



Pulse of True Soulmates

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Description: What is a heart without a pulse? Dead.

Aeon Victoria Blackwell has lived her life with a speeding heart that has caused it to ache. Love is something that she wants but never thinks she'll find. How can someone chase a heart that's beating too fast? If no pulse deems you dead, then what does too fast of a pulse mean? When she meets Declan Michael Phillips, Jr., will he be the right medication to slow her pulse down just enough to catch her? When the pulse of true soulmates sync, the only thing that can happen is pure love.

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Exhaustion had taken over Aeon's body after being up since five that morning. She was in the process of completing a data science bootcamp at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. The bootcamp was a great addition to her Bachelor of Science in Data Analytics. Although she was good with numbers, data analytics was not the original career path that she planned for. Her desire in high school was to be a preschool teacher. She loved children, but God seemed to have a different plan for her life. A life-changing diagnosis at nineteen years old pivoted just about every plan that she had for her life.

She was diagnosed with Hyperadrenergic POTS (Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome). POTS was a condition where your heart rate abnormally increased when a person stood and did other normal activities most considered daily activities. One of the main symptoms of the condition was a significant heart rate increase within minutes of standing. Your heart rate could increase 30 beats per minute. A person could go from a heart rate of 78 beats per minute to 148 within a few minutes of standing, which was abnormal. Because of this fact, dizziness, long-lasting fatigue, lightheadedness that could result in fainting, headaches, blurred vision, palpitation, and a host of other things could accompany the increased heart rate. Aeon's life had changed drastically since her diagnosis.

Now at twenty-four, she hadn't gotten a handle on how to fully function with her condition. When she was diagnosed, she lived with her father, Vernon, who was a fire fighter. Last year, she and her best friend purchased a duplex so they could live closely, but separately; therefore, she moved out of her father's house. His protective nature as a father was not happy with her decision, but he also knew that she had to learn how to independently live her life as an adult. Her condition even affected her property purchase. She had her eyes set on the three-level townhouse, but her father

and best friend shot that dream down because of the stairs. Stairs were not the friend of a POTS girlie.

The buzz of her phone on the table caught her attention. She stepped into a coffee shop to take a rest. It was a warm day which could trigger her condition. Aeon's cheeks rose at the notification of her boyfriend, Troy, video calling. She fluffed her fresh twist out before she propped her phone to take the call. "Hey, baby," she greeted with her bright, beautiful smile.

"Hey, baby. Where are you?" Troy asked with a bright smile to match hers. This was his first time speaking to her today.

Aeon held up a textbook. "I just got out of my bootcamp class. I had to come into a coffee shop to sit down for a second. I said I might as well stay here for a bit to get some work done. What are you up to today? I haven't talked to you all day."

"I've been at work in meetings all day. This is my first break. I just wanted to check in with you to make sure you were okay," he told her.

Troy and Aeon met when they both attended Queens University and had been together for almost four years. When they started dating, she was sure to rip the Band-Aid off about her condition early. She didn't want to waste her time with a man that didn't want to deal with a person who suffered with a disability. Troy didn't understand her condition fully and still didn't, for that matter. If you asked him to explain it, his simplistic answer was 'she faints a lot.' Although he didn't understand it, he said that he wanted to be with her and be supportive. Well, supportive was an extremely subjective concept.

"They're keeping you busy I see. I miss you. Are you coming over tonight?" She hadn't seen him in almost a week because of work. When the duplex was purchased by the best friends, Aeon assumed that Troy would move in with her. Troy quickly

put that assumption to rest.

As a graduation gift, Troy and two of his best friends' parents purchased them a home. They wanted their children to get ahead in life. The home was in all three of the friends' names, but the parents split the mortgage. Troy spent most of his time at her house at her request. She didn't like being crowded by his roommates who knew no boundaries. They would walk into his bedroom without so much as a knock.

"I miss you too, baby. I'm going to really try. I'm supposed to meet Scott and Jordan after work. There's a cornhole competition that we wanted to check out. I'm not sure what time that is supposed to end." He put on his soft eyes that told her that his presence at her house more than likely would not happen.

If there was anything that she disliked about their relationship was how much time he spent with his best friends. Troy, Scott, and Jordan had been best friends since they were young kids. Aeon tried to be considerate of that fact, but it was hard. It would be one thing if she could participate in the activities that they enjoyed, but most of them were outside during the warmer part of the year. The one big argument that the couple had in their relationship was about his consideration for her when it came to the activities and events that he went to. She wanted to be included. Scott's and Jordan's girlfriends were heavily involved with their men.

When Aeon brought it up to Troy, he had an extremely cavalier attitude about the discussion. He declared that he would not ask his friends to adjust for her condition. They were not obligated to do so, and he refused to ask them to. If there were activities that she could attend, she was free to. That was the first time that he hurt her feelings. It was also the day her best friend decided that he was a fuck boy.

"Troy, can't you go for a little while and still come over? I haven't seen you all week," Aeon whined. She felt that she shouldn't have to beg to see her man.

Troy wanted to roll his eyes, but he held his composure. Over time, he felt like she'd become needy, clingy, and more difficult to be around. The few times in the beginning of their relationship that he did take her with him to hang out with his circle of friends, she either had an episode or they had to leave. It was annoying as fuck. "Aeon, I'll see what I can do, but I won't make any promises."

She was officially over this conversation. "Alright, Troy. You do the best you can. I think I'm going to pop in on my dad before I head home. If you come over, I'll probably be in my room, so just use your key."

His annoyance was obvious, but Aeon didn't care. If he was annoyed because she wanted to spend time with him, he could stay annoyed. He told her that he had a meeting to get to before he abruptly disconnected the call. She picked her phone up to put it into her crossbody. Her movement stopped and face scrunched when she heard Troy's voice. When she looked at her phone screen, she realized that he didn't hang up. Instead, the call had switched from a video to a regular call. She started to disconnect the call, but the sound of a female's voice halted her action.

Who the fuck is that? "Troy, I thought you said that you were going to break up with her. I don't understand why it's taking so long," the female shrieked. Aeon didn't recognize her voice, but why would she?

"Baby, I am. You have to be a little more patient. The timing needs to be right for both of us, and you know that. We don't want to move prematurely. Our apartment won't be ready for another two weeks." Aeon's eyes bucked to Troy's confession. What the hell?

The sounds of kissing could be heard for a few seconds. "I know, I know. I just hate all this sneaking around. Do you have time today to fuck me?" the woman asked. Aeon's heart felt like it was literally breaking.

“No, baby, I have meetings. Tomorrow, Aeon has classes all day, and her best friend is out of town until Friday. We can go over there,” Troy told the woman that he really wanted to be with. He didn’t mean for their friendship to turn into something deeper, but it did.

Did he just say that he was going to bring her to my house? No, that’s not what he said. Aeon sat there and listened to her boyfriend make plans with another woman to come to her house and do only God knows what. After she’d heard enough, she disconnected the call. She felt her heart rate increasing. Stress and anxiety were also triggers of her condition. She long pressed three on the screen of her phone.

The line began to ring. Fatima picked up on the second ring. “What’s up, best friend?”

“Troy is cheating on me. I just heard him making plans with another bitch to come to my house to fuck her,” Aeon blurted out. “He’s planning to break up with me soon. Their apartment will be ready in two weeks.”

There was shuffling on the other end, then silence. After a few beats, Fatima spoke. “Now, did you just tell me that Troy is cheating on you and using your house to do so?” After Aeon confirmed the playback that was given, Fatima huffed. “Best friend, I love you, but I told your ass a long time ago that something was up with his bitch ass. Your ass should have gone black girl crazy on that white boy a long time ago. You said they were coming to your house, when?”

Fatima was undone. There was no way that she would let Troy play her best friend. They met their freshman year of college when they were roomed together. They’d been locked in since then. When she first met Troy, she didn’t care for him, but she tried to overlook her own prejudice. Fatima didn’t have an issue overall about interracial dating, but Troy was a different kind of white boy. She felt like he dated Aeon to rebel against his uppity ass parents.

Aeon was the first black girl that Troy dated. When he introduced her to his friend circle, they made her feel like a fish out of water. His parents weren't happy with his relationship with Aeon, but they didn't want to come across as racist. Troy ambushed his parents with the news of his relationship when he brought her as his date to a gala that their country club hosted. Aeon wasn't the only black person in the room, but her economic status paled in comparison to the others in the room.

"He said tomorrow since I have classes all day and you're out of town." The tears started to fall against Aeon's wishes. "I can't believe he's cheating on me. What kind of man uses his girlfriend's house to cheat on her?"

"A bitch, that's who. He's not a damn man." Fatima took a minute to finish the task that she was in the middle of before she spoke again. "Pick me up at the airport at six."

"What? I thought the conference wasn't over until Friday," Aeon said in disbelief. "Don't leave the conference because of this."

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Fatima sucked her teeth. “Girl, fuck this conference. I’ve already done all of my presentations. All I’m going to miss is tired ass dinners with a bunch of sales reps arguing about which drug works best. Pick my ass up at six. Let me go so I can make this flight. Aeon, don’t say shit to that man yet either.”

Nothing else was said before the line disconnected. Aeon felt overwhelmed at the moment. She glanced at her watch before she decided to forego the visit with her father. One thing about Vernon Blackwell, he could sniff out if something was wrong with his daughter. Fatima, unfortunately, wasn’t the only one who didn’t care for Troy. When two of the most important people in her life didn’t like the man that she was with, that should have been the biggest red flag.

She wasn’t sure how all of this would play out, but she knew it would be with a bang. Hopefully the bang wouldn’t be from the barrel of Fatima’s or Vernon’s guns. That was a huge possibility.

THE NEXT DAY . . .

Aeon was convinced that her best friend missed her calling as an agent for a federal agency. When Fatima was on go, there was nothing that could be done to stop her until she was ready to stop. As soon as Fatima’s ass hit Aeon’s passenger seat, she gave out orders.

First, they went to an electronic store. Fatima purchased a GPS tracker and a set of indoor cameras. She asked Aeon if she knew where Troy went for the bullshit cornhole competition. Aeon had a good idea where, so they headed that way. They weren’t looking for Troy; they were looking for his car. It wasn’t hard to find his

Bronco on oversized wheels in the parking lot.

Fatima hopped out, put the GPS tag on his vehicle, then they were on their way. When they got to Aeon's house, they went to work, putting the cameras around the house. It couldn't be a production if there was no way to play it back. The plan was to drop Aeon's car off at her father's house, then come back to Fatima's place to hang out until they caught a cheater. Fatima parked her car outside of her garage whether she was there or out of town for work. Therefore, it wouldn't throw bitch ass Troy off if he saw it.

Troy didn't bother to call Aeon last night or this morning. He texted her and told her to have a great day. She wished him the same and made sure she mentioned her all-day classes. "Do you think the girl he's cheating on me with is a white girl?"

Fatima's head snapped in the direction of her best friend where she sat on her bed. "Bitch, I don't care if she was purple. None of that matters. "

Fatima and Aeon's friendship was a balance of opposites. Where Aeon was an introvert, Fatima was an extrovert. Fatima had a 'fuck it up then leave' personality, while her best friend had an 'if we ignore it, maybe it will go away' personality. Aeon never wanted to be in the spotlight, but Fatima considered herself the spotlight. Fuck being in it. Their opposites were what brought them together as best friends. Both of them would go to war with God and His son over each other.

Aeon knew before she asked that the next question she asked would get her further cursed out, but she couldn't help it. She had to ask it out loud to get it out of her head. "Do you think he cheated because of my condition? I know it limits me sometimes when?—"

"Aeon, if you want me to slap the fuck out of you, that was all you had to say," Fatima said through gritted teeth. She hated the insecurities that lived in her best

friend because of her condition. She took a moment to calm her nerves before she said anything else. “Troy is an asshole and has always been. Please don’t allow his actions to imprint an impression of who you are onto yourself. Yes, you have POTS. Yes, there are certain things that you have to be more cautious about doing than others.

“I hate that this happened to you. I can promise you this though: When you meet the man that’s supposed to be just for you, I hope he fucks the POTS right outta your ass.” There was a beat of silence before both of them erupted with laughter. Fatima was the most politically incorrect, nonfiltered person that Aeon had ever met. She didn’t count her father because she always knew him.

While the girls waited for Troy to make his move, they watched television in Fatima’s room and talked. Fatima’s phone dinged around one in the afternoon to let her know that Troy was near. She had set the geotag to alert her when he got to the beginning of their street. “Alright, bitch, we about to have some action. Let’s pull up these camera feeds on this television. I need to see this shit in big picture.”

Aeon had a doorbell camera on her front door, but she was horrible about charging it. Fatima or her father had to remind her often to do so. Yesterday, cameras were put in the living room, both bedrooms, office, and kitchen. One would have been put in the bathroom if Fatima had anything to do with it. She wanted to make sure the whole house was covered.

The loud roar of Troy’s modified Bronco could be heard from a block away. As clean cut as him and his family were, they were redneck as hell too. Fatima inconspicuously peeked out of the window to get a glimpse of Troy and his ho. Her head tilted. The girl looked familiar, but she couldn’t place her. “I think I know that bitch,” she mumbled when she climbed back on the bed.

Fatima and Aeon were glued to the cameras’ feed. They weren’t exactly sure what

they would do once they saw the damning evidence against Troy, but they knew something would be done. Seconds later, Troy opened the front door of Aeon's home then stepped aside to let his whore in. Aeon gasped before she covered her mouth. "Tha . . . that's Jordan's girlfriend, Erin."

"Who Jordan?" Fatima asked in disbelief. "Jordan as in his best friend that he lives with. Bitch, I know you're lying."

Aeon looked on with a broken heart, wide eyes, and disbelief. Troy is fucking his best friend's girlfriend! She was pissed that he had the gumption to cheat in her house. However, she did feel a sense of relief when they went into the guest bedroom. At least he had enough respect for her than to fuck a woman in her bed.

"Troy, I think we need to just get a hotel room until our apartment is ready. Scott has been looking at me suspiciously." Erin's voice was filled with angst. She was tired of not being able to be with the man she loved out loud. These little meetups were the only time that they had to be together alone.

Troy's eyes held confusion. "What the hell does Scott have to do with us, Erin? He has his own girlfriend to be concerned with." Erin's paranoia grew daily.

Erin sat on the bed then crossed her legs. "Troy, you know if Scott thinks something is suspicious, then he's going to say something to Jordan. Please stop acting like you don't know your best friends. And what about Aeon? When she finds out, she's probably going to pass the hell out." She giggled. "I mean, her ass passes out for way less."

"You're right." Troy agreed with a chuckle. "It's like walk three steps . . ." He put the back of his hand on his forehead then did his best imitation of Aeon when she passed out. While they both burst into laughter, her broken heart hardened.

“Wow!” Fatima said with a shake of her head. “Your boyfriend is a fuck ass all the way around. Oh, and Jordan’s girl is a whore.” An idea hit her like a brick. “Do you have Jordan’s phone number?”

Aeon side-eyed her. “Yes, I do. Why?” She had Jordan’s and Scott’s numbers for emergency reasons.

When Fatima told her to call him, she hesitated. With a deep sigh, she found his contact on her phone, pressed the call button, then put it on the speakerphone. Jordan answered on the fourth ring. “Hello, Aeon, is that you?” This was the first time that she’d ever used his number. When the friend group exchanged numbers with her, it was more of them being nice than for emergency reasons. He was confused as to why she would need to call him.

“Hey, Jordan. This is actually Aeon’s best friend, Fatima. I’m not sure if you remember me.” She’d been around the friend group a time or two, but they were not her speed. To her, they all came across as the kind who would commit a crime then throw you under the bus even if you had nothing to do with it.

Now Jordan was even more confused. Yes, he remembered Fatima. She was a hard person to forget. “Yes, I remember you. Um, how can I help you?”

“Yes, so, I’m a shoot from the hip kinda girlie. I’m at my house with Aeon, and we are looking at your girlfriend, Erin, and Troy in Aeon’s house about to have sex. Apparently, they’ve been dealing with each other for quite some time,” she said all in one breath.

Jordan was frozen in his seat. There was no way this girl that he barely knew was serious. “Look, I don’t know if this is some kind of joke, but my best friend and my girlfriend would never do anything like that.” He chuckled. Aeon and Fatima heard him ask Scott if he put us up to whatever joke this was. Scott didn’t find his question

amusing and told him to put the call on the speakerphone.

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Scott asked Fatima to repeat herself. She ran it down again. “Look, not only are they fucking around, but they plan to move in together. Aeon, when is their apartment ready again?”

“It’ll be ready the week after next. Jordan, if you think this is a joke, call her, and I’ll dictate the conversation from her side.” Fatima knew that Aeon’s blood pressure was rising. “It might take her a few rings to answer since his dick is currently down her throat.”

It sounded like the phone fell. “Text us your address. We are on the way,” Scott instructed. He preferred live evidence. He knew something was up with Erin, but never in a million years would he have guessed this was it. After Fatima gave them instructions about where to park and where to come when they got there, Scott said they would be there in less than ten minutes.

“Oh, this is about to be entertaining,” Aeon hated to admit. “They better not tear my apartment up, Fatima. Your messy ass.”

Fatima laughed. “Shit, best friend, I already know your heart hurts. If seeing his two best friends beat his ass makes you feel better in the moment, then that’s what it’s going to be. We about to watch white folks, white folk.”

She knew she couldn’t mend Aeon’s heart, but she also knew that small instances of gratification would make her feel better at the moment. Plus, Troy needed his ass beat. Fatima also knew that her best friend was not a fighter, so the likelihood of her testing her hands on that Erin bitch were slim to none. It was a good damn thing that Fatima Lewis came out the pussy swinging.

Scott did ninety the entire way to Fatima's house. He followed the instructions she gave them about where to park. When she heard the light knock on her back door, she answered it. "Hey, fellas. Please come in and join the party."

Fatima and Aeon could agree that Scott, Jordan, and Troy were very attractive men. They were all active in the gym and were always well groomed. Scott and Jordan worked for a gaming company. They were able to turn their love of playing video games into a career. Troy wanted to follow their career path, but his parents refused to pay for his college if that was his plan. He followed his father's career path as a lawyer.

"Hey, Scott and Jordan." Aeon greeted them with a low, monotoned voice. "It's been a minute. Sorry to see you both under these circumstances." She glanced at the television. "Oh, finally. Jordan, please come see your best friend fuck your girlfriend in the ass."

From the doorway of the room where he and Scott stood, the screen of the television couldn't be seen. Scott was the first to step into the room to see the television. Scott's heart broke for his best friend, and his anger was prepared to ride for him. "What the fuck! How do you want to handle this, Jordan?"

Jordan couldn't believe this shit. His best friend since childhood betrayed him in the worst way. The fact that Troy was fucking Erin but still went with him and Scott to pick out the engagement ring that Jordan planned to present to her at her birthday dinner in a few weeks made the knife in the back a little bigger.

Jordan's attention didn't leave the television. Erin was getting drilled in the back door in the most disrespectful way. Just as painful as it was for Jordan to see, it was for Aeon too. Everyone in the room learned that Troy and Erin talked shit about the sex game of their partners in the commission of their sexual act. After another minute, Jordan turned his reddened face to Aeon. "Let's go pay our exes a visit."

“Ok, we can do that. Scott and Jordan, please don’t tear my house up. Anything you break, you will pay for,” Aeon told them. She worked hard for the things that she had.

Scott and Jordan had no problem with that. It was so much not a problem that they asked for her Zelle information. Within two minutes after they received it, each of them sent her fifteen hundred dollars.

“Well, damn, y’all about to go in there and fuck it up, I see,” Fatima said with a titter. “Let’s go before they finish. Not sure if Troy is a minute man.” She side-eyed her best friend.

Aeon didn’t talk about her sexual relationship with Troy often. He was her first and only, but in the last year, they hadn’t been as active as she would have liked. Now she understood why.

The four walked out of Fatima’s front door to take the few steps to Aeon’s door. After the door was unlocked, they all stepped into the house quietly. Troy and Erin were none the wiser because of their loud fucking. Aeon told them that she would be the one to walk in on them since it was her house. Jordan would be the secondary, unexpected surprise. She told the rest of them not to come into the room until she told them to.

With her hand on her doorknob, Aeon closed her eyes then took a deep breath. When her eyes opened, she was focused. She opened the door. “Well, what do we have here?”

“Ah! Oh my God!” Erin was mortified. She crawled toward the headboard, grabbed the sheets, and covered her naked body.

Troy was so shocked that he just stood there. This was not how he wanted her to find out about him and Erin. He genuinely cared about Aeon, but he didn’t love or want to

be with her. Troy wasn't sure if he ever really did. He snapped out of it when Aeon pushed his chest. "Ae . . . Aeon, what are you doing here?"

"I live here, stupid. Yeah, I'm not about to do all of this stupid shit. You're in here fucking your best friend's girlfriend!" Aeon glanced behind him at Erin. "Does your man know you're in here being a ho, Erin?"

Tears flowed down her cheeks. She didn't feel bad about what she did, but she did feel bad that she got caught. This was not how she wanted her boyfriend to find out either. In a perfect world, she and Troy would have already moved into their apartment. Neither of the parties were naïve with the thoughts that this situation had the potential to turn volatile. Erin lifted her hand before she spoke. "Please, don't tell him."

"Oh, I don't need to tell him shit," Aeon said venomously. With an arched brow and crossed arms, she stepped to the side to clear the doorway. "Jordan, look what we have here."

Jordan walked into the room with his hands pushed into his pockets. His face was a very unattractive shade of red. When Fatima walked in shortly behind him, Aeon wasn't surprised. Her best friend rarely listened to her.

Fatima walked in first with tight eyes. She bumped Aeon's shoulder before she said, "I see you getting sassy in here." She peeked at Aeon. "Are you alright?" She was worried about her heart rate. Aeon confirmed that she was fine at the moment.

Troy's stupid ass still stood there naked with his limp dick swinging. When Jordan then Scott stepped into the room, the color drained from Troy's and Erin's faces. "Wow! When I woke up this morning, I never thought that I would find out that my best friend from childhood and my girlfriend were fucking behind my back." He glanced over his shoulder. "Scott, did you see this coming?"

Scott scoffed. "I knew something was going on with Erin. A few weeks ago, she told you that she was hanging with Tara, but I knew that was a lie. Tara was out of town. I never thought it would be Troy." Tara was Scott's girlfriend.

Troy finally grabbed his boxers to put them on. Once they were on, he found his words. "Jordan, it wasn't meant to happen, but it did." His eyes bounced between everyone in the room. "We never wanted to hurt you or you, Aeon." His eyes softened. "Jordan, I love her, man."

The room was stone silent for a moment. Jordan's head dropped. His shoulders lifted and fell at a semi rapid pace. Ah, shit! His head lifted. "Cool.

The same way that you love her, I need you to love this beat down."

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Before anyone had a chance to blink, Jordan was on Troy's ass. There was no competition between the two because Jordan was a wrestler in high school and college. Erin's loud ass jumped off the bed, screaming. "Stop, stop! Jordan, stop!"

"Girl, shut the fuck up!" Fatima yelled. "Matter fact! Since you want to make jokes about Aeon's pass outs, let me make you pass out!" Like a cheetah, she jumped over Jordan and Troy's fight to tag Erin dead in her face.

Scott stood off to the side with the creepiest smile. Aeon thought he would have jumped in by now since he'd given her fifteen hundred dollars too. Nothing in the room was broken yet.

In her mind, Aeon told everyone to stop, but it didn't come out of her mouth. Both of them deserved their asses beat. The betrayal from both of them was bigger than the cheating. For Aeon, it was the disrespect to her house. For Jordan, it was the disrespect to his and Troy's long-time friendship.

Aeon stood there and watched two relationships and friendships go up in smoke. Her head began to hurt with the increase of her heart rate, and her vision blurred. This is too much. Her heart couldn't take this nor could her POTS. With a final look and shake of her head, Aeon walked out of the room. To hell with it all.

SOME YEARS LATER . . .

"Man, I'm trying to tell you, Ty. The dating pool has piranhas in it," I fussed. "Y'all married niggas are blessed that y'all found y'all forever."

I had just finished getting my locs retwisted, and now I was sitting in my barber Tiberius's seat to get a lineup. It was Saturday, so the shop was packed like it usually was. Everyone laughed at my expense. My best friend, Julian, laughed the hardest.

I met Julian when my family moved from Orlando, Florida, to Charlotte, North Carolina, when I was fourteen years old. Two flat tires was the best way to describe our relationship. We also attended the same college, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, NCA&T. Aggie Pride. He'd seen me through all the crazy female shit that I'd been through.

"Why do you think I snatched Jesika's ass up when I did? There was no damn way I was lettin' her slip through my fingers," Julian said with conviction. My boy met his wife when we were juniors in college and married her six months after we graduated. They'd been married almost eleven years now.

Tiberius nodded. "Fuck yeah. Shit, my situation was a little different, but once I knew she was the one, I locked Leydi's ass down." He pointed at his best friend who sat in the seat next to him. "Hell, this nigga trapped the fuck out his wife." The entire shop laughed.

"First, I didn't trap her. Santorini did. All I did was take my girl on a month-long vacation. It ain't my fault her janky birth control was old or some shit," Derrick, my cousin and Tiberius's half-brother, said with a wave of his hand. "All that matters is that I got my wife and we're happy."

I heard what he was saying. At thirty-four, I wanted that shit for myself. My parents, Declan Sr. and Princetta, had been married so long that I didn't even know how long. I wasn't even sure of their damn ages.

"I told your ass to stop fucking with our customers. You already know bitches come in there to get tats and dick," Julian kidded. "I thought you learned when that girl

came in there and had a tantrum on our floor.”

I sucked my teeth. “Look, at the end of the day, I never lead these females on. I make it known that I’m looking for my wife; therefore, from the first conversation we are in an evaluation period as they should be too. I’m not going to waste my time. Now, if a female comes at me on some fuck me shit, then I let them know that’s all it will be. It’s not like I’m out here just slinging monster dick.”

A few weeks ago, this chick that commissioned me for a custom tattoo straight up told me that she wanted to see what that dick do. I told her up front that if we fucked, it would never be more than just a fuck. I wouldn’t catch feelings eventually, so she shouldn’t expect that or try too hard to get me to catch feelings. She claimed that she wasn’t on some relationship shit. Her exact words were, I’m for the streets right now, and I’m fine with that. After I finished her tattoo, she paid me the six hundred dollars that I charged her and sucked my dick. We met up a few times after that to fuck, then I cut her off when she asked me to take her on a date.

That crossed a ho boundary for me. Just fucking meant just that, just fucking. I expressed that I didn’t feel comfortable with our sexual relationship any longer. She told me that she was tired of my dick anyway. I wasn’t offended in the least because the way her ass screamed and hollered during sex said differently.

The next day, she started with the text messages. Since we didn’t communicate outside of when to meet up and weren’t having sex any longer, I didn’t respond and promptly blocked her. Fast forward to the next week and this girl was laid out on the floor of my tattoo shop, kicking and yelling like a three-year-old child. I couldn’t tell you what she said because I left her there on the floor by herself. I didn’t entertain my four-year-old godson, Aiden, when he threw a tantrum. There was no way that I would entertain it from a grown ass woman, so I called themboys and told them to trespass her ass. My father taught me that you didn’t argue with crazy women; you let the police do that.

“Man, Declan, you know good and well these females out here will lie just to get the dick, get addicted, then want it for themselves. I found my wife fresh out of prison, so I didn’t have to be subjected to that bullshit,” Tiberius pointed out. He served five years for killing his mother’s boyfriend.

I was tired of the subject. “Derrick, when you and your wife coming to get your new piece? I’ve been waiting on y’all.”

When I was twenty-five, I decided to use my BA in visual art design to open a very unique tattoo business. It wasn’t just a tattoo shop; it was a lounge. Ink Vibing was the place to get a fire ass tattoo, amazing food, drinks, and vibes. The tattoo portion of the business was upstairs in the loft area. The lounge portion was downstairs. There were nights that we had live bands, spoken word, silent book clubs, speed dating, and anything else that kept our spot live.

We made most of our money on the nights that were catered to the Hispanic community. I brought in a band, a special cook, and it was a whole vibe. I spoke fluent Spanish since I had a number of Spanish speaking customers. The third year of business, I met my goal of making a profit of over three hundred thousand dollars for the year. Four years ago, I opened the second lounge, Ink Vibing Again, with Julian as the co-owner. He was also a tattoo artist. We also co-owned a graphic design firm.

“Man, you know your ass be booked and busy. I’m trying to get in where I fit in.” He did have a point about how busy I was. Both lounges were open six days a week. I spent four days in the main lounge and two in the secondary location.

Tiberius was finished with my lineup, so I turned the seat in his direction. “Cuz, stop playing with me. Let me know when y’all want to come, and I’ll clear my books for y’all.”

“Shit, you ain’t said nothing but a word. Mama Bug got my babies this weekend, so

we'll be there tomorrow. I'm going to call Iesha to see what time she wants to go and text you tonight," he let me know.

After I told him that was cool, I stood from the seat to pay Ty. "Alright, let me get out of here. Y'all know it's my mama's reup day."

"Aye, tell Auntie I'm gonna come over tomorrow to get a cake. I'm gonna Cash App her the money because I already know Iesha's greedy as is going to try to eat all my cake," Derrick said. He and his wife had the funniest relationship. Their love language was talking shit to each other. At their wedding, a part of their vows was to always get on each other's nerves.

I did my rounds of goodbyes, then left. I had a few appointments later, so I needed to make this quick. Unfortunately, there was no 'quick' with Princetta Phillips.

"Derrick sent me money for a black forest cake. Is Iesha pregnant again?" my mother asked. She moved to the next cabinet to look at her inventory in her store that was added to the kitchen.

My mother was the neighborhood's snack and cake lady. When we lived in Orlando, it was the same thing. The kids in the neighborhood loved her and so did the parents. On report card days, she made these goodie bags that had chips, candy, a sandwich, a drink, a slice of cake, and money depending on what their grades looked like. She'd had parents come to her to thank her because their kids made cautious efforts to not get in trouble and get good grades.

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“Mama, why you ask me that?” I wasn’t sure why she thought Iesha was pregnant. My mama was nosy as hell too.

She slowly turned her head and put her tight eyes on me. “The only time that girl asks me for a black forest cake is when her ass is pregnant. This is the third black forest cake that she’s asked me for this month.”

My brows knitted together, and my head tilted. Now she had me thinking. “I don’t know. I’m gonna ask her tomorrow. Both of them are coming to the shop to get tatted.”

“I need to come in there and get me a tat,” she mumbled. There she goes with the bullshit. She’d been screaming for a few years that she wanted a tattoo.

Footsteps were heard behind me. “Cetta, don’t make me get in your ass now. I already told you that you’re not getting a tattoo, woman.” My mama fussed back with my pops as he smacked her on the ass. “I got something I can?—”

“Whoa, we’re not doing that today! What’s up, Pops? Mama, you ready?”

My parents acted like horny ass teenagers with their old asses. It only took one time to see their bare asses for me to never show up unannounced. They were affectionate regardless of where they were. As much as it got on my nerves, I wanted that with the woman who would be my forever.

After a few more kisses, my mother told me that she was ready. My pops came over and cupped the back of my neck. “You good, boy?” After I told him that I was good,

he removed his hand then started toward the living room. “Alright now. Don’t let nobody fuck with you. I’ll kill behind mine.”

“So will I, Pops.” My pops had been saying that since I was a little boy. When I was a little boy, if you told me that my pops wasn’t a superhero, I would literally fight you. If you told me that now, I still would probably fight you.

My father was a retired air traffic controller, and my mother was a retired city court clerk. Both of my parents lived very comfortably off their pensions and savings. I paid off their house a few years ago as a gift when I made a nice chunk of change from a trade I did with one of my stocks.

It didn’t take long to get to the big box store from my parents’ home. My mother had a whole list, but we were in an aisle that had nothing on her damn list. My mother’s list was just a suggestion for the most part. When her ass put something in the cart that wasn’t on her list, all she would do was add it. We’d get to the register, she’d pull out her list, then have the audacity to say I got everything!

“Mama, there is nothing on this aisle that is on your list. Why are we on an aisle with towels and bathroom stuff?” The only things that were on this list were items for her store. Candy bars and towels were not on the same aisle.

My mother did her famous slow turn to face me. She’d been doing that creepy serial killer turn since I was a kid too. It used to terrify me then. Not so much now, but when she did it, I knew she was about to curse me out. “Boy, since when have you been in charge on how I spend my damn money?” She snatched her list from my hand, took a pen out of her purse, wrote something on the list, then handed it back to me. “See, towels on the list. Now leave me the hell alone.” I guess we’re shopping for towels now.

For the next twenty minutes, we walked around the warehouse to put things that were

already on the list and some that were added into the shopping cart. We finally got to the aisle with the drinks. My mother's and my feet stopped in their place. "What the fuck is she doing?"

A woman was lying on the floor with a dog on her chest. I grabbed my arm after my mother hit it with the back of her hand. Her heavy ass hand. "She must have seizures or something. That dog has one of those service vests on. Son, go over there and make sure she's alright."

I stared at my mother for a beat before I slowly approached the girl. From what I could see of her, she was a smaller framed girl. Her eyes were closed when I stepped closer. I didn't want to step too close because I wasn't sure how her dog was trained. Her dog noticed me and shifted his body. "Ma'am, are you alright? Do you need me to call emergency services?"

Without opening her eyes, she responded, "No, I'll be fine." She rubbed the back of her service dog. "Midnite's got me." That was the perfect name for the dog that looked like a black labrador retriever.

Her skin was the perfect shade of milk chocolate. Damn, she's beautiful. "Ok, I just wanted to make sure you were alright." After she thanked me, I walked back over to my mother. "She said she's fine."

I was ready to carry on with our shopping, but when Princetta was not satisfied, nothing would move until she was. She shook her head vigorously. "Nope. I'm not leaving that baby on the floor like that." When I reiterated that the woman said she was fine with her service dog, Midnite, my mama told me to shut the hell up.

My mama's five feet, four inches short ass loved to bully people. That Napoleon complex was a real thing. Here I was, six feet, three inches tall, but when she told me to shut up, I did. I called behind her as she marched toward the girl and her dog. With

a sigh, I followed my mother back to where the woman lay on the floor. “Hey, baby. I know you told my son that you were alright, but I don’t feel comfortable leaving you here by yourself. Did you have a seizure?”

The woman finally opened her eyes. Her head turned to the side to give us her attention. Her brown eyes were beautiful. A small smile surfaced on her beautiful face. “No, ma’am. I’m not having a seizure. I have a condition called POTS. Sometimes I get overworked, and my heart rate goes up too much, so I have to sit or lay down.”

She glanced down at her dog, then rubbed his head with a bigger smile. “My baby here is trained to warn me so I can sit or lay down so I don’t hurt myself. Thank you for asking.”

What the fuck is POTS? My mother’s beautiful cheeks rose, but the concern that still sat in her eyes told me that my mother wasn’t satisfied with her answer. “Ok, well, I still don’t want to leave you here by yourself. My son is going to stay with you until you feel well enough to get up.” She turned on her heel. “Declan, stay here and help her when she’s ready to get up. Give me the cart, and I’ll go get the stuff I need. I’ll be back.”

My mother pushed me to the side, stepped behind the shopping cart, and was on her way. The woman’s saucer eyes made their way to me. Well, this is awkward.

EARLIER THE SAME DAY . . .

Life had been living as of late, but I wouldn’t change it for the world. Having a life to live was good enough for me. A lot had changed in the past year. Some of it good, some of it bad. After the debacle that was my relationship with Troy, it took me some time to get over it. Part of the reason was because the drama didn’t immediately stop after that day.

Troy and Erin were fans of amateur porn that starred them. Most of the videos were on Erin's phone. Somehow, Jordan accessed the videos in her cloud. He didn't blast her on social media or anything like that, but he did send the videos to his, her, and Troy's parents. Troy's, Scott's, and Jordan's parents were extremely close; therefore, it affected their relationship.

Jordan beat Troy up badly to the point that he had to stay in the hospital for a few days. I thought Troy would press charges on him, but he didn't. Jordan's parents paid for the hospital bills, which I thought was crazy. Erin, on the other hand, did press charges on Fatima. I didn't think Erin pressed them because she got beat up, but more so because her surgically enhanced nose was broken. I was so upset and worried about the charges. Fatima's reaction and only comment about the charges was 'Erin is about to find out that street niggas do street things.'

I knew nothing nice would come of that. A little over a month later, Fatima's cousins made a special trip to Charlotte and jumped the damn girl. Erin assumed that the attack was connected to Fatima. Instead of doing the cops thing again, she dropped the charges to move on with her life.

Just when I thought it was over and done with, Erin backtracked to go back to Jordan. That shit was crazy to me. What was crazier was that he actually took her back. You couldn't tell me that the boy wasn't stupid, but I should have known that something bigger was in play. That man cheated back hard. Let's just say, Erin's sister and her had something in common. They both were whores.

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Erin's double back to Jordan triggered a domino effect. All of a sudden, Troy was so apologetic and wanted to try again. He claimed to have made a mistake that was due to him being overwhelmed. He came up with some bullshit about him taking the time to really understand my disorder and how to better take care of me. I promptly told him to be overwhelmed with a dick in his ass. Yes, I had an insecurity that I may never find a man that would want to deal with my condition, but I'd rather be alone with Totino's Pizza Rolls in my bed than be with a man that cheated and didn't respect me.

When I heard my front door open, I picked up a coffee mug from my coffee bar and poured a fresh cup. Fatima cut the corner into the kitchen where I stood. "See, that's why you're my best friend. You anticipate my needs."

"Good morning, best friend," I said after I leaned against the counter to watch her jazz up her coffee at my bar. "What do you have on your agenda for today?"

She didn't respond until she finished flavoring her coffee and took her first sip. Fatima didn't function well before coffee. I had an addiction of sorts to coffee just like my best friend. Last year for my thirtieth birthday, my mother, Ariel, gave me gift cards to buy the things that I needed to make a coffee bar after she called my father to ask him what I liked.

Ariel only gave me birthday gifts every five years, special accomplishments, and Christmas. It'd been like that since I was six when she sent me to live with my father after they divorced when I was four years old. My mother was twenty when she and my father got married. Three years later, she realized that married life was not for her, then two years after that, she realized neither was motherhood. She called my father

and told him to come and get me, and he did. After their divorce, my father moved from Aiken, Georgia, where they lived, to Charlotte, North Carolina.

When I was younger, my feelings were hurt by her decision, but as I got older, I realized that it was a blessing in disguise. In hindsight, I appreciated that she was honest about her feelings toward motherhood instead of becoming resentful and mistreating me. Ariel was always available. If I needed something, she would come through for me. She just never initiated contact with me except on those birthdays and Christmases when she purchased me something. My father loved me enough for my mother and him. My father was the best man that I knew.

I had great female figures in my life, including Fatima. She was a year younger than me, but her life experience had given her wisdom beyond her years. “Girl, I have meetings most of the day, but since I’m not facilitating any of them, I’ll probably be half listening.”

My best friend was an extremely successful pharmaceutical representative. She landed the job before we graduated since it was where she did her internship for her bachelor’s degree in biology. The company then turned around and paid for her master’s degree in public health. My girl came into the company and lit it on fire. Now she was the top earning rep in the company.

“You better listen to those people in those meetings. You might miss something you need,” I reprimanded with a giggle. She was so nonchalant at times.

She waved me off. “Girl, please. I record the meetings. I’ll listen to it at some point.” She took a sip of her coffee. “Now, what’s on your agenda today?”

“I have one meeting today, go check on my daddy, then some running around to do for my daddy’s birthday.” My daddy was turning fifty-four soon. His assistant and I planned a surprise birthday party for him. I couldn’t wait for it. My father was the fire

chief of Mecklenburg County. I was so proud of him when he was promoted. He worked so hard to get to where he was.

Fatima's brows met in the middle. She set her mug down on the bar and leaned on the counter next to it. Here we go. "Aeon, I'm not about to play with you. It's hot as hell outside, and your ass is just getting over fucking COVID. You better send what you need done to Susan and let her get it done."

Oh my God! Everyone acted like I was incapacitated. I'd been over COVID for almost two and a half weeks. "Fatima, I'm going to be fine. You know Midnite will be with me."

She leaned off the counter, then walked toward my couch in the living room. Midnite relaxed on the couch with his favorite cartoon on. When I was twenty-four, my POTS seemed to worsen to the point that my doctor told me that I was unable to drive any longer. I had a few accidents because I passed out. In my mind, that shouldn't have been the call because my condition wasn't the reason for my passing out; my low iron was. Her damn response to that was that anemia was a symptom of my condition. I cried for days because it made me feel dependent on others around me.

"Midnite," Fatima called out to my baby. Once he paid attention to Fatima, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Look, you know your mama does too much. Make sure you watch out for her silly ass. You know if anything happens to my best friend, I'm going to cuss your black ass out."

Every time she talked to my baby, I couldn't do anything but laugh. She talked to him like he was really a human. It took Midnite a minute before he climbed from the couch to go to his communication buttons. He walked through them to find the ones that he wanted. "Fatima, shut up."

Midnite looked at her with a side eye, climbed back on the couch, then lay back down

like he was never bothered. I bent over with laughter. An offset of my condition intensifying was that I was approved for a service dog. When I got quotes from organizations on how much it cost to train them properly, I said absolutely not. The programs that would train and give them to individuals were need based. I didn't qualify because of my income. As a data analyst for Meta, I made well over one hundred thousand dollars a year.

This was one of those situations where if you called Ariel, she would come through. My father called her and told her how much it cost. She agreed to pay half of the twenty-thousand-dollar fee. I cried when she and my father told me that they paid for the training. Ariel even came here to Charlotte to present it with my father. That meant more than she would ever know.

When I got Midnite, he was two months old. It took about eight months to train him on the basics like socialization, obedience, potty training, teaching him to stay relaxed and calm in different environments, and things like that. During that training, the bond between Midnite and I was built. I took the initiative to teach him the communication buttons. After his initial training on the basics, it took another almost two years to train him on task specific things associated with my POTS symptoms. I love my baby.

“See, people don't believe me when I tell them that your dog is rude as fuck. A nigga! That damn dog is a nigga in a labrador retriever's body. He lets that black coat get to his head.” Fatima rolled her eyes before she walked back over to drink her coffee. After she took a sip, her expression turned serious. “Aeon, I'm serious. I told you if you wait until tomorrow, I can take you.”

That was it right there. I hated that. I wanted to be able to move around without having to depend on people. It was bad enough that I had to depend on rideshares if I wanted to go somewhere if my father or Fatima weren't available. “Fatima, thank you, but I work a full day tomorrow. Today is the best time to do it since I'll be done

with work by like ten.”

Her face screwed up. “So, what you’re telling me is that you’re about to go out in the peak of the day when it’s the hottest instead of either waiting until the sun falls when it’s cooler or tomorrow evening? How does that make sense, Aeon?”

“I want to get it out of the way, Fatima.” She got on my nerves sometimes with her overbearing nature. I loved her for wanting to make sure I was healthy and safe, but sometimes, it was just too much. “I promise, I’m going to bring my water, fan, and make sure I sit down when I get overwhelmed.”

She stared at me for a moment before she put her empty coffee mug in the dishwasher. Her hands went into her pockets as she walked in my direction. “Alright. If you think Daddy Vernon is going to go apeshit if he gets a medical emergency call about you, I’m gonna be a gorilla to his chimpanzee.” She kissed my cheek. “I’ll call you later to check on you. Bye, Midnite, nigga.”

I giggled as she sashayed out of my house. Fatima was nothing to play with, and I loved it. Her half step was better than some bitches’ overstep. I glanced at the clock on the side table. I had twenty minutes to get my life together and jump on this meeting. It was a blessing that I worked from home. “Midnite, today is going to be a day. Are you ready?”

Midnite climbed from the couch to go to his button. I smiled when he stood over the button he intended to press. He looked over his shoulder at me then pressed the button. “I stay ready.” Yes, he did.

“I’m cooking tonight, baby girl,” my father told me. He knew that would make me excited. My father cooked his ass off.

I wiggled in my seat that was in front of his desk. After my meeting, Midnite and I

caught a rideshare to my father's office. I saw him at least three days a week. He came to my house, or I went to his office or house. "What are you cooking? Please say seafood lasagna."

"Well, what do you know. I'm cooking seafood lasagna. Make sure you tell greedy ass Fatima." He laughed at his own words. My father treated Fatima like she was his daughter as well.

Her father was in prison serving a sixty-year sentence for murder, and her mother was serving twenty for being an accomplice to murder. When she was twelve, her mother told her father that some dude raped her. Her mother then set the man up, and Fatima's father killed him. When they were caught, it came out that the man did not rape her. She was mad at the man because they were fucking around, and he told her that he didn't want to mess with her anymore. Initially, she had a second-degree murder charge, but she took a deal and flipped on Fatima's father. Fatima's paternal auntie took her in and raised her.

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I pulled out my phone. “I’m texting her right now. You know she’s gonna be right there.” My head popped up from my phone screen. “Um, are you making brownies too? I’ll get the stuff.”

“You don’t have to get nothing, lil girl. I already knew you were going to ask me.” He leaned over to look at the side of his desk where Midnite lay on his pillow. “Midnite, I got you something good to eat too.”

Midnite got up with a wagging tail. He had buttons in my father’s office, but not as many as we had at home. He pressed the button. “Thank you, Pop Pop.”

I loved the way my people loved my baby. There were days that I didn’t feel well, so my father would make me come and stay in his office with him. He had a very comfortable couch that pulled out into a bed. That was the reason there were buttons in here for my baby. I thought him having the couch-bed in his office would be a problem, but everyone was aware of my condition and how my father didn’t play about me. Sometimes it felt weird when I was out and I saw firefighters because they’d tell me “hi” by name. I didn’t know these people, well not all of them.

“Alright Daddy, let me get out of here. I have an errand to run, then I’m going home.” I’d already been here for over an hour. It was time for me to go.

When Vernon Blackwell tilted his head, I knew he was about to work my nerves like my best friend. “Aeon, there is nothing that important that you need to do right now in this heat. Take your ass home, lil girl.”

I rolled my eyes and waved him off. I pulled up the rideshare app on my phone to

order my ride. There was one only five minutes away. Good! “Okay, Daddy. Come on, Midnite.”

My baby got up and came to my side. I said my final goodbye and walked out of his office, closing the door. I stopped at Susan’s desk to let her know what I planned to get from the store today. Her ass started to fuss too. I have to stop telling people about my moves.

It took about twenty minutes to get to the big box store. The heat sweltered outside, so I moved faster than normal to get inside of the warehouse. Maybe I should have listened to Fatima. I grabbed a cart to put what I needed inside. About ten minutes into my shopping, Midnite started to lean away from me as we walked. He did this when he wanted to help me be more stable while I walked or stood.

Halfway down an aisle, Midnite stopped walking and jumped up with his front paws on my thigh. He did it two more times before I addressed him. “Alright, baby. I’ll sit down.”

I pushed the cart a little further up, stepped back a few feet, then sat on the floor. I took my messenger bag off me, opened it, then pulled out my bottle of water and my pulse oximeter. Midnite watched me for a second. I knew he wanted to see if I would pull out my medication from my bag. I intentionally didn’t so he would be prompted to get it. I smiled when he dug in my bag with his snout then pulled out the pill bottle. “Thank you, baby.”

My pulse was 152 and my oxygen level was eighty-eight per my pulse oximeter. I need to get my heart rate down and oxygen saturation up, or I’m going to pass out. Midnite had already laid her head on my lap. I hurriedly opened my medication and took it then placed the bottle back in my bag. My blurred eyes let me know that my heart rate was not going down fast enough. “Midnite, I’m gonna lay down.”

He got up to give me room to lie down. Once I was flat on my back, I tapped my chest. Midnite used his body to lie across it. I tried not to use deep pressure therapy in public because people became overly worried. Lack of understanding caused them to immediately call emergency services, which was unnecessary most of the time. The weight from Midnite on my chest helped regulate my blood flow faster than if I just sat there and waited for my heartrate to slow.

“Ma’am, are you alright? Do you need me to call emergency services?” a deep voice asked from my side. At least he asked instead of just calling them.

My eyes were closed as I spoke. “No, I’ll be fine.” I rubbed my baby’s back. “Midnite’s got me.”

He said something else to me, but I really wasn’t listening. I prayed he took what I said and moved along. I was annoyed because I knew that once I got it together to get up, I more than likely would have to leave what I’d gotten so far here to go straight home. Fatima’s ass was going to curse me out, then when we got to my father’s house, he would curse me out. I didn’t feel like any of that today. I should have damn listened. I could be stubborn as an ox sometimes.

“Hey, baby. I know you told my son that you were alright, but I don’t feel comfortable leaving you here by yourself. Did you have a seizure?” Now it was a woman’s voice. I took a deepbreath. She said she was whoever the guy that spoke to me mother. The guy’s deepness of his voice didn’t give a kid, so I assumed that this woman was older.

I opened my eyes then turned my head with a smile on my face. “No ma’am, I’m not having a seizure. I have a condition called POTS. Sometimes I get overworked, and my heart rate goes up too much, so I have to sit or lay down.” I glanced down at my baby who minded his business with his head on my shoulder. I rubbed Midnite’s head, then said, “My baby here is trained to warn me so I can sit or lay down so I

don't hurt myself. Thank you for asking."

I saw the confusion in her eyes. My attention moved to the man that stood beside her. Well, damn! This lady's son was fine. He was dressed perfectly for the heat, with a pair of khaki shorts, a basketball jersey, and sneakers that complimented the colors in the jersey. His locs were up in a bun on the top of his head. You could tell that his lineup was fresh, and I appreciated the work of whoever did it.

I snapped out of my infatuation with this lady's son when she said something I didn't expect. "Ok, well, I still don't want to leave you here by yourself. My son is going to stay with you until you feel well enough to get up." Wait, what! "Declan, stay here and help her when she's ready to get up. Give me the cart, and I'll go get the stuff I need. I'll be back."

My eyes bucked as I watched this woman take the cart from her son, then walked off. What was really happening right now? My eyes shot back to her son whose name apparently was Declan. He looked uncomfortable as hell. "Um, so hi, Declan. It's nice to meet you. My name is Aeon."

He chuckled before he spread his legs a little, leaned back on the big shelf, then crossed his sexy, tatted arms across his chest. "What's up, Aeon? Does this happen a lot?"

"Um, to this degree, no. Most of the time, all I have to do is just take a seat somewhere, but with the extremely hot weather and just moving around, I think I did too much," I told him. I lifted my arms up to put my pulse oximeter back on my finger. My heartbeat is 101 and my oxygen level is 97. "That's more like it. Midnite, I'm okay, boy."

Like he was trained to do, he lifted his head and stayed on top of me for a moment to make sure I was alright. If he didn't think so, he would have laid his head back down

to let me know that he wasn't satisfied yet with my heartrate. When he got off me, that was his okay for me to get up.

Declan took a step toward me. "Let me help you up." He paused for a moment and glanced at Midnite. I understood the look of asking if my dog would react. After I told Midnite that it was alright to let Declan help me, he came to my side and extended his hand. "Come on."

I grabbed his soft hands and let him pull me up. Midnite was right next to me. My baby was trusting to a point, but not that damn trusting. People often underestimated labradors because of their friendly nature. I'd admit that most were overly friendly, but as my service dog, he would protect me at all costs. Declan picked my bag up once I was on my feet. "Thank you so much for helping me up and staying with me."

"Shit, my mama would have beat my ass if I didn't." Although he said it jokingly, something told me that it was not a joke at all. He peeked over at my cart. "Do you want me to help you get the rest of whatever you need?"

Hm, his help would be great. "I mean, if you have the time, that would be great. I don't want to put you out of your way."

He looked at the very nice watch on his wrist. "Nah, my mother still has a good twenty minutes of getting the things on her list and getting stuff that's not but adding it to the list like it always was." There was absolutely no smile on his face. He was serious.

"Oh, I think I have to use that method." It may not have been funny to him, but it was hilarious to me. He pushed the cart while I walked beside him. He smells so fucking good. Will it be weird if I ask him what cologne he's wearing? "Alright, I just need a few more things, then I can get my rideshare to get home."

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He stopped pushing the cart. His face tightened, and it was a sexy sight to see. “Wait, rideshare? What the hell do you mean you’re going to call a rideshare? Baby woman, your ass was laying on a damn floor in the store. You really plan to pick up this heavy ass shit and put it in a rideshare, only to take it out and carry it in your house? You’re joking, right?”

“Um, no, I’m not. Unfortunately, I can’t drive because of my condition,” I told him. My right, upper lip was lifted with my eyebrow. “I’ll be fine. Baby woman? What is that?”

He gawked at me then shook his head. “You’re not a child, so I’m not going to call you baby girl, hence baby woman.” He started to push the cart again. “You’re talkin’ about you’re going to be fine. If you act like you’re going to pass out again, I’m going to pick your lil ass up and put you in this damn cart.” He cut his eyes downward at my dog who must have felt him, because he looked up. “I’ll put your black ass in there too.”

I couldn’t help it. What was it about people talking to Midnite like he was a human. “You’re really going to put me and my baby in the cart?” I looked down at myself. “I am not little either.”

“You damnright I’ll put your lil ass in this cart and your little dog too,” I confirmed with an arched brow. She had me fucked up. She was tripping. The girl was just on the floor, almost passed out with a dog on her chest because she overheated from her POTS. Whatever that shit is. Now she was talking about going in a rideshare.

She stopped walking to laugh hard. I smiled and was happy that she wasn’t offended

by what I said to her. That meant to me that she wasn't overly sensitive about her condition and that she could take a joke. I really would toss their asses in this cart though. I tended to be a jester at times, and so were the people around me.

"You're silly. I don't think anyone has ever been threatened to be put in a shopping cart like a little kid. That's a new one that I have to tell my best friend." She mumbled the last part.

I let out a low chuckle. We stopped so I could put two cases of wine into the cart. I side-eyed the fuck out of her. Before I put these cases in the cart, there were already two cases of soda. "What are you getting all of this stuff for? If you're having a party, I'm invited."

Her head bucked back before she giggled. "How do you just invite yourself to an event that you don't even know what it is?" Yeah, she had that look in her eyes. Thehe's crazy, but I like it. "I'm throwing my daddy a surprise birthday party."

"Oh, and it's a surprise party! I'm definitely about to be all up and through there. Who's cooking?" That was an important question.

She gawked at me for a second. "We have a caterer. She just doesn't supply the beverages." I gave her a knowing look. "Yes, she's black."

I threw my hands up. "I have nothing against the mayo-sapians. I rather support black businesses. I love Mexican, Cuban food too. Once a week, I have a Mexican night at my lounge, and I have some cooks come in for that night. They cook a mix of both cultures, and I have a live band. The Hispanic community comes in droves to support."

She put her finger up. "First, mayo-sapians, really?" She shook her head. "Next, you own a lounge? That's cool."

Yeah, I had to slip that in there to let her know I wasn't an average nigga out here in these Charlotte streets. "Yeah, Ink Vibing and Ink Vibing Again are mine. It's a tattoo lounge; I'm a tat artist."

Her feet halted, and her eyes lit up. "That is so cool. I only have one tattoo, but I want more. My best friend has a lot." Her eyelids lowered a little. "Maybe I'll let you do my next one."

"I'd be honored to permanently put my ink work on your skin," I flirted back. "What do you do for a living?"

"Oh, nothing as cool as you. I'm a data analyst for Meta," she told me. "I work from home."

The corners of my lips lifted with my cheeks. "From what I know about data analysts, they're smart as hell and make good money. That's what's up."

"Hey, babies." My mother's voice interrupted our conversation. "Are you feeling better, baby?"

Aeon smiled. "Yes, ma'am, I am. Thank you for being concerned."

"Mama, tell me why this girl came here in a rideshare. She planned to go back home the same way with all this stuff," I told my mama. My head tilted with my side-eye.

My mother's face contorted. "Sweetheart, that's not what's going to happen today. Do you have everything that you need?"

Aeon glanced down in the cart. "All I need is two cases of water, then I'm done. I promise I'm alright to take a rideshare. I'm used to it, and most of the time, the drivers are really nice."

My mother ignored her comment and waved her off. “Let’s get your cases of water. Declan will take you and your fur baby home. Come on.” My mother was the type that didn’t understand the word no. That was partially my father’s fault. It was always whatever Princetta wanted, Princetta got. My mother turned her cart around and walked smooth off toward the aisle that the water was on.

Aeon gave me that is she serious look. “Yeah, there’s no arguing with Princetta Phillips. Let’s go.”

After we finished shopping, Aeon gave me the address of where she lived. I was thankful that I drove my Tahoe today. My everyday vehicle of choice was my Charger. If it was just my mother’s stuff, it would have fit in there. With my mother’s stuff and Aeon’s, there was no way that it all would have fit with her and Midnite. They talked the whole way to her house. I couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

Her place was nice. Aeon asked my mother if she wanted to come in for a drink. She accepted the invitation happily. While I carried the things into her house, my eyes roamed around her place. The television on her wall over the fireplace. It looked like at least ninety inches. It took three trips to get all the beverage cases inside.

She and my mother sat comfortably at her dining room table with what looked like lemonade in front of them. “Thank you very much, Declan.” She peeked over at her dog that was laid out on the couch watching some cartoon on the television. “Midnite, say thank you for them bringing us home.”

Midnite climbed from the couch and went over to these buttons that were on the floor. I knew that they were those communication buttons, because I’d seen them on social media. He looked toward us before his paw hit a button. “Thank you.” He moved to another button. “Mama, food.”

“Ok, baby, I’ll feed you in just a minute.” She smiled after he pressed

the“okay”button. That shit was cool to me. “Declan, do you want some lemonade?”

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I accepted her offer before I sat at one of the free chairs at the dining room table. “How long did it take for you to train him? Those communicator buttons are cool.”

“Oh, I trained him on the buttons, and it took about six months. It’s an ongoing thing. For him to be my service dog, it took about two years. That is an ongoing thing as well. My parents paid for an organization to train him,” she told us.

My mother asked her how much the training cost. When she said twenty thousand dollars, I almost choked on the lemonade that I drank out of the cup. “Damn, it really cost that much? Yeah, I would have taught him to communicate with me too. He would hold all of my deepest secrets.”

They both laughed, but I was serious as fuck. I’d sit on my couch with a glass of Yak, he’d have a bowl of water, and we’d chop it the hell up. “Boy, shut up,” my mama said with a laugh. “Aeon, baby, we’re going to get out of your hair. Give Declan your phone number so we can check in with you.”

I tilted my head with tight eyes in my mama’s direction and sucked my teeth. I couldn’t let Aeon know I wanted her number, so I had to act like my mama was doing too damn much. Like I said, Princetta got what she wanted. Aeon didn’t fuss with my mama; she just asked me for my phone. She called herself from it once she put her number in. We said our goodbyes, including Midnite, and we were on our way.

“I appreciate you, Mama.” We were on our way to her house. When we got there, I’d have a little bit of time to help her put this stuff up.

With a smirk, my mother said, “Oh, I already know. You will never be able to get

anything past ya mama.” She was right. It’d been like that since I was a little boy. She was the best wing woman today.

A LITTLE TIME LATER . . .

“I told your ass to not get that shit on your foot. You wanted to think you were tough shit. Now you’re in here crying, about to pass the fuck out,” Derrick fussed at his wife.

You couldn’t do shit but laugh at his goofy ass. He and his wife finally brought their asses in here for their matching tattoos. The first day that they were supposed to come in, something came up that forced them to cancel. After I finished their matching tattoos, Iesha decided that she wanted a foot tat to match her best friend, Leydi’s. I warned her ass about the pain. She said that she could take it, but now her ass was in here crying.

“Shut the hell up, Derrick, before I get out of this seat and beat your ass,” she said through sniffles. “You get on my damn nerves. You gonna talk yourself right out of some pussy.”

When they got like this, all you could do was grin and bear it. I normally wore earbuds, but I wanted to talk to their ignorant asses today. “Aye, Iesha, my mama thinks your ass is pregnant.”

Derrick let out a hearty laugh. “I told her ass she was pregnant. That’s my boy for sure.”

“Ain’t nobody pregnant, Derrick.” She waved him off. “Why does she think that?”

When I told her it was because of those black forest cakes, she rolled her eyes. Derrick shook his head, then said, “Her ass is in denial like a muthafucka. This dick

knows when his pussy is pregnant. I'll let her stay in denial though. When that belly starts to grow, she's gonna know something." His focus turned from her to me. "Aye, I was over Auntie's house the other day, and she was talking about some girl named Aeon to Unc."

Leave it to my mama to tell my business. "Man, Aeon is this chick we met a lil over a week ago in Sams. Her ass was in there laying on the floor with a damn dog on her chest. My mama made me stay with her until she was ready to get up. I did, then I helped her get the shit she needed, then we took her home."

"Oh my God! Was she having a seizure?" Iesha asked. I knew she wanted to be included in the conversation so she would have something other than the pain to think about.

I shook my head before I sprayed a paper towel to wipe the tattoo to get a clearer work area. "Nah, she wasn't. She said she has some shit called POTS. Something about the condition makes her heart rate go up more than other people's when she does everyday activities. When it does, she has to sit or lay down to get it down. I guess her dog, Midnite, can sense the shit and help her," I told them.

"Did you look the shit up?" Julian asked. He worked on a client in the seat that was right next to me. It was a big piece that he'd been working on for at least three hours now.

When I told him that I hadn't, Derrick pulled out his phone. "Let's look that shit up." He pressed on his phone screen for a minute or so. "Alright, this article says that it stands for postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome. Shit, that's a lot to say. Yeah, it says that the heart rate increases abnormally from regular shit like standing up. Damn, I wouldn't want to have this shit."

I lifted the needle gun from Iesha's foot. I took in what he said. "Is there like a cure,

or is it like a forever thing?”

It took him a minute before he answered me. Iesha was still squirming in the seat like someone was killing her. It was almost done. “From what I’m reading, it seem like it’s a forever thing. There’s different kinds and shit.” He looked up at me. “Did she tell you what kind she has?”

“Nah. When we talk, we don’t really talk about that. It must be like bad though since she needs a service dog and shit.” I thought about Midnite and chuckled. “Her dog uses those communicator buttons. He better since she paid twenty thousand dollars to have him trained.”

The buzzing from Julian’s tattoo gun stopped. “Say the fuck what? I know you just didn’t say twenty bands.”

I chuckled. “I did. He a cool lil black lab though.”

“So, we just going to skip over the part when you said that y’all talk? Do y’all text, talk on the phone, or video calls?” Derrick asked.

After I pulled the needle up because I was done, I responded. “We do all three. Why?

“Why haven’t you asked her out yet?” Julian asked. When I asked him how he knew if I wanted to ask her out, he gave me a knowing look. “So, are we going to act like I don’t know you? Declan, you would never do all that calling, video chatting, and texting if you weren’t feeling her. Stop fuckin’ playing. What’s holding you back from asking her out?”

He was right. I never wasted time with bitches that I couldn’t see myself being with. Aeon was cool as fuck, sweet, funny. I could tell from some of the stories she told me about herself that she was loyal. There was definitely sexual tension between us. She

was a slim girl, but her ass was thick with a jiggle when she walked. All of that was important when you thought about the woman that you wanted to be with. If we got to the point where we had sex and that pussy was what I thought it would be, her ass was going to be stuck like fuck with me. “You right. I don’t know what’s holding me back.”

“You think that POTS shit is holding you back?” Derrick asked. “From what this shit on here says, it’s manageable. There’re just certain things that she’s gonna have to be carefulwith.” He hadn’t stopped reading whatever he was reading on his phone.

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I finished wrapping up Iesha's foot before I shifted in my seat to face him. "Nah, I don't think that it matters to the point that I wouldn't be with her. I don't know much about it, but I'm learning now. If I have questions, I know she'll answer them."

Iesha swung her legs off the chair. "Well, call her now and ask her out. There's no time like the present." She crossed her arms over herself. It was clear that she'd been around my mama too long and too damn much.

I grabbed my phone from the table next to me. There was no need for me to act like I didn't want to ask her out. I pulled her up on my contact list then pressed the call button. "Hey, Deck," she greeted with the nickname that she gave me without my damn permission.

"What's up, Aeon? What you up to?" I looked up at everyone in my damn face. Even the dude that Julian was tatting had tuned in.

There was some shifting on her end. "Um, I'm with Fatima hanging out. Are you at the shop?"

"Yeah, I am. I wanted to ask you?—"

"Baby, you want another piece of cake?" Why the fuck does that sound like my mama?

"Um, why does that sound like Princetta? Aeon, where are you and Fatima?" I talked to my mother earlier today, and she didn't say anything about Aeon and her best friend coming over.

Aeon hesitated, but she responded. “Um, we’re at Mrs. Princetta’s house. She invited us over for dinner.”

“My mama invited you over for dinner, huh? Okay, well I guess I’ll ask you what I wanted when I get there for dinner. I’ll see you soon.” I disconnected the call.

“Yo, my mama does the most. How are you going to invite her over and not tell me that shit. If I didn’t call, I wouldn’t have known. I’ve talked to my mama and Aeon’s ass today, and neither of their asses said shit to me.” I got up to start packing my shit.

Julian started to laugh, then Derrick and Iesha joined in like a little heckle choir. “That man is mad that his mama invited his girl over and didn’t tell him. You better go see about your girl,” Derrick joked.

“Fuck y’all. She’s not my girl yet. Y’all told me to ask her out on a date, so that’s what I’m going to do. I’m just going to do it in person.” I heard them talking funny shit, but I refused to entertain their asses. Once I had all my stuff, I chucked everyone the deuces and left them all right there.

Ink Vibing was only ten minutes from my parents’ house in the south end of Charlotte. How does my mama get to meet the best friend before I meet the best friend? When I got to the house, it felt like I floated to the front door. Since Aeon and Fatima were here, I felt comfortable using my key to walk in.

When I walked in, my face tightened. I walked the short journey to the kitchen. They sat at the table in the kitchen while my mother stood at the stove, frying chicken. It was in the middle of the week. My mama only fried chicken on the weekends. “Mama, you frying chicken on a not weekend day?”

She turned with tightened eyes and a hand on her hip. “Boy, I know you didn’t just walk in my house and not greet people. I just know I raised you better than that,

Declan Micheal Phillips Jr.”

I got myself together because she was right. “My bad, Mama.” I walked over to her and kissed her cheek. “How are you doing today?”

She showcased her beautiful smile. “That’s more like it. I’m great, baby. Yes, I’m frying chicken because Fatima and Aeon wanted some.”

I pivoted to put the ladies in my sight. “Hello, Aeon. Fatima, it’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

She sized me up as I expected her to do. “Hey, Declan. It’s nice to meet you as well. I’ve heard a lot about you too.”

“Midnite, what’s up witch?” I asked him. He lay at the threshold of the kitchen. I wasn’t sure if my mother told him not to come into the kitchen or not. He just lifted his head, looked at me, then put it back down.

“Aeon, can I talk to you in the living room really quick?” I asked her. Her rude ass didn’t say shit to me when I told her hello.

“Ok, Deck.” She giggled because every time she called me that shit, I gave her a death stare. She walked ahead of me into the living room, giving me the opportunity to watch her ass.

We both sat on the couch. She looked good and smelled good. “You look beautiful as usual.”

“Awe, thank you so much. You look se . . . handsome. You look handsome today.” Her milk chocolate cheeks lifted and rose over. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

I watched her for a moment. She was so fucking beautiful. “I wanted to know if I could take you out on a date?”

EARLIER THE SAME DAY . . .

“Girl, you are tripping. I think it’s sweet that she calls to check up on you and ask if you need anything. I mean, you and her son gonna end up together with his fine ass.” Fatima fanned herself.

She was so extra. When she got home the day that I went to the store, I begrudgingly told her what happened at the store. I didn’t get to the part about Declan before she started to fuss and cuss. I had to calm her down before I could tell her about Declan. She was mute when I told her about him. After I told her that he owned Ink Vibing and was a tattoo artist, she pulled him up on his lounge’s website. She was team Declan from that moment.

My head snapped in her direction. We were on my couch chilling since both of us were done with our day. “Um, what makes you think that we’re going to be together?”

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She snickered. “Girl, every time I come over here, you’re on the phone with him. If you’re not working, with me or your daddy, you’re on the phone with that man. Girl, I walked in here and y’all was on a video call while he was doing a tattoo. Y’all go together and don’t even know it.”

We talked a lot, whether it was text, video chat, or regular calls. He was so easy to talk to, and he kept me laughing. I thought about inviting him over a few times, but I thought better of it. I didn’t want to talk about this, so I steered the conversation back to his mother. “We were talking about Mrs. Princetta. Like I was saying, I don’t want her to do all that because she feels sorry for me.”

Fatima’s chin dropped to her chest for a second with a huff. “Girl, why is it when anyone other than me or your daddy does anything for you, you think it’s because they feel sorry for you?” Her eyes were soft when she looked at me. “Aeon, you do realize that there are genuinely good, caring people in the world? From what you told me about Mrs. Princetta, she doesn’t sound like the type of woman that would do something just because she feels sorry for someone. Stop doing that shit.”

In my head, Mrs. Princetta had no reason to be so concerned with me as she had been. She called me every day since the incident at the store, to talk to me. She asked me if I needed anything. “I mean, I know there are genuinely nice people.” I shrugged. “I guess I haven’t really met any.”

Fatima didn’t say anything as she stared at me. We sat there quietly for a moment. When she turned her body toward me with her leg bent on the couch, I knew our conversation was about to get deep. “Aeon, hear me out. Do you think that it bothers you so much because she exuded that motherly, nurturing feeling that you never got

from your mom, so it overwhelms you? You and I both know that you've met genuinely nice people, so that's bullshit. I think what it is, is that you've never had that motherly feeling that you wanted, and Mrs. Princetta makes you feel that."

I didn't know I was crying until she wiped my cheek. Is that how I feel? "I never really thought about it. She is very nurturing. I just don't want her to feel sorry for me because when she met me, I was laying on a store floor."

"Alright, best friend, time is almost up for this bitch ass pity party that you're having for yourself. I've come to the party to bring your ass back home because this party is not it." Her tone was low and soft. "You are not this girl that thinks you're helpless and that people feel sorry for you."

Our conversation was cut into by my phone ringing. My phone was on the couch between Fatima and me, so she saw who it was. She smiled before she mumbled that it was God giving me a sign. I answered the call on the speaker on the third ring. "Hey, Mrs. Princetta. How are you doing?"

"Hey, Aeon, baby. I was calling to check on you today. You good over there?" she asked.

From conversations with Declan, I knew that his family was from Orlando, Florida. I wondered if Mrs. Princetta was originally from there. She had a serious country twang. She was funny too. I saw where her son got it from.

"I'm good. I'm sitting here with my best friend, Fatima." I thought about whether I wanted to say anything about her not having to continue to check on me. I knew that I probably shouldn't have, but I couldn't help myself. My eyes closed, then the word vomit just came out. "Mrs. Princetta, you know you don't have to check on me. I know that you're probably a busy person, so you don't have to feel like you have to go out of your way for lil ole me. I can manage."

When my eyes opened, Fatima gave me a death stare. Someone somewhere had already dug my grave. She mouthed, “I hope she curses your silly ass out.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end, then a chuckle could be heard. “Aeon, baby, did you pass out today? I mean you must have because it seems like you bumped your damn head or something. I thought that dog was supposed to make sure you’re in a safe place before you pass out.”

My mouth fell open. Fatima’s ass covered her mouth to hold in her laughter. I couldn’t believe Mrs. Princetta said that. I wasn’t offended, but I was surprised. “Mrs. Princetta!”

“Your ass is over there talking about I don’t have to feel like I have to go out of my way. Girl, trust me, if I didn’t really care, I wouldn’t have stopped when your ass was on the floor. I call to check on and talk to you because I like you. I might as well get to know the girl that’s gonna be with my son. Now shut the hell up. Since you and your best friend are finished with y’all day, bring y’all asses over here for dinner. I’m going to text you my address.”

She didn’t give me a chance to say shit. Fatima was now laughing loudly. Midnite looked at her like she was crazy. She interrupted his nap. Seconds later, my phone dinged with Mrs. Princetta’s address. Fatima jumped up from her seat. “Bitch, get your ass up so we can go eat.”

I guess we’re going to Mrs. Princetta’s house for dinner.

“I wanted to know if I could take you out on a date?” Declan asked me. His question surprised me. I was happy that he asked, but a part of me never thought he would.

My cheeky smile almost hurt. “Oh wow. Of course you can take me on a date. I would love that.” I tried not to act overly excited, but I didn’t think I did a good job

of it.

“Bet. I’ll let you know when so you can clear your schedule,” he confidently told me. His head slanted to the side. “Now how long you been chillin’ with my mama?”

I leaned over with my laughter. “I know you’re not in your feelings about me being over here. This is the first time that I’ve physically been over here. I talk to Mrs. Princetta every day.”

His body leaned away from me slightly with a surprised expression. “Oh, so y’all like besties? That’s what’s up.” He gawked at me for a second before we both laughed. “Come on so we can eat dinner. My mama doesn’t fry chicken on weekdays, so I’m not missing this.”

He stood then extended his hand to help me up. When he pulled me up, our bodies collided. Declan towered over my five feet, six inches, and I loved that for me. Tall was one of my prerequisites for a man. Every man that I’d dealt with was taller than me. It wasn’t like I’d dealt with so many. After Troy, I dealt with two more men, but it was more of a physical relationship than a real one.

We eventually separated to go into the kitchen. Mrs. Princetta and Fatima both had goofy ass smiles on their faces. “Y’all just in time. Senior! Come down here to eat!”

Declan’s father was down here with us for a little while when we first got here. He introduced himself, asked me and Fatimaa few questions, then left us to our girl talk. After a few minutes, he came into the kitchen. “Hey, Junior, I didn’t hear you come in.” After Declan stood to greet his father, Mr. Declan cupped the back of his son’s neck and put his forehead against Deck’s. “You good, boy?” After Deck told him that he was good, Mr. Declan removed his hand. “Alright now. Don’t let nobody fuck with you. I kill behind mine.”

Declan told him that he would too. I couldn't help but smile at the interaction. It was like in that moment, Deck was a little boy who admired his father to no end. After we all sat and Mr. Declan led grace, we dug in. This was really nice. I secretly hoped that Fatima and I would be invited to dinner more often.

A LITTLE WHILE LATER . . .

Today was not a good damn day. I had a lot of housework that I couldn't do because every time that I did, I got overly tired. It was days like these that were overwhelming and made me just want to fold into myself. Midnite had been by my side since last night. In the beginning, when service dogs were trained, it was detrimental that a bond was established between the handler and dog. This was the reason why. They were also our emotional support animals.

When I got like this, I would lie to Fatima and tell her that I had important meetings all day. I didn't want her to come over, but I knew she would come anyway in the morning for her coffee. I would sit at my computer to act like I was so busy when I wasn't. I had intermittent FMLA leave at work. For days like this, I called out and used it to cover me.

Midnite and I lay on the couch together and watched television. As a compromise, we'd watch one of his shows, then a movie that I wanted to watch. He'd sleep during my movies. The buzz of my phone caught my attention. When I saw that it was Declan, I debated whether I would answer. If I don't, he'll keep calling. "Hey, Deck."

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There was silence for a moment. “Why do you sound like that, Aeon? What’s wrong?

Why does his ass have to be so damn observant? “There’s nothing wrong with me. What’s up?”

He didn’t immediately answer. “I was calling to let you know that I want to take you out Saturday. There’s a concert in town that I want to take you to.”

My ears perked. I loved concerts but rarely went. “Oh, okay. What concert? There’s only one concert in town this weekend and that’s Mrs. Carter.”

“Well, I guess that’s where we’re going, Aeon. I’m going to pick you up around three o’clock. I want to have an early dinner, then chill a little before the concert. Cool?”

“Yeah, that’s cool. I can’t wait.” The way I felt didn’t allow me to be overly excited like I would have been on any regular day. I loved Mrs. Carter, and he knew that. The fact that I didn’t jump up and down was a big red flag.

“Cool. You sure you’re alright?” Concern seeped through his tone.

As if he could see me, I told him that I was fine. We spoke for a few more minutes before I found a reason to rush him off the phone. The longer we were on the phone, the harder it was to wear the mask.

The movie that I was watching ended. I rubbed Midnite’s back to wake him. “It’s time for your show, baby.” I turned his favorite movie on, and his ass pepped right up.

While he watched his movie, I decided to take a little nap. I glanced around my living room at the laundry that covered the other side of my large couch that I was supposed to fold. There was carpet powder all over the floor that I started to vacuum up but couldn't finish. I was loading the dishwasher when Midnite alerted me that I needed to chill out. A tear fell from my eye that I smacked away. These were the things that frustrated me about my condition. I just wanted to clean my fucking house.

I wasn't sure how long I was asleep when Midnite's bark woke me from my sleep. There was someone at my door knocking loudly. I stretched before I grabbed my phone to look at my camera app. What the hell is he doing here? I pressed the talk button. "Deck, what are you doing here?"

I watched his face scrunch. "Aeon, don't play with me. Open this door."

The frown on his face told me to heed his unspoken warning. I climbed off the couch, told Midnite who was at the door that it was alright, then I opened the door. "What are you doing here?"

He walked past me into my house before he answered. He looked around then faced me. "Your ass didn't sound right, so I came to put eyes on you. What you got going on?"

I stood there stuck in a daze with the door still open. My daze ended when he asked me if I planned to close the door. "Oh, yeah, sorry. I'm just surprised to see you here at my house. Um, I don't have much going on."

He pulled his arm up and looked at his wristwatch. "You not working today? It's one in the afternoon."

Curse me for telling him my work schedule. When I told him, it was during a casual conversation. This man paid attention to everything. "No, I took the day off to cle-

clean my house.”

My nerves were revved up under his stare. Why is he looking at me like that? I walked past him into the kitchen to finish the dishes. I felt his eyes on me, but I ignored him. As I moved around the kitchen, I inconspicuously peeked at Deck who hadn't moved from where he stood. After a few minutes, Midnite jumped up to indicate that my heart rate was too high. Not right now, please.

I tried to ignore him, but he kept jumping. “Aeon, you better sit your ass down somewhere. I know you see and feel Midnite on your ass.” Deck's tone was hard.

I took a deep breath before I walked over to the couch. Midnite went into what she was supposed to do. Within minutes, I had medicine and a bottle of water. “What, Deck?” He just stood there like a damn statue.

All he did was shake his head then walked to my kitchen. What is he doing? I watched this man finish the dishes that I started. He'd ask me where to put things and where certain cleaning supplies were. He pulled out my mop and mopped my hardwood kitchen and dining room floors. Next, he finished vacuuming my floor. It wasn't until he sat on the couch and started to fold my laundry that the tears fell.

When he glanced at me, he did a double take. He set the shirt that he was folding down, then slid next to me. “What's wrong? Why are you crying?”

“No one's ever done anything like this for me outside of my dad and Fatima. I was with my ex for years, and he never helped me with anything like this. If I didn't feel good, he'd just be like I hope you feel better soon. He wouldn't even come over to see about me.” It was crazy that the simple act of Deck helping me around the house made me feel stupid for how long I was with Troy's stupid ass.

Deck didn't say anything at first. He placed his hand on my bare thigh and squeezed

it, which caused me to look at him. “It’s because you ain’t never experience a real nigga.” My eyes bulged when his lips pressed against mine. It was quick but impactful. He pulled away, smiled, then said, “You fuckin with a real one now.”

He slid back over and restarted folding my laundry. The only sound that could be heard was the television that was still on a show that Midnite watched. Declan kissed me. When he finished folding the laundry, I showed him where everything went.

“Alright, how you feeling?” he asked me once he had put away my clean laundry in my bedroom. After I told him that I felt better, he pulled his phone out of his back pocket. He tapped the screen for a second before his attention came back to me. “I have a tat appointment in an hour.”

“Oh, okay. I didn’t mean to hold you up. I’m sorry.” I quickly apologized.

His lip turned up. “Be quiet, Aeon. Get dressed and get Midnite ready. Y’all coming to chill with me in the shop.” I tried to tell him no, but his words over his shoulder shut me up. “Get the fuck ready while I chill wit’ my boy out here.”

What ‘I’m going to fuck him’ sorcery is this! I got ready in record time. It took about thirty minutes to get to his shop from my house. When we walked in, he gave me my third shock of the day by holding my hand as we walked through the lounge. I saw the stares from the waitresses and some of the patrons. I paused when I saw the massive staircase.

“Calm down. We have an elevator,” Deck assured me. He walked over to the bar first to tell one of the waitresses that stood there to come upstairs to get my order. After he grabbed a menu with his free hand, we walked to the elevator and got on when the doors opened. I felt like a schoolgirl as I tried to glance at him secretively. He grabbed my chin, turned my face to him, and gave me another kiss. This one was more sensual.

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I'm going to fuck him real bad. Like real bad! When we stepped off the elevator after the doors opened, I glanced down at my baby. Like he always did in a new place, he assessed our surroundings. He wanted to identify the safe places for me.

"Declan, what's up, man?" some dude called out. He paused the tattoo that he was in the middle of, took one of his gloves off, then dapped Deck when he was close.

"It ain't shit." He still held my hand. "Julian, this is my baby, Aeon. Aeon, this is my best friend, Julian."

Julian looked just as surprised as I did to his reference to me as his baby. I like it. My blushing smile told on me. "Hi, Julian. It's nice to meet you,"

He smiled. "It's real nice to meet you too, sis. My wife is coming here in a bit with our son. I'll make sure I introduce you."

After our greetings, Deck told me to hold on, then went into a room. He came out of the room, pushing a recliner. After he put it where he wanted it, he told me to sit down and get comfortable. I did just that. For the rest of the evening, I ate, read on my e-reader, met Julian's wife, texted Fatima, and just chilled. A day that started out horribly, Deck was able to turn into one of my greatest days.

NIGHTCAP . . .

Our date was the shit! When Deck arrived at my house, he asked me if there was anywhere in particular that I wanted to eat or it was whatever. I surprised him when I told him that I wanted to go back to his lounge. They had this salad that had lamb on

top with this house dressing that was addictive.

I tried to leave Midnite home, but he, Deck, and Fatima weren't having it. Fatima came over to style me and do my hair and makeup like I was incapable of doing it myself. She saw me off like an overbearing mother. I swore her to secrecy that she wouldn't tell my father. His ass would have been there too.

The buzz was real in the lounge, and I couldn't say that I didn't enjoy it. If I could read minds, I would take a gamble that the two waitresses that were huddled, attempting to watch us on the low, wanted to know who the hell I was. The young lady patron that boldly came to our table to speak to Deck and continued to look down at Midnite wanted to know what was wrong with me. There was no need to wonder if Deck ever messed with her because he told me freely that they'd fucked in the past. I thought it'd bother me that he told me, but I appreciated it. I also appreciated that he made it clear that I was his girlfriend. He wouldn't get any objection from me.

After dinner, we chilled at an ice cream shop. I love ice cream. When it was time for the concert, I couldn't hold my excitement. Since I had Midnite, we used a different entrance than the other concert goers. These types of environments could be chaotic for Midnite, but her training kicked in.

When I inquired where our seats were, Deck told me to be patient. I was worried because I knew the area was not as handicap accessible as most places. When we took the elevator up, I assumed we were about to sit with Jesus, but I didn't care because I was about to see Mrs. Carter herself. It didn't matter if she looked like a thumbnail picture. Well, we weren't sitting with Jesus today. We were sitting in a box! When I saw Fatima, Julian, his wife Jesika, who I now knew as Deck's cousin, Derrick, his wife Iesha, Derrick's half-brother, Tiberius, and his wife Leydi, I almost lost my mind.

The concert was amazing! Fatima, Jesika, Iesha, Leydi, and I made plans for brunch tomorrow. Now we need to get Fatima a man because I got one. Deck's keen eye to detail allowed him to plan a date that was centered around my likes to ensure that I had an outstanding time. That was the reason that we were in his shower, and I was trying to suck his prostate gland through his urethra.

"Fuck, Aeon!" Deck's back was pressed against the shower wall. His hip thrust forward, pushing him further down my throat. I let out a little gag. "Nah, don't gag now. You came in here with your hot ass talking about you wanted to suck some dick. Suck some dick, Aeon."

My body shook at the feeling of an orgasm I didn't expect to have. Note to self, I like shit talking. He was right. The minute we walked into his house, I boldly told him that I wanted to suck and fuck him.

Midnite found comfort on his couch after I put on his favorite movie. Thank God he isn't opposed to him getting on his couch. My baby was bougie and refused to lay on the bare floor. When Deck took us to his shop, Midnite sat in front of me and looked at me like bitch, I know you don't expect me to lay on this floor. I rolled my eyes then laid the recliner back. He climbed his happy ass right in my lap. When I told Deck that my baby wouldn't lie on the floor, he called him an uppity nigga, then ordered him a pillow from a pet store via a delivery app.

"I'm about to cum. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Deck's nut shot into my mouth, and I happily chugged it down.

I made sure he was drained before I stood up. His head was tilted backward on the wall as his chest rose and fell. As my arms wrapped around his waist, I was impressed that his dick was still hard. When he finally got himself together, he brought his eyes to me. There was a look of trouble in his eyes. Fortunately, it seemed like the trouble that would leave my body with tremors.

Aeon was something special, and it was crazy that she didn't know it. We'd talked every day since we met, and it was cool. I wasn't that type who sat up to cake on the phone. She was just so easy to talk to.

I learned a lot about her from those conversations. A nigga had his notes app up taking notes so that I didn't forget. My father taught me that relationships were work. In work meetings, you took notes until you understood something fully or it was committed to memory. The same could be true in a relationship.

At my age, I didn't have the time to play with these bitches. I was looking for my wife. I wanted the babies, the house, the dog, all that shit. My parents got married three months after they met each other. Now, I didn't plan to do that, but I planned to find my forever and lock her in to lead to that.

I knew that I liked Aeon after our first full conversation. I knew that she was mine when I called her and she sounded off. We hadn't known each other for long, but we'd talked enough that I could firmly say that I knew her. When I told her about our date and she realized it was a Mrs. Carter concert, I expected her to scream, shout, or something. I knew how much Aeon liked—no, she loved Mrs. Carter. So when she barely gave me any reaction, I knew something was up.

I was at my parents' house when I called her. Immediately after I got off the phone, my spirit was bothered. My father knew what was up, and I didn't even have to say anything to him. My expression, spirit, and soul were off kilter because I knew something was wrong but not what was wrong. My father looked at me and said four words that had me make moves. 'Son, go to her.'

My heart broke when I got to her house and walked through it. It was like organized chaos there. The fact that she was in a relationship with that fuck ass white boy for as long as she was and said that he'd never done something as simple as clean her house was crazy. My flabber was gasted. He could have hired a housekeeper if he didn't

want to do it himself. Date outside of your race, they said.

I loved her in my space when I was at the shop doing my work. We didn't have to talk; I just wanted her near me. Now, Midnite's uppity ass was about to get kicked. When Aeon told me that he refused to lie on the floor without a pillow unless she was in a crisis, I thought she was bullshitting until I saw his ass really not lie down. When she reclined in the chair and his ass climbed on it between her legs then lay down, I was done. I bought him a pillow, so now he had one at the shop when he came back.

Date night was a success. That was evident by my dick at the back of my girl's mouth. "I'm about to cum. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

The way my nut shot out of my dick was almost painful. Aeon gobbled up my dick like it was Thanks-fuckin-giving, and I damn sure was thankful. I had to give myself a moment because a nigga was lightheaded. Is this how my baby feels with her POTS? Her arms wrapped around my waist helped me get it together. When I gazed down at her, she wore this innocent expression like she didn't just win a dick suck-a-thon.

My dick was already brick hard again. The side of my bent finger lifted her chin to give me more access to her lips. The passion in our kiss was deep as our tongues explored each other's mouths. Her neck extended back allowing my tongue to trace her collar up to behind her ear. I pulled away, then asked, "Are you good?"

She gave me a devious smile. "Yes, I'm great. Thank you for asking."

At dinner, we talked about an array of things. One of those topics was things that triggered her to have a POTS episode. In that conversation, I learned that she had to be careful with the temperature of the water when she showered. The temperature in her shower was regulated by the showerhead that she had. I was worried because mine wasn't, but I'd have it by the next time she came over. "Tell me if you're not

okay. I'm about to fuck the shit out of you."

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“Please fuck the shit out of me,” she requested. The want in her tone had my dick about to burst. Her body felt good against mine.

Our places switched when I turned our bodies around. She had already gotten on her knees. Now it was time for me to get on mine. My lips went back to her extended neck. They worked their way down her body. When I got down to the prize, I lifted her leg and put it over my shoulder. My hands reached up to use her breasts to anchor me, then my mouth went to work.

“Deck, oh God!” Her hand gripped my locs and pressed my head in so hard you would have thought that she was trying to put my head inside her pussy. “Right there! Yes, right fucking there!” Her pussy soaked my beard. Her body trembled from the force of her orgasm.

I kissed back up her body until I got to her lips. Her breathing was rapid, and that worried me. I wanted to make sure she was safe, but I didn’t want to fuck up the vibe. “You want this dick?” After she told me yes, I picked her up. I kissed her as I walked us out of the shower.

With wet bodies, I still laid her back on the bed. She lifted a leg. “Put it in, Deck,” she begged.

I’d never make her beg too long. We’d already exchanged STD results from the testing we agreed to do, and she’d taken the initiative to get on birth control. I was ready to go bareback, balls deep in the pussy. I lined myself up to ease in her, but it damn sure wasn’t an ease. My baby was tight as fuck. “Damn, Aeon, you’re tight as fuck.”

She moaned as I worked my dick in and out of her. “Deck, Deck, wait. You’re so big.”

“You better take this dick. You said you wanted to fuck and suck. We’re at the fuck part of this programming.” Her pussy released around my dick. Yeah, she likes when I talk that shit. “You gonna fuck me back, Aeon, or you just want me to fuck you? You said that you wanted to fuck and suck, so I wanna know. You wanna fuck me?”

The longing in her voice couldn’t be ignored nor could the desire in her eyes. “I’m going to fuck . . . oh my God!” The increased grip and saturation of her pussy let me know that I’d hit a spot that I would tap on more often. Let me stick a dick pin there. Once she got herself together, she tried to answer again. “I’m going to fuck you.”

When her hands pushed against my chest, I pulled out and lay on the bed next to her. My intense stare stayed on her as she stood over me on the bed. With her feet flat, she lowered herself, aligned my dick to her opening, and slid down my shaft until she hit the base. My hands flew to her hips. “Fuck, Aeon!” Her pussy activated a pulsating vice grip. She’s trying to make me her bitch.

With a tilted head, she asked, “Am I fucking you now, Deck? Huh, is this fucking you?” Her face held determination and pleasure. She liked to talk her shit too.

I gripped her hips, then thrustured upward into her. “Yeah, you’re fucking me, and I’m fucking you right back.” I took a hand to grip her neck to pull her down to me for a kiss. I smacked her ass when she stopped bouncing. I spoke against her lips. “I didn’t tell you to stop bouncing. Bounce that ass.”

She was excellent at obeying demands. For the rest of the night, we explored each other’s bodies while we learned the sexual limitation of her conditions. There was an increased risk of fainting or dizziness during sexual activity due to the change in

blood pressure. We found that out during our second session when I was tearing her pussy up from the back. She became lightheaded, so we had to take a break. I saw the discouragement on her face when it happened. There was an insecurity there that I would need to work out of her.

I had no issues with working out any insecurity that she had, because she was my person. It was all about flexibility and adaptability. For the rough from the back, riding, and shit like that, we needed to make those types of sessions quickies. For the more sensual sessions, we could take our time because there were moments of stillness to allow her heart rate to level out. There was nothing outside of cheating or some sort of betrayal that would put me in harm's way that could pull me off Aeon. I needed her to know that.

A SHORT TIME LATER . . .

“Why are you over here bothering me? Where is my daughta and fur daughta?” My mother was clearly annoyed with me. It was like she forgot I was her son and Aeon was my girl. If I came over here without my baby, she seemed disappointed.

My daddy shook his head. “Don’t do my boy like that, Cetta. The minute he stops coming by here, your ass going to be crying about missing your baby boy.” My father fussed at her from his recliner in the den.

“Hush, Senior. My baby knows I’m joking with him,” my mother said with softened eyes. She snapped her neck in my direction where I sat on the couch. “He better not stop coming over here. I’ll show up at his tattoo shop and toss everything around before I get a tat myself.”

I laughed at my mama. “Here you go with this tattoo business. Dad, at this point, y’all should just come in and get matching tats.”

The way my father's face scrunched and tightened at the same time sent me into a laughing fit. "If I never in my years got a tattoo, why at my tender age of fifty-eight years old would I want one?" He glanced at his wife. "Woman, you better sit down somewhere." He was officially over the conversation. "How are things going with baby girl?" He asked about Aeon.

Just the thought of her made my heart rate increase. "It's been good as hell, Dad. I'm gonna marry that girl." There was a moment of silence. "Y'all are still coming to her father's birthday party, right? There's supposed to be a who's who of local government officials there."

The time was almost here for Mr. Blackwell's birthday party. When my mother and I met Aeon, she was shopping for the party. You would have thought the party was next week or so, but no. The party was almost three months away. With the guest list, she had to send off invitations well in advance because of the schedule of some invitees.

"You know we're going to be there. I already have my dress, and your daddy suit just got tailored the other day," my mother informed me. When Aeon came over to bring their invitation, my mother was so excited. It wasn't often that my daddy and she got the chance to get jazzy to go out. "How you feel about finally meeting her daddy?"

My shoulders lifted toward my ears. "I don't feel any kind of way. It's about time, but I get it. Aeon needed to feel secure in our relationship before she wanted to introduce me to her father. Her ex, Troy, messed her up, man."

"Well, Son, you have her heart now, so take care of it. I can only imagine how it feels to have a disability that is rare, not always easy to explain, and alters your lifestyle." With a prideful smile, my father continued. "When I see the way you love her, it lets me know that me and ya mama raised you right. She's a good fit for you, her and Midnite."

We all chuckled at that because that dog was a damn mess. I purchased a pillow for him for my parents' house because my mother said that he was not welcomed on her couch. I thought the pillow would be enough, but I was wrong. The next time I came over here, there was a children's loveseat here for her. My mother wanted her fur daughter to be comfortable.

I glanced at the clock on the wall over the couch. "Let me get out of here. My baby and Fatima are coming to the shop to get tats today."

My father's finger went up quickly. "Don't say shit to me, Cetta. Not a word."

My grown ass mother crossed her arms over her chest and fixed her lips into a pout. In an audible mumble, she said, "See when the next time you get some pussy."

I jumped up from my seat. "Yep, I'll talk to y'all later." No couth . . . My parents had no fucking couth.

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When I got to the shop, my baby and Fatima were already there. It wasn't a surprise to see her eating our Greek lamb salad. "What's up, baby?" I asked before I leaned down to kiss her Mediterranean vinaigrette flavored lips and tongue. I made sure I showed Midnite some love since his ass finally fucked with me for real.

"Hey, baby. I missed you all day," she cooed from her recliner seat. Her hair was up in her signature ponytail.

I leaned down and put my lips to her ear to whisper. "Keep looking at me like that. I'm going to take you in my office to show you something."

"Y'all stop being nasty," Fatima reprimanded from Julian's tattoo seat. The tattoo design that she and Aeon decided on was one of Julian's. He was tatting Fatima, and I would tat my baby. Both were getting the design on their forearms.

Aeon waved her off and told her to mind her business. When I got over to my station, Julian put his tattoo gun down. He told Fatima to give him a minute before he told me that he wanted to talk to me in his office. He closed the door once we both walked in. The worry that covered his face told me that bullshit was soon coming.

"Aye, when I came in, Sandy told me that Alesha came in here earlier looking for you. Bro, I'm not sure what you did to that damn girl. Her ass is like a water bug. She goes away for a while, then pops back up."

I dropped my head on his words. What the fuck! "Man, there ain't no way. I don't need this shit. What did Sandy tell her?"

“She said she told her that you weren’t here,” Julian confirmed. “I’m just giving you a heads up. I’m not sure if her ass is going to pop back up.”

I told him that I appreciated him. This bitch, Alesha, was aggravating. A couple weeks ago, she commented under a picture of Aeon and me on my Instagram business page. It was a picture of us in front of the lounge with my arms wrapped around her waist from behind. It was a promo post for our couples’ night event. I didn’t think too much about it; I just blocked her page.

Aeon was finished eating by the time Julian and I came out of the office. It was time for me to bless her skin with my ink. “You ready, baby?”

I helped her stand from her seat. With a weary smile, she said, “I’m ready. I’m nervous though.”

“How can I help you be less nervous?” I asked her lowly. When her head pivoted and eyes landed on my office, I knew what it was. “Alright now, you know how your ass gets. If that pulse-ox and blood pressure ain’t right, you are not getting this tat today, Aeon.”

She gave me a cute pout. “I mean, you can just nibble on it a lil bit.” She glanced down at her feet coyly then back at me.

My lips connected to hers. “Come on.” I looked down at Midnite. “Midnite, we’ll be back. I got her.”

He walked over to the setup of buttons that we had for him. Most of the buttons he was already familiar with here. We added a few buttons that took him about a month to get the hang of. “Ok, Deck.”

It took a while for Midnite to trust that I had his mommy’s best interest at heart and

that I could take care of her. Since Aeon and I had been together, she has had two episodes that I was there for. Midnite helped me make sure she was alright. That was when he knew I could handle taking care of his mommy.

When we got into my office, I closed and locked the door. Our kiss was passionate as I walked her backward to my desk. There was nothing on my desk that had to move for Aeon to lay down. I didn't notice that she wore a skirt until she opened her legs to expose her uncovered pussy. My brow arched. "You walked around all day without panties, Aeon? I know better than that shit."

"Baby, I took them off before we came here," she said as she put her fingers between her legs to play in her beautiful pussy. "You know I would not do that. Now eat before you make me late for my tattoo appointment."

I grabbed her under thigh, bent her legs back, then commenced to eating her pretty pussy. Her moans were low and sexy as fuck. It took less than a minute for me to pull that first nut out of her.

After the first few times that we had sex, Aeon warned me that POTS could sometimes cause a decreased libido and orgasmic dysfunction. The orgasmic dysfunction had not been an issue for us. The decreased libido was not a big issue. The only time she wasn't in the mood for sex was after an episode, which was understandable, or when she went into a depressive state. That shit didn't bother me.

"Fuck, Deck! I'm about to cum again. I love you," she declared through her moans. Seconds later, her legs knocked against the sides of my head, and her pussy wet my beard. I love this pussy.

After that nut, I pulled back before her ass got too worked up and started to beg for the dick. I kissed her inner thigh. "I love you too."

I smacked her thigh and told her to stay there so I could clean her up. It was another fifteen minutes for both of us to get cleaned up before we came out of the room. My baby was a lot less nervous.

Fatima's nose turned up. "I don't know if I'm ready to be an auntie." She glanced down at Midnite. "Midnite, you see your mama and daddy being nasty?"

Midnite lifted his head from the pillow he lay on. His head tilted from side to side before he got up, shifted his body to turn away from her, then lay down. Julian burst into laughter. "Yo, he's really not fuckin' with you."

Fatima had been bringing up babies since she knew Aeon and I were having sex. It sounded to me like she wanted to be an auntie because I knew that she knew Aeon was on birth control. My baby sat in my seat so I could prep what I needed for her tattoo. Julian had the design already printed for me, which was slightly different from Fatima's. Just as I settled to start the process for the tat, I heard Julian grumble a lowfuck. I followed his eyes to the staircase. Man, fuck is right.

EARLIER THAT DAY - BRUNCH WITH THE GIRLS . . .

"Girl, yes! Now I have to knock before I enter. I know Midnite sick of them," Fatima joked at my expense.

Last week, she saw more ass than she wanted to see when she walked into my house without knocking and announcing herself. Midnite was never in the same room with us when we had sex. If we were in the living room, I turned on his favorite show in the guest room. "Midnite is not around when we have sex, Fatima. I bet you will knock the next time."

I was at brunch with my girls Fatima, Jesika, Iesha, and Leydi. This had become a weekly thing with us. I had never had this many friends in my life. For the longest, it

had only been Fatima and me. It felt good to add more estrogen to our circle. They were so chill.

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“Shit, what we need to be doing is finding your ass a man, Miss Fatima,” Iesha jested. “Give Aeon a chance to walk in on you getting those cheeks smacked.”

Fatima rolled her eyes. “I’m fine. I have way too much going on for the woes of a nigga.”

I put my fork down on my plate. “What do you have going on outside of work, because either I missed it, or you’re not telling me something?” When she did not respond, I picked my fork back up. “That’s what the hell I thought.”

Leydi giggled. “Damn, Fatima. She put that ass on blast. Oh, I know who would be perfect for you.” Her head snapped toward Iesha. “Wouldn’t Georgie and her be perfect?”

Iesha wiggled around in her seat. “Yes! I can see that. He’s one of the master barbers at Tiberius shop. Girl, he is fine, but do not tell Derrick’s crazy ass I said that.”

That was a fact. Iesha’s husband taught crazy how to be crazy. That honestly worried me because he was Deck’s cousin. “You don’t have to worry about me saying anything. So, why do you think Georgie is a good fit for Fatima?”

“Oh, so you with the shits too, best friend?” Fatima asked me. “I got you,” she said with a giggle. One thing about my best friend, she didn’t play fair with her, I got yours.

“Baby, Georgie will suck all that dark chocolate off your ass. He’s like those sour patch candies. Just like you,” Iesha said.

My hand stifled my laughter. It was funny because I'd told Fatima that myself. To the unknowing eye outside of her profession, she seemed like a bitch, but she really wasn't. Once you got to know her, she was the best person to have on your side. "I guess that means that he's a mean, sweetheart."

In unison, Iesha and Leydi said, "Exactly!"

For the next fifteen minutes, we talked about how we would set Georgie and Fatima up while Fatima sat there silently. She was silent because as much as she hated to admit it, my girl wanted to connect with somebody's son.

When brunch was over, Fatima and I headed to my father's house. Today, I left Midnite at home to rest. I tried to leave him home at least once a week. When we were in public, my baby was in work mode. There were certain places that he knew were what we called safe zones. Those places were my father's house and office, Fatima's house, and now added to the list, Deck's house and lounge, and Ma and Pop Phillips' house. Safe zones meant that there were others there that I trusted to take care of me.

"Hey, Daddy! What are you doing in here?" I asked after Fatima and I walked into the den where my father was.

He glanced up from his favorite chair with a smile. "Hey, girls! You know me. I'm just watching my games."

"Are you ready for this weekend?" I tried to keep my father's birthday party a secret but learned it was impossible because of the guest list. I had to tell him. "I'm so excited about it," I told him.

His blushing smile was so cute. "I'm ready. I'll have the two prettiest girls on my arms."

“Unfortunately, it will just be me and you, Pop Vernon. Aeon’s going to be on the arm of her boyfriend,” Fatima said with a smirk. This bitch!

I had yet to tell my father about Deck for good reason. This was my first relationship since Troy, so I wanted to make sure it was serious before I brought it to my father. I felt safe to say that we were profoundly serious. He showed me daily that I was worth the love that he gave me.

My father’s entire body shifted in his seat to face me. The tightness of his eyes and jaw matched. “Boyfriend? I don’t recall a discussion about a boyfriend. How long have you been with said boyfriend?”

Fatima sat there with her drink in her hand and a smirk on her face. I had something for her ass. “Um, me and Declan have been together for some months now. I met him and his mother at Sams when I had an episode, and they helped me. We kinda became friends, then it just progressed from there.”

“So, you thought that it was a good idea for me to meet him for the first time at my party, Aeon?” my father asked with a serious tone. “Yeah, I don’t think that will work. Does this boyfriend of yours do something? Does he have a job?”

I huffed. “Yes, Daddy. He’s a business owner. He owns two very successful businesses in Charlotte.” My father acted like I had a track record of being with trash men who were unemployed. Sure, Troy was trash, but he was gainfully employed.

My father stared at me for a quick second. “I’m throwing some steaks on the grill tomorrow around six. He needs to be here.” Before I could push back, his hand went up to stop my words. “I don’t give a damn what he has on his schedule. Tell him to cancel it. If I don’t see him tomorrow, then his ass better not be at my party, Aeon.”

“Ok, Daddy. We’ll be here,” I confirmed. Pissed was not strong enough of a word

right now.

Fatima and I stayed a little longer before we left to go home. We both had tattoo appointments in a few hours. “You mad at me?” Fatima asked.

“It doesn’t really matter if I am. What’s done is done. It was fucked up because I would never put you out there like that with something so serious in my life. I got you though.” That should have told her all she needed to know.

Her face was saddened. “I didn’t think Pop Vernon was going to crash out like that. I mean, he’s just meeting him a few days early.”

“It doesn’t matter because that wasn’t the plan I had. You knew the plan that I had, but you disregarded it because you felt a way about us talking about hooking you up with Georgie? Like I said, no worries.” I gave her a bright smile. “I definitely got you. I’ll be ready to leave when you are.” I wasn’t as mad as I made it appear, but the get back was going to be real.

Fatima and I were back to normal by the time we got to the lounge. Kira, the hostess, asked me as soon as I came into the building if I wanted my usual. Their lamb Greek Mediterranean salad was God’s gift. At this point, the entire staff knew what I ate and what Midnite ate as well. When Midnite came with me to the lounge, one of the chefs made him a special power steak bowl. My baby loved it.

After Deck made me feel less nervous about getting my tattoo, I came out of my baby’s office with a bright smile. Sex with my man was amazing. I loved how patient he was with me.

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In the past with Troy, there were times that I had to stop our session due to lightheadedness, and he would get so upset. Before I knew it, we had sex less and less. It was always, just suck my dick. The first time Deck and I had to stop, I just knew he would decide that it was too much, but nope. He said we would figure out what worked for us to make sure we were both satisfied. That was when I knew I loved him and wanted to be with him for as long as the universe would allow.

When my eyes landed on Fatima, her nose turned up. “I don’t know if I’m ready to be an auntie.” She glanced down at Midnite. “Midnite, you see your mama and daddy being nasty?”

The way my baby looked at her like she annoyed him before he turned his body away from her to ignore her was comical. I was surprised that he didn’t go over to the buttons to tell her to hush. Julian burst into laughter. “Yo, he’s really not fuckin’ with you.”

I got comfortable in Deck’s tattoo chair while he got his station set up for me. Deck was almost ready when Julian grumbled fuck. It caught Deck’s and my attention. What caught my attention next was the female stomping up the staircase who looked like she was on a determined mission. What is this about?

“Declan, I want to talk to you,” the female said aggressively. When she reached the top of the steps, she stopped. “Oh, so this is what we doing? You’ve been ignoring me for this bitch.”

My head tilted to the side. How did I get in this? Deck’s arm extended across my body when I tried to stand up. “Baby, I just want to ask her who she’s talking to.”

“Aeon, sit your ass down,” he said with a stern tone. He stood, leaned over me, then kissed my lips. “I’m sorry about this delusional ass girl.”

With tight eyes, I said, “Handle it, Deck.” I extended my arm backward, then snapped my fingers four times. Midnite got up and jumped onto my lap. Four snaps was his signal that I needed his protection. Yeah, labrador retrievers were cute until they had their teeth locked on you. I glanced at Fatima to see what her crazy ass was doing. She typed on the screen of her phone like a maniac.

“Alesha, you on your good bullshit. I haven’t talked or fucked with you since when?” Deck asked. He went to the railing of the loft. “Aye, call them boys. Let them know someone who has a trespass is here.”

The Alesha chick stood there with a contorted face. “You a bitch! You told me that you weren’t looking for a relationship, but then I see you all over the gram with this bitch. You a ho ass nigga.”

Deck was extremely calm. This was the first time that I’d seen him handle conflict, so I was interested to see how it would play out. “Alesha, I already told you that I don’t argue with crazy. You can do that with Charlotte-Meck when they get here.”

He gave her no real energy as he came and sat back in the seat that was closest to me. He continued to lay out what he needed for my tattoo. That clearly agitated Miss Alesha. “Yeah, I’m gonna beat you and your bitch’s ass.”

Deck laughed. “I got something that says you won’t.” He reached behind him and pulled a Glock out. He pulled the hammer back and set it on my leg. “Now, I don’t hit females, but if you come near my woman, I’ll shoot the shit out of you before I tell Midnite to tear your ass up.”

Alesha’s eyes widened. She’s not that tough now. Julian stepped forward. “Aye, you

need to get the fuck up out of here. Your ass is about to go to jail over a nigga who told you a long time ago that it wasn't you."

"Fuck you, Julian! Nah, it wasn't me because he rather a disabled bitch. Look at her with her lil service dog!" she spoke callously.

Fatima's abrupt laugh drew everyone's attention. "Bitch, I was trying to let you live, but you got my best friend, her dog, and me fucked up. You wanna beat someone up, beat me the fuck up."

Before Fatima advanced the dumb bitch, Julian grabbed her. "She's not even worth all that shit." His head dropped back. "Who the fuck called them!"

Rushed steps came up the stairs. Before any of us could blink, Iesha punched Alesha in her face. "Bitch, who the fuck are you playing with."

Julian let go of Fatima, which was a horrible mistake, to grab Iesha. Deck jumped up to grab Leydi who had jumped in as well. I held onto Midnite to make sure he didn't get worked up. The other tattoo artists that worked on the far side of the loft came over to help. It was complete mayhem for a moment. I, however, was chilling with Midnite in one arm and Deck's gun in my other hand.

By the time the guys were able to peel all my girls off the Alesha dummy, the police had arrived. I was terrified that my girls would get locked up, but they didn't. Miss Alesha was arrested for trespassing, and Deck went a step further to ask for a restraining order. I guess he's serious about not arguing with crazy. Tiberius and Derrick arrived soon after the police left to reprimand their women, which was funny to see.

"Baby, I stopped talking to that girl weeks before I met you," Deck said. "I love you, and I would never do shit to jeopardize us." Sincerity laced his eyes.

I told Midnite to go back to his pillow since everything had calmed down. Once I made sure he was comfortable, I turned my attention to Deck. My lean toward him prompted him to lean toward me. Our lips locked in a passionate kiss. “I know you wouldn’t. It’s clear that you haven’t dealt with her. Can I get my tattoo now? It’s an hour over my appointment time.”

He chuckled. “I got you, love. I’m sorry about that shit though, for real. I don’t do drama, but unfortunately, I can’t control other’s actions.” He pecked my lips with his. “I’ll still make it up to you.”

I guess this is the best time to tell him about dinner plans tomorrow. “You can make it up to me tomorrow at my father’s house for dinner. He wants to meet you.”

Deck sat there frozen for a second. “I thought I was going to meet him at the party. What happened with that?”

“Fatima, can you tell Deck what happened with him meeting my father at his birthday party?” I asked when I turned in her direction. Julian had finished her tattoo, so she was sitting in my recliner. “I’ll let her tell you all about that.”

She rolled her eyes before she gave her version of the story while everyone tuned in. Everyone thought it was funny, including Deck. All the couples were invited to my father’s party. I also made sure I told Leydi to have Tiberius invite Georgie.

“I guess I’ll be meeting my pops-in-law tomorrow. Let’s get this tat done so we can go home.” For the rest of the time, Deck worked on my tat.

Fatima eventually went home, but everyone else chilled until my tat was done. I was happy they stayed because my tattoo was still painful, even with the numbing cream. It would be a while before I got another one.

TIME TO MEET THE FATHER . . .

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“How are you more nervous than me. I’m the one fucking your daddy’s daughter,” Deck joked from the driver’s seat. We were on our way to my father’s house for dinner.

I smacked him on the arm. “Deck, that is not funny. You don’t know my father. He can be intense. I mean, him and Troy never got along.”

His laughter stopped abruptly. When we came to a stoplight, he glared at me with not so friendly eyes. “I know you’re not comparing me to your bitch ass ex? I’m sure your father never got along with Troy’s fuck ass. Troy was a bitch, I’m not. Do you see the difference?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to compare or offend you. I’m just nervous.” I lowered my head and fidgeted with my fingers.

Deck’s hand cupped my chin to lift my face. He turned my face to his, then kissed my lips. “You have no need to be nervous. Trust me, I got this.”

All I could do was trust that he did have it. When we got to my father’s house, you could smell the food in the air as soon as we got out of the car. One thing that Vernon Blackwell could do was grill his ass off. He grilled during any season. “Daddy!” I called out when we walked into the house.

“I’m in the kitchen, baby girl,” he responded. His smile was bright when I walked into the kitchen with Deck on my heels. “You look beautiful today.” He pulled me into his arms for a tight hug and kiss on my temple.

When we pulled away, I cleared my throat. “Daddy, this is my boyfriend, Declan Phillips Jr. Declan, this is my father, Vernon Blackwell.” My eyes ping ponged between my father and my man.

Declan’s hand extended. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Mr. Blackwell. Thank you for inviting me to dinner.”

My father looked down at his hand for a beat before he took it into his and shook it. “It’s nice to finally meet you too, Declan.” After their hands disconnected, he said, “At least you have a firm handshake unlike that fuck boy Troy.”

My eyes bulged. Why would he say that? Deck’s boisterous laughter made my eyes expand even more.

“Mr. Blackwell, bitch boys can’t have firm handshakes, sir. I’m a grown ass man,” Deck said coolly. He chuckled a little more.

My father didn’t initially laugh, but when he did, I let out the breath that I didn’t know I was holding. Dinner was ready, so we sat down to eat. There was casual get-to-know-you conversation during dinner. After dinner, I was told to sit in the den with Midnite while the men had a talk. I wanna know what they’re talking about. By the end of the night, my father and man seemed like damn best friends. What kind of conversation was that?

When we got to Deck’s house, we had a short sex session in the shower, then showered before we got in bed. The second time that I came to Deck’s house, he had installed a showerhead that regulated the water temperature like the one that I had at my house. It took me a while to get the shower right after my diagnosis. I was one of the rare women who didn’t like their water lake of hell hot.

“Baby,” I softly spoke. My head was on Deck’s chest as we lay in bed. “What did

you and my dad talk about? Y'all seemed like best buds by the end of the night."

He tittered. "Why are you so nosy? All you need to know is that me and your father have an understanding. I love you, and he loves you. Cool?"

"Really, baby? That's the understanding that had you two buddy, buddy?" I turned on my award-winning pout. From his stoic expression, my pout fell flat tonight. "Whatever."

He smacked my ass. "Right. Go to sleep, nosy ass girl. You know all that you need to know."

I couldn't stand him or my father at this point. I may have wanted to wait for my father to meet Deck at his party, but tonight proved to be a better plan. I guess I owe Fatima a thank you.

IT'S A BIRTHDAY PARTY . . .

I looked gorgeous, and my man was fine! The gown that I wore fit me like a glove. Today was a busy day, but to see the final results felt great. The venue was perfectly decorated.

Arms wrapped around me from behind before lips kissed my neck. "I'm going to fuck you in the bathroom tonight. No 'let me show respect'; I'll just eat that good pussy," Deck whispered in my ear.

"Why are you so mannish?" I turned in his arms, then kissed his lips. "We have to be on our best behavior while we're here. When we get home, you can have me however you want me."

He smacked me on my ass, then squeezed it. He was so mannish, but I loved it.

Declan was so different from what I was used to.

Photographers littered the event to take pictures. Many had been taken of my father, me, Declan, our friends, as well as the other dignitaries in the building. I didn't reach out to them, but somehow, the media got wind of the party. They were outside covering it.

Fatima came over with two champagne flutes in her hand. "Alright, this is the only glass of alcohol that you can have tonight. Midnite, make sure you keep an eye on her."

Midnite was very handsome in his doggie tuxedo. I reached for the flute excitedly because I hadn't had an alcoholic drink in months. Before I could put it to my lips, Deck's hand went around my wrist. "The only one, Aeon?"

"Ok, Deck. I mean, I think three should be the limit, but we can talk about that in a bit." I took a sip from the flute. In a low voice, I said, "I get fancy on the dick when I'm a lil tipsy."

He snickered at my words, then responded. "I guess I won't know what it feels like for you to get fancy on my dick."

Fatima burst into laughter because, of course, her nosy ass was listening to our conversation. She was gorgeous tonight. When we all got here, she met Georgie. They'd been talking for most of the night. "He told your unfancy ass."

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Before I could quip back, a voice from behind me stopped me. When I turned in the direction of the voice, Troy stood. His parents flanked him. “Aeon, you look beautiful tonight.”

Fatima let out a loud ‘ha!’ “This can’t be life. The devil is a fuckin’ liar.”

My eyes roamed over to Deck who wore the most sinister smirk that I’d ever seen. I had a feeling this night would not go like I thought it would. Jesus, be a fence.

A TALK WITH DAD . . .

“Alright, son, so here we are. How many of these conversation with girls’ fathers have you had?” Mr. Blackwell asked me with a raised brow. It was an odd question to me, but a question I would answer, nonetheless.

After dinner, Mr. Blackwell told Aeon to go into the den and relax so that we could have a conversation. My baby looked at me with so much worry. You would have thought her father just told her that he planned to murder me. I wasn’t worried about shit because I was Declan Michael Phillips, Senior’s son. I was confident and resolute in the man that my father raised.

“This is actually the first. During the last semi-serious relationship that I had, the young lady didn’t have a father to have a conversation with. I know this is your second, if I’m not mistaken, so it’s good that this will be both of our last conversations of this kind until me and Aeon have our daughter.” I assumed he would take the lead in this conversation, but I wanted him to know that I would be an active participant rather than a passive one. It was my belief that a lot of people allowed

people to assert dominance within conversation by becoming the passive bitch within that interaction. It was often something that was done unintentionally, but it still happened.

Mr. Blackwell looked intently at me for a moment before he chuckled lowly. “I like a confident, straightforward man. That says a lot about how you were raised. Let’s get into it. From early talk, you’ve been in a relationship with my baby girl for some time now. Have you experienced any of her episodes?”

“I have experienced a few as well as a couple of her depressive episodes. I’ve learned how to help her manage them with Midnite’s assistance, ironically. I’ve also taken the time to do research to know common symptoms, and I’ve asked her questions to learn her specific symptoms.” Trust and believe, I was on my woman’s head and would always be. Was it always easy? Fuck no! What it was, was worth it. I loved the fuck out of my girl, POTS and all.

He nodded with a faint smile that I could tell he didn’t want to release. He wanted to keep his hardI’m the ‘big bad wolf’and that was cool. I planned to do the same when it was my turn. He didn’t have to tell me that my response made him feel better about how I loved his daughter. “How did you handle her depressive episodes? She doesn’t have them often, but when she does, it can be intense. I’m aware at this point that she doesn’t tell me about them unless it gets really bad.”

That was true. She didn’t. When the guys and I were doing the research on POTS, it spoke about the emotional and mental toll it could take. Ever since my circle, the women included, had been consistently interacting with Aeon, we’d all taken the time to research and know how to take care of her in an episode. We got together to do the research, and if we had questions, they were fielded through me. This was something that my baby didn’t need to know that we did. It would show itself in how we handled her. That was what family did.

“When she’s in that state, I watch over her but give her the space she needs if asked. As her man, though, I try to mitigate the triggers. Like I noticed she gets overwhelmed when she wants to do her bi-weekly deep cleanse of her house. We discussed it and came to a compromise. She scheduled her deep cleanse for once a month, and I hired a cleaning service to do it. For me, it’s about taking things off her plate. The days that the service is in the house is one of our date days so she can stay out of the house.”

It was about intentions and planning. The seven Ps. Proper prior planning prevents piss poor performance. I tried not to overcrowd my baby because I never wanted her to feel as if we treated her like she was disabled.

His smile was now wide. “I like that. Has she told you about her relationship with her ex?”

I rolled my eyes at the mention of his bitch ass. “Yeah, she told me about bitch ass Troy. That was and still is at times a big hurdle in our relationship, but I’m patient with that.”

“Yeah, I didn’t like him the first time that I met him. It was solidified when I met his parents. They had a problem with their son bringing home not just a black girl, but a black girl that was not well to do.” Mr. Blackwell scoffed. “How dare he comes home with this black girl who was, in their eyes, basic. Did she tell you what his parents did for a living?”

Now that was something that she hadn’t told me. “Nah, she didn’t. We’ve basically talked about how he treated her and his cheating on her. Do you think that he was just with her out of spite for his parents?”

“Yeah, I think that was a part of it. His father is a prominent lawyer and now the Republican senator of the state of Virginia. His mother is a trust fund baby. I also felt

like she was a notch on his belt or a thing on his bucket list,” he said. That was fucked up if it was true.

This conversation was informative, but there was one simple yet complex question that I had for him. I frankly didn’t give a fuck about what Troy’s parents did for a living. “Mr. Blackwell, what are your expectation when it comes to how I treat your daughter?”

His eyes widened slightly. “That’s a good question. The easiest way I can explain it is love her like I do but from a boyfriend perspective. My baby girl has been through a lot, whether she wants to admit it or not. Her mother, Ariel, decided when Aeon was six that she didn’t want to be a mother anymore, so she came to live with me. That affects her deeply, although she would never say anything.”

“She doesn’t really talk about Ariel much outside of telling me that her mother went in half for Midnite. Outside of that, she really doesn’t talk about her, nor do I bring her up.” I debated whether I wanted to tell him the next part. There was no reason not to. “Also, from the genuine caring nature of my mother, Princetta, she gets a lot of motherly love from her.” Itittered. “Hell, she spends more time with my mother than I do at this point.”

He nodded again. “Son, I don’t get any off-putting vibes from you. That gives me a lot of ease. Her condition can be a lot on most people, including me. I wanted to make sure that you weren’t a bitch like Troy. He hurt the fuck out of my daughter way before she found out that he was cheating.”

Now I smiled. “Well, your vibe is spot on. Mr. Blackwell, I love your daughter, and we haven’t been together for very long. I can pinpoint the exact moment my mind aligned with my heart in that love. At some point soon, I plan to propose. I am not a man that wastes time. I pray that when that time comes, you will give me your blessing.”

His head bucked back a little. “Alright, I hear you. Make sure that when that time comes, you are sure. I rushed into marrying Aeon’s mother because I was convinced that I was in love. I didn’t fully understand who she was as a person. You see how that shit ended. I don’t want that for my daughter.”

“Understood, Mr. Blackwell. I look forward to when that time comes.” For the rest of our conversation, it was about manly shit like sports, drinks, investments, and shit like that.

BACK THE PRESENT . . .

Debonair wasn’t strong enough of a word to describe how on a nigga was right now. Aeon’s father’s birthday party was more like a black-tie gala. She didn’t have to invite me because I invited myself a long time ago. I would have come whether we were in a relationship or not. When she told me the dress code, I asked her why she didn’t call it a gala. She told me that she didn’t shift it to a more formal event until after some of the people RSVP’d. Apparently, there were people in the local government arena that contacted her to be invited.

I never realized that her father’s position was a governmental one. You learn something new every day. The guest list included people on the city council as well as state senators, house members, etc. He rubbed elbows with some pretty important people.

My parents were having the time of their lives. My father and Mr. Blackwell gelled well and had planned an outing. My pops needed some damn friends to get his ass up from under my mama. They were mingling and making new connections. My mother had found a group of women that loved to read, from what she told me when I checked on her earlier.

All my circle and now Aeon’s circle was here. They all looked like money. Tiberius

brought Georgie along to meet Fatima. She acted like she didn't want to meet him in past group conversations. That quickly changed when his ass walked in. I found out something about her tonight. Her ass could giggle.

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Now, a guest I didn't expect was this bitch boy Troy and his parents. There was no way you could make me believe that she invited them. "Aeon, you look beautiful tonight."

I wanted to see how my woman reacted to this man before I said or did anything. I wouldn't say that I would fuck this man up in this venue. What I would say was that I would fuck this man the fuck up in this venue if he came at her wrong. I didn't give a bobblehead fuck whether the police chief was here with some of the police department.

Aeon tilted her head. "Troy Givings, it's been a very long time since I've seen you and frankly surprised that you're here. Mr. and Mrs. Givings." She nodded her head in greeting. "I don't recall sending an invite to you guys."

Mr. Givings stepped forward. "Ms. Blackwell, I'm a senator. Getting in this little shindig wasn't hard at all."

I tittered because that was offense number one. Troy gave his father a glaring look before he turned back to Aeon. He looked down to where Midnite stood next to her. "Hey, Midnite." He reached down to pet him. Now, this dummy should know that that was some shit you shouldn't do outside of a chill situation. For all intent and purpose, Midnite was on duty.

When Troy's hand came close to him, Midnite growled before he snapped at Troy's hand. Well, damn. I guess he doesn't like that man. I was a firm believer that dogs and babies had a heightened level of discernment.

My baby's eye twitched. "Well, that may be so. However, you, your wife, and son were not invited. That was intentional. Why are you here?"

"Aeon, they are here because I asked them to get me on the guest list. I wanted to have a conversation with you about us," Troy boldly said. "I know it's been years, but that's a good thing, honestly. With time comes maturity, understanding, and regret."

She put her finger up. "Let me stop you there. I apologize. I'm being rude and disrespectful." She peeked over her shoulder at me. Her hand reached back, grabbed mine, and pulled me forward. "This is the love of my life, Mr. Declan Michael Phillips, Junior."

I better be the love of your fucking life. I turned on my smile. "Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Givings. Mrs. Givings, you look lovely tonight. That color complements your pasty tone well."

Fatima spit out a little of her champagne before she covered her mouth. "Damn, I would say that's messed up, but it really does."

I didn't feel the need to address Troy. I rarely addressed insignificant people. There was no need to start now.

Mrs. Givings clutched her pearls. "Excuse me. That is extremely rude."

"Ma'am, we'll have to agree to disagree. I'm not sure if you've looked in a mirror lately, but your skin tone is in fact pasty. That is common with mayo-sapians." I slightly turned my head to Aeon. "Baby, did you bring that compact mirror that you normally carry in your clutch?"

"Oh, I have mine." Fatima spoke up. She reached into her clutch bag that hung from her arm and pulled out a compact mirror. "Here you go."

I opened it after she handed it to me. “Here, Mrs. Givings. Take a look. You will see that no disrespect was intended. I’m simply observant and know colors and tones better than Crayola and Sherman Williams.”

She gasped before she grabbed her husband’s arm. “Troy, I think it’s time that we leave. As you can see, Aeon has finally aligned herself to the degenerate class that she belongs to.”

“What did you say about my daughter?” Mr. Blackwell said from the side of them. “I may have misheard you, but I think you insulted my daughter. Degenerate class?”

Mr. Givings stepped in front of his wife. “Chief Blackwell, how are you tonight? We came to wish you a happy birthday.”

My future father-in-law stepped into Senator Givings’ face. I was sure they smelled each other’s breath. When I saw the senator’s security scootching up, I put my eyes on Julian who I knew had eyes on me. I gave him a knowing look, and he nodded. Seconds later, he, Tiberius, Derrick, and Georgie stood behind me. Best believe, the senator’s security wasn’t the only people in the room with toolies. Mr. Blackwell carried all the time as well.

“Senator Givings, fuck your happy birthday. I know for a fact my daughter did not invite you, your classless ass wife, and bitch ass son. I advise you to get the fuck out of here before the news headline tomorrow reads, Senator Trevor Givings found dead in alley with family from an apparent meth overdose.”

Well, damn. I didn’t know Mr. Blackwell got down like that. A meth overdose though? I thought he would warn him that he would shoot the shit out of them. I saw he was creative with his threats.

Senator Givings’ face was strawberry red. See, that was a different hex of red than a

tomato. Call me Sherman Williams. “Chief Blackwell, are you threatening me and my family?” he asked.

Mr. Blackwell’s head bucked back. “I would never threaten a person; call it a premonition. I mean, meth is not too far off from cocaine.” His eyes fell on Troy for a second, then back to the senator. “Word on the streets is you and your son likes to get y’all nose dirty when y’all fuck on your high-class prostitutes. Wait, Senator Givings. Your more into the boys if I recall.”

The amount of gasps that were heard let us know that our party was not the only one tuned into the conversation. Mr. Blackwell didn’t exactly whisper the part about the cocaine, prostitutes, or the senator liking boy pussy. This whole thing was tragic. Mrs. Givings looked like she wanted to cry. It wasn’t an I didn’t know cry either. It looked more like a our secret is out in the open cry.

The senator straightened his back and cleared his throat. “Chief Blackwell, I will not stand for the disrespect. Let’s see how long you last in your position from here.”

He laughed. “I have never stood for disrespect. I’m not worried about my position, but you should be worried about the amount of proof that I have that could bury you, your son . . .” He pointed at Mrs. Givings. “And your little dog too. Now get the fuck out of my party and take your pussy ass boy and security with you.”

A defeated cloud seemed to hover over the senator. He stared at Mr. Blackwell before he grabbed his wife’s hand then marched around him. Troy followed closely behind.

“Mr. Blackwell, how the hell do you know all of that about that man and his son?” I asked. I didn’t know too much about Aeon’s father, but tonight, some things were put into perspective. His ass was a few cards short of a full deck. That was cool because so was I when I needed to be.

He cut his eye over to me. “I started to do my research on Troy’s family when this one brought him to meet me. In the recent years, some things have come to me from different avenues, and I fact-checked them to have ammunition in my back pocket.” He spoke to all of us in the circle. His hands went into his pocket. “I learned quickly at the beginning of this position that it’s more politics than anything. Politics is not a clean game, and I don’t mind getting dirty.”

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I peeked at Aeon who had been silent during the whole exchange. My arm was wrapped around her waist. “You alright?”

“I think I’m in shock. Was he doing cocaine when we were together, Daddy?” she asked. I wasn’t sure why it mattered, but it wasn’t big enough of a topic to ask her why.

He smiled then said, “No, baby girl. You know if he was, I would have cut your relationship short no matter how you felt. From what was reported back to me, it started shortly after the girl he cheated on you with went back to her boyfriend.” He squinted over at me. “Oh, I’ve done my research on you and your family too, Declan. Just know that.”

I snickered with everyone else. “I’m not worried, sir. I’m sure if there was something not right, you and my father wouldn’t have plans to hang out.” Mr. Blackwell didn’t come across as a person who would intentionally mix with people that weren’t on the up and up.

I started to say something else, but something or, should I say, someone caught my attention. My head tilted to the side at the familiarity of the person. Why the hell do they . . .

“Happy birthday, Vernon.”

My mouth dropped open. What is she doing here? I hadn’t seen Ariel since she paid for half of Midnite’s training. My baby was relaxed as he leaned against my leg. He was not going to lie down on the floor without a pillow. I brought a pillow for him

here, but he refused to stay on it because it was across the room, and this was not considered a safe place.

“Happy birthday, Vernon.” Ariel greeted my father. I did send her an invite, but I never in a million years thought she would come. She didn’t respond to the RSVP request.

My father turned with a shocked expression. His eyes roamed my mother’s body from her head to her feet. Ew! “Ariel, I’m surprised to see you here. What gracious moon settled in the universe to have you grace us with your presence?”

She giggled. “Stop being so extra, Vernon.” Her eyes trailed over to me. “Aeon, I got the invite, but didn’t respond because I wasn’t sure if time would permit for me to come.” She returned her concentration back to my father. “My husband and I moved to Charlotte a little over a week ago for his job.”

I started to cough. Deck patted my back. Iesha handed me the bottle of water that she had in her hand. I slowly drank it. Once I had myself together, I glared at Ariel. “You’re married?”

My father appeared to be just as shocked as I was. I didn’t keep up with Ariel, so I had no idea what went on in her life. My father didn’t fool with social media outside of LinkedIn.

“Yes, Aeon. I’ve been married for five years now,” she responded with a warm smile. “Anyway, there was a lot to do when we moved. I wanted to make sure that I had everything with my home set before I did anything else.” When I asked if she brought her husband, she shook her head. “No, I didn’t think that was appropriate. Um, Aeon, I wanted to ask if we could have lunch or dinner sometime this week?”

“Oh, I-I guess we can. Just text or call me and let me know what day and time you

have in mind. Dinner probably fits better. I even know a great place we can go,” I told her. I couldn’t lie and say that I wasn’t excited about her wanting to share a meal with me. Her seeming interest in me was surprising but exciting.

She smiled. “Great. I’ll text you with a date and time. Well, I just wanted to pop in to tell you happy birthday, Vernon. I’m going to take my ass home. I had a long day.”

Just like that, she was gone with the wind. Tonight was way more than just a birthday party. When I planned this party, I never thought my ex or my mother would pop up. What a damn night!

The party went off for the rest of the night without a hitch. When it was over, the venue cleaners that I made sure to hire took over the cleanup. Deck’s house was closest to the venue, so that was where I went. Both of us had clothing and hygiene products at each other’s homes.

We showered then got into bed. “How do you feel about your mom popping up and wanting to go to lunch or dinner?” Deck asked after we were settled in bed.

I thought about his questions and my feelings. “Is it wrong to be kind of excited about it? I mean, I’ve literally never had lunch or dinner with Ariel after I moved with my father. I can’t believe she moved here.” Deck didn’t say anything, so I tilted my head up to put him in my line of sight. “What do you think?”

“I think I don’t want you to get hurt. This is the same woman who decided that she didn’t want to be your mother when you were six years old, so she left you with your father and dipped. Now she pops up on some I’ve moved here so let’s have a meal. It’s giving, now that it’s a convenience for me, I’ll entertain you.” He shook his head. “I’ll be honest, I don’t like it. I would hate to have Princetta check her ass behind you.”

I giggled because I knew that Mama Cetta didn't play about me. I loved that for me. I never talked much to Deck about my mother, but I had had extensive conversation with Mama Cetta about her. That woman was my vault of emotions. Before I left my father's party tonight, I told her that I wanted to talk to her tomorrow.

"I understand what you're saying. I'll be careful, baby. I just want to, you know, see what she's talking about," I told him. I couldn't fathom what our meeting would be like, but I knew whatever it was, I wanted to be there to experience it.

"Well, the dinner is a great time to ask her the questions that you've wanted to ask her, baby. I know well enough to know you probably have a journal page with questions," Mama Cetta said. She peeked over her shoulder at me with a side-eye from where she stood over the stove.

She knew me well because I did have a page at the back of a journal that had questions that I would ask my mother if I ever had a chance. When I was younger, from the age of nine until about thirteen, my father had me in therapy. I had some behavioral issues when I first got to my father's house. He assumed that it was due to my mother abandoning me. By the time that I stopped therapy because I told my father that I didn't need to go, I convinced myself that I was alright.

This woman dropped me off at my father's house, pretty much told me that she wished me well, and left. The next time that I heard anything from her was in the form of a birthday present and card when I turned ten years old. Every five years, that was all I got from her. She didn't reach out to me, but she did at least answer when I called the few times that I needed something.

"I do have questions. Mama Cetta, I'm just surprised that she's married now. Deck said he doesn't like it because it seems like now it's convenient for her to deal with me," I said in a dejected tone.

She finished mixing the spaghetti sauce in the pot before she put the top on it. Once she was in the seat across from me at the table, she reached across for my hands. “Baby, you know my son loves you and wants to protect you.” She chuckled with a headshake. “Hell, he called me earlier to ask me to convince you not to go. He’s just worried that you’re going to get hurt. After we talked, he understands that this is something you need to do.

“Now, we don’t know if this meeting will lead to closure or a new open door. Whatever it is, I pray it serves you.” She shifted in her seat before her eyes turned into slits. “Just know if she plays with you, I’m going to play with my fist in her face.”

I chortled because this woman—hell, this whole family was violent. To know that my man called his mother to convince her to tell me not to go did something to me. I loved how protective he was over me.

“Well, I kind of hope it’s an open door, but if it’s closure, that’s alright too. I just want to know what she has to say,” I said. Yeah, I said with my mouth that closure would be alright. I really hoped it was an open door.

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Mama Cetta squeezed my hand. “Well, baby, I pray it’s whatever you need for your heart to be at peace and whatever she needs to not get her ass beat.” She gave me a soft, genuine smile like she didn’t just threaten Ariel. Why is she like this?

DINNER WITH ARIEL . . .

“You ready for this?” Deck asked me.

We were in the tattoo loft of Ink Vibing. I told Ariel that we could have dinner here. I wanted Deck to be close just in case I got overwhelmed by it all. Plus, because it was a safe place, Midnite would let me be in the lounge while he stayed upstairs with Deck.

“Yes, I’m ready. I have my questions here.” I held up my notebook. “I’m nervous, but you being here makes me feel better.”

His arms were wrapped around me, and his hands gripped my ass. I loved it when he held me like that. He kissed my lips. “You want me to take care of that nervousness before she gets here?”

A mischievous smile rose to my face. “If you can please, sir. It would be gratefully appreciated.”

With my hand, he guided me to his office. It was about thirty minutes before I expected Ariel to arrive. “Bend over,” Deck commanded. I always wore skirts or dresses when I spent time here with him. Office sex was a norm for us.

“Yes, sir.” I assumed the position that had served us well when it came to our quickie sessions. I’d mastered how to muffle my sound effects when we had sex in the office. After one time too many being told by Julian that we were loud, I learned.

He smacked my ass. The next thing I felt after he spread my ass cheeks with his hand was his tongue. His tongue went from my asshole to my pussy. He sucked and licked on my clit just the way I loved it.

“Mm, Deck. That feels so damn good,” I said through my moans. Not too long after he started, my first orgasm released.

His tongue left my center, and his dick took its place. He slid in slowly and allowed me to adjust to it. It always felt like it was the first time. Once I adjusted, he took off. The clap of his pelvis against my ass turned me on and made my pussy wetter. “How’s that nervousness, Aeon? You feel better.”

“Yes, yes, I feel better.” He fucked the nervousness right out of me. I threw my ass back to meet his thrust. Fucking was the best soundtrack created by us. My nut snuck up on me that time.

He changed the angle as he stroked me. “Fuck, I’m about to cum. Fuck, fuck, fuck!” His warm nut shot into me. I loved that feeling.

He stayed in me for a moment then pulled out. Clap! His hand met my ass again. “Get cleaned up.”

After I removed myself from his desk, I then trekked to the bathroom. It was almost time to sit down and talk to Ariel. Let’s see what the outcome of this talk will be. Open door or closure.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Ariel sashayed into the lounge. She stood near the

door as she looked around. I already had a booth ready for us. She smiled when she saw me after I got up to greet her. Life had been good for her. That was clear from the way she carried herself. “Hi, Ariel.”

“Hi, Aeon. You look beautiful,” she complimented genuinely. “I’m happy that we’re able to sit down and talk. I know it’s been a long time.”

I told her that it had before I escorted her to the booth that we would sit in. We both got comfortable. The waitress came over and took our drink orders. When my mother asked me what was good, I let her know everything. “This is my boyfriend’s business. He’s a tattoo artist.”

“Oh, that’s nice. Ink Vibing, now that makes sense. How long have you and your boyfriend been together?” she asked with twinkles in her eyes.

I gave her a cheeky smile. “We’ve been together for a while now. He’s the love of my life.”

“I understand that. My husband, Marcus, and our daughter, Sophia, are the loves of my life. They’re my everything.” You could see her love for them in her eyes.

My heart stopped beating for a split second. She has a daughter that’s the love of her life. I guess it’s to hell with me. “Oh, you have a daughter. How old is she?”

“Sophia is almost seven years old.” She tinkered with her phone. When she found what she was looking for, she extended the phone across the table for me to see the screen. “Here they go.”

I took the phone to examine the family picture. They looked so happy, genuinely happy. My emotions were all over the place. There was this twinge of rejection, jealousy, unworthiness. Now I was ready for whatever this was to be over. “You have

a very lovely family.”

The waitress came to drop our drinks off and take our food orders. Once she left, I got right to it. “So, Ariel, why did you want to meet with me after all this time?”

Her head bucked back a little at my crassness. “Oh, well, I just wanted to check on you. How is everything going with your condition? I saw your service dog with you at your father’s party.”

I didn’t answer immediately. I sat in the questions for a few seconds. “My service dog’s name is Midnite. As far as my condition is concerned, it’s called POTS. I’m not sure if you knew what it was called since you’ve been disconnected with my life for, well, forever.” I paused for a second. “I appreciate you checking on me, but I’m still confused as to why. Phones worked well before my existence was thought of.

“You could have used one of those to check on me throughout the years if you really cared. It honestly feels like one of those situations where because we’re in the same city, you didn’t want to risk running into me randomly without me knowing that you were here.” I leaned my forearms on the table. “Is that what this is, Ariel?”

I could tell that she was taken aback by my attitude. She looked offended. “No, Aeon, that is not what this is. My husband suggested that I reach out to you to try to establish some kind of relationship with you. I didn’t think that was a bad idea.” Her voice was soft.

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“Oh, so this wasn’t your idea to reach out to me. I’m actually surprised that he knows about me,” I quipped. She was pissing me the hell off at this point. It didn’t feel like any open doors would come from this bullshit dinner.

Ariel shifted in her seat. “Yes, he knows about you. I had to tell him about you when your father called to ask for the ten thousand dollars for Midnite’s training. That was a substantial amount of money to pull from my household.”

I chuckled. “I’m not really sure if you’re trying to or even realize that you’re using all the wrong words in this conversation. You basically just told me that the only reason you told your husband was because you gave me money so my dog could be trained. I appreciate that, by the way.”

Her hand waved in front of her frustration-painted face. “This is not going how I thought or want it to go.”

“What, did you think that I would be overjoyed because you wanted to spend time with me? Excited that you found the time to pencil me into your life?” I felt the first tear leave my eye. “Ariel, I’m not that six-, seven-, or eight-year-old girl that cried for you. It would have been different if you brought me to my father but were still in my life. Maybe if you called to check on me, send me a birthday card or call every year, not every damn five years. Who the fuck does that shit?”

I felt like I would hyperventilate. Seconds later, Midnite jumped up onto the booth seat next to me with my medication in his mouth. Right behind him was Deck. “Aeon, baby, are you alright?” He turned to Ariel. “Aye, I think you need to leave because you’re agitating her, and I don’t like that shit. You can try this bullshitI give

a fuckreunion another day if she's up to it."

My baby was pissed as he took the medicine from Midnite to open it and give me a pill. Ariel sat there and watched as Deck and Midnite took care of me. There was this look of something. I wasn't sure what it was, but it was something. "Um, yeah, Aeon, I didn't mean to make you upset. I would love it if at some point you could meet your sister. I would really like her to meet you at some point."

I looked at this woman like she was crazy. The insensitivity of her attitude was outrageous to me. I knew Sophia was innocent in all of this, and I felt horrible for the jealousy I felt in my heart toward a child. Why wasn't I good enough to have a mother? I had already taken my pill and felt myself calming down. "I'll see if I can pencil the love of your life into my schedule. I'd love to ask her how it feels to be loved by a mother."

"Aeon, I love you. I have always loved you," Ariel proclaimed. "It was my love that made me know that I couldn't take care of you. I was young and still wanted to live a free life. Your father was more stable back then than I was."

I felt myself getting upset again. "Nope, we're not doing this shit," Deck said as he stood to his full height. "Ariel, I'm gonna need you to leave. All that bullshit you're poppin' is just that. Picking up the phone to call your damn daughter would not have impeded on your damn free life. Now you want to flounce in here like you were here all along, asking the daughter you abandoned to meet the daughter you kept. Fuck outta here."

Ariel chuckled, then said, "Fine. Aeon, you know how to get in touch with me if you want to. Hopefully, I hear from you, but if I don't, I understand." She slid out of the booth and put her purse strap on her shoulder. One final look, then she was gone.

"Come on, baby," Deck said. Right as I stood, the waitress walked up with our food.

He told her to bring my plate upstairs with cutlery and trash the other plate of food.
“Come on, Midnite.”

When we got upstairs, Julian had a concerned expression. “Aeon, you good?”

I just nodded before I told Midnite he could lay on his pillow. Deck walked me into his office, then closed the door. He leaned back on his desk before he pulled my body to lean against his. He said nothing; he just looked at me. The silence made me uncomfortable. I didn’t like being uncomfortable. Why isn’t he saying anything?

I had no idea where the tears came from. They left my eyes without my consent. In a whisper, I asked, “How could she not want me but have another child? She said her husband told her to reach out to me. Not she wanted to, but her husband told her to. Oh, and the only reason he knows about me is because of the money she gave for Midnite.”

Deck wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into his chest. The hug was so damn tight, and I needed it as I cried into his chest. “I’m so sorry, baby. Time may have passed, but that woman is still selfish.” He pulled my face out of his chest, then cupped my cheeks. “You are not obligated to let that woman into your life. You have so many people around you that love you, including my mama.

“We got you. I know it’s not the same as having your own mother, but we got you.”
He kissed my lips gently.

When we pulled back, I wore a smile. “You’re right. It’s not the same; it’s better.”

A LITTLE TIME LATER . . .

“I swear she has always been a selfish bitch,” Mr. Vernon said. “We were young when we got together, so you expected immature, selfish behavior. I knew our

marriage wouldn't work before it happened, but I wanted my baby to experience a two-parent household." He sighed. "When we divorced, I offered to take my baby, and she told me that I was trying to take her baby. She was so damn bitter."

My face scrunched. Aeon never spoke much about her parents' divorce, which was expected since she was only four when they separated. She told me that it was an amicable split, so I was confused why Ariel was bitter. "Wait, why was she bitter? Aeon told me that y'all split was amicable."

He tittered. "That's what you tell a five-year-old that ask why you and mommy aren't together anymore. You say, Mommy and Daddy are still friends. I've kept that storyline because it was easier than saying what really happened. The fact is that she started her live free lifestyle well before we divorced. It seemed like every other month I caught her doing something she had no business doing. The last straw was when she got pregnant by another man."

I spit some of my drink out. "Wait, what? She got pregnant for another man! How did you know it wasn't your child?"

"When she got pregnant, we weren't having sex. The first time I found out that she cheated, that was enough for me to not want her. Man to man, all she could do was suck my dick," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

I wasn't sure how I felt about this blunt conversation with Mr. Vernon. I guess we had crossed a certain bridge in our relationship. That had to be a good thing. "Damn, that shit is crazy. What happened with the baby situation?"

"The guy said that he didn't want a baby, so she had an abortion. The week after she told me that she was pregnant, I had her served with divorce papers. She talked big shit about the man that she was pregnant for. How he would take care of her, their baby, and our daughter. Blah, blah, blah. She signed those divorce papers with

enthusiasm and vigor. Once her knight in shining armor turned out to be nothing more than a court's jester, she came running back.

"When I refused to take her back, she made problems for me when it came to seeing my daughter. We were in and out of court about Aeon. It was crazy," he commented with a far-off look in his eyes.

"Damn, yeah, Aeon never told me anything like that," I said. This new information was a little surprising. From first impression of Ariel, she came across as a selfish woman. It was in how she carried herself. There was something about a selfish person that just stood out. They couldn't hide it.

"Yeah, it was bad, but she probably doesn't remember. That's why when she popped up at my door with Aeon and all her stuff, I was surprised. It wasn't even a weekend before that she wouldn't let me see her," he recalled. "She didn't ask what I had going on or anything. It was just, I don't want to be a mother. Since you want her so bad, take her."

I sat there quietly for a moment. "It's crazy that she's around here like she's sincere. On top of that, she's been texting her about meeting Sophia. That shit is stressing my baby out."

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His nose turned up. He had a befuddled expression. “Who the hell is Sophia?”

“Damn, we’ve been sitting here all this time talking about shit, and I didn’t tell you that Ariel had a six-year-old daughter named Sophia. I’m surprised that Aeon hasn’t told you. Ariel wants them to meet like on some big sister, little sister type shit.”

Mr. Vernon stared at me with a tightened jaw. “That little girl of mine didn’t even tell me that she sat down with Ariel. If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have known. So, this bitch abandoned my daughter to turn around and have another one? Wow! How did Aeon take that?”

“Not good. She feels bad about feeling bad though. It’s crazy how parents can fuck shit up for their kids.” I mumbled the last part.

Mr. Vernon took a deep breath. “I’m happy she has you, Declan. To cover her when I can’t. When I heard Ariel say something about going to lunch at my party, I took it with a grain of salt, you know? For years, Ariel made these promises about coming to see her, to spend time with her, and she never did. I was shocked as hell when she showed up with that ten thousand for Midnite.”

When I came over here earlier, it was for something completely different. I mentioned how upset Aeon was about the dinner with her mother. I assumed my baby told him about it. That led to an almost hour conversation about Ariel. It was the women’s brunch day. I stopped over here before I was on my way to Tiberius’s house to chill with my boys.

“I’m happy that I’m here. Your daughter means everything to me.” I rubbed my

sweaty hands down my pants leg. “Keeping that energy, the reason I wanted to come chop it up with you was to tell you that I plan to ask Aeon to marry me soon. It’s respect that I come to you first to ask for your blessing.”

His head dropped with a chuckle. “I definitely didn’t see myself being dealt the big joker today. So, you want my blessing to marry my baby girl? Do you have a ring or is this an ask me first situation? His expression was stoic.

“I have a ring.” I reached in my pocket to pull out the ring box that held Aeon’s engagement ring. “I bought it a couple weeks ago.”

He opened the box as soon as it was put into his hand. The room was silent as he examined the ring. He took it out the box, put it on his pinky finger, and held it up like he was a diamond expert. “This is nice and just my baby’s taste.”

“Yeah, Fatima helped me pick out the perfect one.” I smiled thinking about the day Fatima sent the picture to me. We were shopping for the ring the next day. “I know me and Aeon have been together a little less than a year, but I know she’s myforever.” I tittered, then said, “I knew that shit the first day I went to her house and cleaned it for her. I’ll do anything for that fuckin’ girl, man.” I spoke to myself more than I was speaking to Mr. Vernon.

My focus came back into the room from my thoughts of Aeon. Mr. Vernon sat there with the ring still on his finger and his eyes on me. It took a minute, but a smile welcomed itself to his face. “I’d be proud to call you my son. I knew this was coming though. Senior already put me up on game.”

Well, damn! We both laughed at that. That sounded like my father, making sure to give him the heads up so he would be prepared. My father would never let me walk into a situation that would end in failure. We talked for a little longer about my proposal plan before I left. It was time to chill with my boys.

“If I was her daddy, I woulda told your ass no. Made your ass sweat,” Derrick teased. “You better believe when a nigga comes for my baby, I’m going to tell him no just because. I don’t care how much I like his ass.”

We all laughed. “That’s because you’re aggie as fuck. Dude probably isn’t going to ask you first. They’re gonna go right to Love Bug and ask her without your blessing,” Tiberius said with an arched brow.

The way that Derrick’s face tightened, you would have thought that it already happened. “I wish someone’s son would ask my daughter to marry them and didn’t come through me first. I would kill that nigga, then console my baby girl at his fucking funeral.”

“Yo, Derrick, I keep telling you to use that therapist’s number that I gave you. You’re way too violent for no real reason.” The concern in Georgie’s voice was comical.

He referred him to a therapist like three months ago when a delivery guy said something sexual about Iesha after she closed the door when he delivered her food. When the guy rang the doorbell, Derrick watched him through the camera like clockwork. When he heard the guy say he would fuck Iesha until she was darkskin, you would have thought Derrick was a track star. He accosted that poor man in his car and now the delivery service blackballed them.

Derrick held his middle finger up in Georgie’s direction. “Man, fuck you. I’m not violent at all. I’m a protective lion about my pride. Lions are cool until you give them a reason. So, no, I’m not violent. You have got a lot to say about everything, but what Julian asked you over twenty minutes ago. What’s up with you and Fatima?”

Now that was a good question. I didn’t need to ask, because I’d seen his car at her house when I was at my baby’s house. It would be there when I came over and be there when I had to leave for the day in the morning. All eyes were on Georgie now.

“We chillin’. Nothing too serious but nothing too laxed,” he said nonchalantly. Georgie was a quiet dude, but in the same breath, he would pop off relentlessly. He used to be heavy in the streets before he moved to Charlotte, but after a battle with death, he gracefully bowed out.

Julian snickered. “Nothin’ too serious but nothing too laxed? Does that mean that y’all are dating exclusively, but not in a relationship?”

“I guess you can say it like that. We’re in the process of seeing if we want to be in a relationship. The only way you can really do that is put all of your focus on each other. It’s still too soon to say that we’re going to be in a relationship though,” Georgie responded.

I thought about what he said as I drank my beer. “I guess that makes sense. Most people date multiple people to see what they like best. It sounds like you’re a put all your eggs in one basket kind of man.”

He chuckled. “I don’t have time to talk to a bunch of different females. I have way too many things to do in life than juggle potentially crazy bitches. I talk to females one at a time for my sanity.”

“Yeah, that’s a good method. No one wants an Alesha on their hands,” Julian quipped with a smirk.

It was my turn to hold up my middle finger. After Alesha’s pop-up at my lounge, she fell back because she found a new nigga to obsess over. The only reason I knew about her and her new dude was because she felt it necessary to tag my page into a post about them that her dude was also tagged in. I wasn’t sure what type of dude she had, but in my mind, he screamed pussy. There was no way that I would allow Aeon to tag another dude in a post with me for any reason.

My phone rang on the table that we sat on. I picked it up when I saw it was Fatima. “What’s up, Tima?”

“Get to Presbyterian Hospital. Aeon had a bad episode. I had to call the ambulance.” Fatima’s voice was panicked.

I jumped up from my seat. “What the fuck? I’m on the way.” I disconnected the line. “Aeon had to be rushed to the hospital. I got to go.”

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All of us got up to head to the hospital because there was no doubt that their women would be at the hospital too. I had a lot of questions because Aeon has had some bad episodes, but between me, Midnite, and Fatima, we were always able to get her heart rate down. Before I pulled out of Tiberius's driveway, I texted Mr. Vernon to let him know to get to the hospital. Someone was going to have to tell me something.

It took almost twenty minutes to get to the hospital from Tiberius's out of the damn way house. When I rushed into the emergency room, my steps slowed for a second. The fuck.

"Declan!" Fatima's voice caught my attention. I rushed over to her. Midnite came right to me when I was close.

"Fatima, what happened?" When I looked behind her, Iesha, Leydi, and Jesika were in seats. Iesha had fire in her eyes, so whatever Fatima was about to tell me I knew I wouldn't like it.

She huffed. "We were at the lounge for brunch, our normal routine. Aeon got a text message from Ariel asking about meeting again with her skip head ass daughter. I know Aeon told her that she was busy, but she must have told her that she was in the lounge. Next fucking thing we know this?—"

"What the fuck are you doing here?" The deep timbre of Mr. Vernon's voice caught us all off guard. You could see the figurative smoke expelled from his pores.

Ariel jumped up from her seat. Who I could only assume was her husband and daughter sat next to her. "Ver-Vernon, I was at the lounge when she got sick. I came

there so she could meet her little sister.”

“You ambushed her with the shit!” Iesha popped up out of her seat. “Your silly ass thought it was a good idea to pop-up where the daughter you abandoned was to meet the daughter you chose not to abandon?”

Ariel’s face tightened and a hand kissed her hip. “Who are you? I don’t damn know you, and you don’t know me.”

I loved the way the girls cut for Aeon. She went from having one crazy ass friend to having four. There was a current debate on who was the craziest, Iesha or Fatima.

“Is that what you did, Ariel? Did you try to push your damn child on my daughter? Yeah, that’s what you did,” Mr. Vernon said before he turned his back on her.

You could tell that Ariel was trying to maintain her composure. “She is not just your daughter, Vernon. Aeon is my damn daughter too.”

When he turned around and rushed toward her, me and the guys stepped in front of him. “Whoa, Mr. Vernon. Calm down. She’s not worth all of that,” I told him.

Ariel’s husband was out of his seat now. He stood slightly in front of his wife. Their daughter must have had her headphones on the loudest level to watch whatever was on her tablet. She hadn’t looked up once.

He lifted his hand up in mock surrender. “She’s your daughter too, huh? Let me ask you something, what’s her favorite color, movie, cartoon? What was her favorite toy? How old was she when she started menstruating? Do you know any of those, shit? Hell, what’s the fucking name of her condition with your slack ass.

“You’re the woman who dropped your daughter off and said you want her so bad,

take her. Stop acting like you've been around. If you hadn't moved to Charlotte, your ass would still be in the fuckin' wind. You are so fucking selfish!" Mr. Vernon was pissed.

Ariel's husband took a step forward. "Hold on, you're not going to talk to my wife like that! There is nothing wrong with her wanting her daughters to meet."

"Nigga, who the fuck are you? Get fucked up where treatment is available," Mr. Vernon said. "You know what? It's not worth all this energy for that chick." He looked around at Ariel. "Stay the fuck away from my daughter. If she wants to deal with you, it will be on her terms, not yours. Now get the fuck out of here."

Ariel stood there frozen like the rest of us. I was genuinely surprised by his reaction to her. Is this an old person crash out? Fatima was the only one that didn't look fazed. "Vernon, I just want to make sure she's alright."

"When she wants you to know that she's alright, she'll let you know. You are not wanted here," Mr. Vernon said through gritted teeth. An intense stare down began.

If I didn't know any better, I would say that Ariel was trying to make herself cry, but the tears wouldn't come. After she realized how foolish she looked, she turned around, tapped her daughter's shoulder, and told her that it was time for them to go. The three-piece family stalked out of the waiting room. Mr. Vernon moved to Fatima and asked what happened.

Overwhelmed . . . my baby got overwhelmed. The pop-up from her mother was a lot and it was just too much. Per what Fatima told us, Aeon became irate, and it was downhill from there. When I sat down, Midnite sat at my feet. I felt the worry that came from him. "She's going to be alright," I told him as I rubbed his back.

It was another thirty minutes before the doctor told us that she would be fine and that

some of us could go back. Mr. Vernon, Fatima, and I went back while everyone else decided to leave and check on her later. We didn't want to overwhelm her again.

Aeon was awake when we walked into the room. Midnite was the first one to her when he jumped on the bed. Next it was her father with kisses to her face. Fatima and I smiled at the interaction. I prayed to be even half of the father that he was.

"I'm so sorry, Daddy. I'm sorry. I don't know what happened." Tears fell from Aeon's eyes. I wasn't sure why she felt the need to apologize.

Her father shushed her. "You have nothing to be sorry for. If anyone should be sorry, it should be Ariel. She had no right to ambush you like that."

Fatima went to the other side of the bed. "Best friend, that lady knows her ass was dead wrong. You told her two days ago that you weren't ready to meet that lil girl or her husband. For her to pop up like that was wrong."

I stood back to let Fatima and Mr. Vernon have their time. I'd already canceled all my appointments for today. I planned to stay here until she was discharged, then stay at her house until she felt better. When I said until she felt better, I didn't mean only physical. The day after my baby had dinner with her mother, she went into a depressive episode for a few days. On top of Aeon's POTS diagnosis, she was also diagnosed with anxiety and major depressive disorder which was not the same as bipolar disorder.

Aeon sighed. "She texted me and asked how often I came to the lounge because she wanted to bring her husband. I told her that I was there often. I mean it is my boyfriend's establishment. I happened to tell her that I was there at the time," she said with her eyes ping ponged between us. "I never thought she would pop the hell up."

"Baby girl, I'm telling you now that you do not have to interact with her if you do not

want to. It is your choice, and don't allow anyone to make you feel obligated to do so," her father told her with soft eyes. "The same way your mother chose not to interact with you all those years, you can make the same decision if you want to."

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There was a moment of silence before her focus moved on me. Her smile was weak, but it was there. The doctor told us that she needed fluids because she was severely dehydrated, which pissed me off because I was on her about her water intake. She hates water. I'd had to go as far as to tell her that she couldn't get any dick until she drank at least forty ounces that day. She hates those days.

"Declan, I understand if you don't want to deal with this. I know it's a lot." New tears released from her lacrimal glands. "I don't want you to think that you have to be balled and chained to a disabled person."

She only calls me Declan when she is serious about something. This was not how I envisioned what I was about to do. I had a whole plan, but God clearly had a different one. I moved toward the bed to take her father's place. I didn't feel the need to address her ludicrous statement.

"Aeon, you know I love you, right?" After she nodded her confirmation, I continued. I pulled the ring box that was still in my pocket and opened it. I giggled at her and Fatima's gasp. "With the people that you love the most, I want to ask you to be my wife. I love every part of you, including your speed racer pulse. You are my heartbeat."

"You're my soulmate. Will you let me change your last name?" She sat frozen.

Midnite lifted himself to smell the ring. When he lay back down and put his head on Aeon's lap, I felt like he approved. Like, that lab nigga always had an opinion.

"Aeon, you have to answer the man." Fatima pushed her shoulder lightly to bring her

out of her daze. When Aeon glanced at Fatima, she smiled. “You going to answer?” Fatima asked.

Aeon peeked at her father who gave her a nod. “Yes, I’ll marry you. I love you too.”

I took the ring out of the box to place on her finger. After it was secured there, I leaned in and gave her a kiss. This woman was my forever. There was no condition, situation, or person that would keep me from her. Without her, I had no pulse.

EPILOGUE

SOME TIME LATER . . .

It took Aeon and Declan a little over a year to plan an intimate, destination wedding that was set on the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Africa. The only people in attendance were Aeon and Declan’s circle of friends, Midnite, Mr. Vernon, and Declan’s parents. The backdrop of the wedding was completely breathtaking. They captured pictures and video of their union of love that was to die for. The videographer and team they hired utilized drones to get an amazing announcement that made front page news in Charlotte as well as was talked about on local news networks. It was a big deal that the fire chief’s daughter got married in Africa of all places.

“Baby, you’re going to keep trying when I’m sitting right here? Look at Midnite. He even thinks this is crazy,” Declan said with annoyance.

They were on their way to a doctor’s appointment to check on their little bean. They waited a year after they were married to try for a baby. Declan’s liquid babies said, “why try when we can just do.” Six months after they started trying, Aeon found out she was two months pregnant.

Here they were, four months after the notification, and Aeon was sitting on the couch

with a big belly, bent over the best she could, trying to tie her sneakers. Declan had bought her plenty of slip-in types of shoes, but she wanted to wear lace sneakers.

She sat straight up with a tight face. “Deck, I can tie my shoe. I am not incapable just because I’m pregnant.”

Midnite climbed from his pillow, went over to his buttons, then pressed one then another. “No. Stop.”

He didn’t mean to laugh but it was inevitable. “See, told you. Now I’m helping.”

She conceded and sat back. Declan lowered himself in front of her and tied her shoes. After he finished, he lifted his body to kiss her lips.

Aeon’s pregnancy had been an up and down roller coaster. Toward the end of her first and the beginning of her second trimester, her symptoms worsened. She could barely walk from the front door to the kitchen of their house without dizziness. Her doctor put her on bedrest during that time which was almost a waste. Her husband’s skin was where she decided she wanted to rest. If he was in the shop servicing a client, she was right there in her recliner, reading, watching television, eating, or sleeping. He didn’t mind, though, because Declan relished living in her skin.

“Mama is cooking dinner,” he told her. He knew that would perk her ass right up. Between his parents and her father, Declan and Aeon never had to cook if they didn’t want to.

The sparkle quickly popped into her eyes. “Is she making collard greens with ham hocks? I hope she is.”

“You just had that a few days ago, but yeah, she is. My dad is putting something on the grill, so your father, I think, is coming over after work. Fatima and Georgie are also coming.” Declan was tired of collard greens, and everyone knew it. His mother

made cabbage for him.

Fatima and Georgie went from exclusively dating to a monogamous relationship to parenthood to an engagement where they still were. The wedding was six months away. She was considerate enough to plan the wedding for after Aeon had her baby.

While in the car on their way to Aeon's doctor's office, she received a text message from Ariel. Ariel texted her every once in a blue moon to ask her how she was. Sometimes Aeon answered the texts, sometimes she didn't. She had yet to meet her little sister. There was still a lot of bitterness when it came to that relationship. Like her father told her, she would only interact with Ariel if she wanted to. Aeon didn't want to.

When Aeon and Declan announced their engagement, Ariel reached out to congratulate her daughter. She was excited when Aeon responded back with a thank you. It wasn't much, but in Ariel's mind, it was something. Closer to the wedding, she called Aeon and left a message expressing that she wanted to attend her wedding. The response to that voicemail was a text message that said two words: absolutely not.

Ariel was upset, but her husband brought her back down to reality. He had to make her realize that she had no right to feel entitled to be in a child's life that she abandoned. After the hospital situation, Marcus sat back to really evaluate the situation. They'd been married for years, but he only found out about his wife's older daughter when she needed a large chunk of money for her. He recalled on their first date that he asked Ariel if she had any children, and she told him no. Would she have ever told him if that didn't come up?

The come down to earth conversation that Ariel had with her husband set her straight for some time. Now she only reached out to check on her. Marcus questioned whether it was genuine, because it was scheduled in her calendar. It wasn't something that she just did.

To God's praise, Princetta provided all the nurturing that Aeon needed as a mother. Also, to Princetta's credit, she found Ariel's phone number in Aeon's phone, called her, and cursed her flat the fuck out. Princetta didn't play about her daughter-in-law.

POTS had made Aeon's life more difficult but not unlivable, nor did it stop those around her from loving her. Troy made her feel as if she was unlovable, but Declan's love quashed that theory completely. Troy had proven himself to be a loser that she should have left long before she did, but Aeon knew that everything was necessary.

Troy's father was caught in the middle of a horrible sex scandal almost a year ago that caused Senator Givings to step down from his position and his wife to divorce him. It came out that he in fact did like the boys. The overarching problem with that was one, he was married, and secondly, those boys were on the cusp of being legal. In the court of public opinion, that was a big no-no. He would mess with boys who turned legal age, the day before, which brought up the question of whether he groomed the boys. Troy distanced himself from his father amidst the allegations that he knew. There was no way he could remain close and his coke turned meth habit be uncovered. Life wasn't living for the Givings; hell was helling!

Declan found the one that God had placed on the Earth just for him, his soulmate. Aeon was honored to be that for him and felt blessed that he was that for her. It was a universal truth that they needed each other because standing alone, they had no pulse.

ALL SCOOTCHED IN