



And Everything In Between (Love By Any Means #3)

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Category: Romance

Description: Paige Bishop has built a life around control and service. Between long hours at the bank, her side hustles, and caring for her recently released father, she doesn't have time for distractions. But when a spontaneous summer night puts her in Giovanni Dowlen's path, she finds herself craving everything she swore off.

Giovanni doesn't chase people. He minds his business, runs his shop, and takes care of his family, those by blood and those by choice. His plate is full, but when he sees Paige, he doesn't back off. He's in pursuit, steady and intentional, ready to show her that love doesn't have to drain you.

She's used to being needed. He wants to be chosen. And when they finally meet in the middle, it's this, that, and everything in between.

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Paige's phone buzzed on her desk for the third time in the last hour.

It was JT's worrisome ass again. Same line, same weight in her stomach.

But she didn't groan this time. Didn't roll her eyes or curse under her breath.

She swiped to answer, because he would keep calling until she answered or blocked him.

"What, JT?" she answered, her voice flat.

No warmth, no softness. At least not anymore.

She was drained, over it, and tired of telling him that.

A nigga in prison embodied persistence. With nothing but time, they became the walking definition of I got time today.

JT was no different. She was halfway regretting ever getting involved with him.

"Damn, that's how we doing now?" The line crackled with prison chaos in the background.

"We already had this talk." She swiveled her chair away from the loan application she was halfway through reviewing. "I told you this wasn't working and that hasn't changed."

"I need a favor." That was always the case. Always something he needed. She'd easily become his personal assistant. Going here, calling there, printing and mailing this. If he was calling, he wanted something.

"What is it this time?" She asked, already reaching for a pen. Already preparing to add one more thing to her endless list. The truth was, she'd started pitying JT, and that's when he lost her attention and heart.

"My momma's birthday is coming up." JT paused. "I was hoping you could fuck with me on that."

Before Paige could respond, a light knock sounded on her office door before it opened.

"Paige, can I chat with you in my office for a moment?" her boss Ashton called from the doorway, saving her from whatever guilt trip was loading up.

Paige looked up, relief washing through her and curiosity taking over. Whatever Ashton wanted, it couldn't be bad. Paige loved her job. Loved numbers. Loved her customers. If there was one thing she knew, it was that she was damn good at what she did.

"I gotta go." She didn't bother hiding her eagerness to end the call. "Work needs me."

"You're always putting stuff before us."

"You're right," she replied, unapologetic. "I am."

She hung up without waiting for the goodbye, slid her phone into her desk drawer, and took a deep breath. After that, she was back to work mode. Paige the professional. Not Paige, drowning in everyone else's needs, wants, and phone calls.

Paige took quick steps to the office across the hall from her.

“Close the door.”

Paige closed the door behind her and took a seat. “Am I getting fired? You’re acting cryptic and mysterious.”

“Girl don’t make me knock you out,” Ashton grinned, her belly round under her fitted dress. “You’re my favorite employee. Best loan officer at Coupeville Federal Credit Union’s got. I could never let you go.”

She let out a quiet laugh, her shoulders finally loosening. “You had me nervous. Spill it.”

“You know I’m about to go on maternity leave in a few weeks,” Ashton said, smoothing a hand over her stomach.

Paige beamed slightly, getting lost in the idea of one day experiencing bringing a child into the world. Her closest friends were all at that stage in life and Paige wasn’t jealous. But she wondered if she’d have enough time to love and let someone’s son have her barefoot and pregnant.

“It’s time to get ready for this baby to come. I need you.”

Ashton finished, causing Paige to come out of her thoughts and back to the conversation.

“Need me to do what? You know I got your back, whatever it is.”

“My keys. My access to the bank. I want you to take over while I’m gone. Trina is going on leave as well.”

Paige blinked. “Ashton, that’s a lot. I mean, I can do it, but are you sure you want me stealing your job from you?”

They sat there for a beat before both of them cracked up. Paige loved her some Ashton. She’d taken over the bank a bit before Paige got hired and they instantly clicked and had built a friendship since.

“I got a feeling once I lay eyes on this baby, I won’t care,” Ashton admitted, still grinning.

“But seriously, this is step one. I want you to think about submitting for the loan manager position. You’re good, Paige.

Real good. And the people love you. You care about your loan candidates.

You care about the bank. And you can teach others how to have a little care and compassion. I want this for you.”

Paige leaned back in her chair, heart thumping in her chest. “Can I think about it?”

Ashton nodded. “Of course. But don’t think about it for too long. I want to personally recommend you.”

Paige left Ashton’s office buzzing; she was so excited that her hard work was paying off. She’d been grinding for this. And she was finally being seen, finally being trusted. They were giving her the shot she’d earned.

Ashton’s trust meant a lot to her. She was her shero for being the second and youngest black woman in their small town to become a bank manager. Paige had been grinding harder than anybody in the bank, waiting for them to see that she could be the third.

But nothing she ever wanted came without a fight. She calmed down deciding she wasn't going to get too excited, afraid she'd sabotage it. Good things seldomly happened to her by chance.

Her phone buzzed again in her desk, and she rushed to grab it. It was her father's ring tone. She answered and heard him coughing roughly on the other end.

Her father, Perry Bishop, had only been out of prison for almost year, and he hadn't come out the way he went in.

He was thinner now, slower, smaller in ways that scared her if she thought about it too long.

Three days a week, he sat tethered to a dialysis machine, his body betraying him piece by piece.

"Hey daddy, what's going on?"

"Oh, hell, I didn't mean to call you shit. I can't ever work this damn phone. But while I have you, can you bring me some of them jalapeno pepper poppers? You know when you get off."

"Yes, but you know you can text me during the day. I'm working."

"I know. How is work?"

"It's work. But it's good. Good things are coming."

She looked down at the photo of her and her father the day he was released.

It was hard to look at him and not remember PJ sometimes.

Her twin brother, forever ten, smiling. Wrong place, wrong time.

One bullet, one funeral, a family torn apart.

But that was the story of multiple communities and families. Hers wasn't the exception.

"Proud of you, Paige. I know it's not always easy to look your wound in the face and help it, but your, Pops, appreciates you."

"Dad don't start that. Look, I'll bring the poppers if you learn to text me unless it's an emergency."

Paige hated it when he did that. She hadn't completely forgiven Perry Not when his choices and enemies had taken PJ.

But she was working on it and taking it day by day.

Now the roles reversed. Perry's health problems had become her responsibility, his appointments her responsibility, his medication another line on a to-do list that never ended.

"Thanks. Try to come before Wheel of Fortune comes on. That's my snack."

"Ok, I'll call when I'm on the way." They disconnected, and Paige flopped back in her chair.

Most days, Paige felt stretched thinner than Slim Thug's goatee.

She carried it all - her daddy, JT, her job. Had been since she was ten. Could she carry anything else?

Yes, she told herself. Because that's what Bishops did. And she would have to because this next season was going to be hers. She was claiming it.

The rest of her shift blurred past. Her face was buried in crunching numbers, lunch, and then back to it until Donna reminded her it was time to clock out. She barely remembered clocking out, grabbing Perry's snack, and driving home, her mind stuck in a tight loop of what-ifs and maybe-I-coulds.

When she finally stepped into her home, she stripped down to nothing but her robe.

She tied it loose around her waist and stepped out onto the patio of her townhouse.

It was her own little oasis, full of plants, cute furniture, and lights.

She inhaled and exhaled. It was barely summer, but the nice day followed them into the evening. She was grateful.

The blunt trembled between her fingers as she lit it. Smoke slipped past her lips as the weight of the day eased off her shoulders. For now. She reclined and kicked her feet up on the edge. Today was one of those days. Her mind was all spun up, and she didn't know why.

She was barely ten minutes into her peace when three sharp taps came.

"This is the shit I'm talking about."

Paige pulled her robe tighter and padded to the door, already frowning and tired. Not to mention, someone was popping up unannounced. When she opened the door, there stood her momma, sunglasses perched on her nose, one hand clutching a brown paper bag, the other holding a white envelope.

“Hmph. Good. You ain’t dead. Sure, living like you’re trying to be.”

Without waiting for an invitation, Myra Saint swept inside, the scent of house fried rice and chicken wings trailing behind her like perfume. Paige leaned against the door, exhaling slowly, trying to summon the energy she didn’t have.

“What are you doing here, Momma?”

“Bringing you food so you don’t shrivel up and disappear,” her momma said, plopping the bag onto the kitchen counter. She peeled off her sunglasses with a dramatic roll of her eyes. “And bringing you a little surprise since you act like you’re allergic to joy?”

Paige squinted. Suspicious. She was always suspicious when her mother came around. The conversation was always going to go one or two ways, maybe both if she was lucky.

“I’m not allergic to joy. I’m focused. Big difference.”

Her momma’s mouth curled into a mischievous grin as she waved the envelope like a wand. Absolutely nothing but a vacation on a faraway island with no responsibilities would entice Paige, but she’d hear her mother out.

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“I won these tickets at work to the Idle Hands car show over at the fairgrounds this weekend. I thought maybe you could stop babysitting grown folks for one day and go be young and sprung.” There was conversation one , dating .

Paige folded her arms and shook her head.

“I’m busy, Ma, too busy to be acting young and sprung.”

She hoped her mother would leave the conversation there, because she wasn’t making any promises.

She wanted to work. She wanted to mind her business.

She wanted to coast until she felt like putting the pedal to the metal.

Not worry about being young and sprung. Instead of answering her right away, Paige grabbed her blunt from outside and lit it again. She needed it to deal with her mother.

“Blasphemy, you’re always busy,” her momma snapped, snatching the blunt from Paige like she paid the light bill there. Myra knew her daughter too well. Paige had always been a fighter. For herself. For others. Like any Bishop, she lived up to her last name... stubborn, loyal, and half-crazy with it.

Myra hit the blunt again, slower this time, grounding herself like she was gearing up for battle. Her mouth tightened before the smoke even cleared.

“Busy being everybody’s backbone. Busy pouring into folks who don’t even notice

you dry. You don't listen for shit, Paige."

Paige clenched her jaw. Bit down on the words she wanted to spit back. Because she had plenty.

"I'm fine. I've been fine. My focus is where it needs to be for now."

Myra let out that knowing laugh, and it pissed her off.

The woman who fell apart after her brother died had the nerve to act like Paige didn't remember who cleaned it all up.

She didn't have a childhood or a choice.

Instead, she got silence, fetched wine coolers, and made sure the house still functioned.

She hadn't even had a chance to grieve her brother.

Myra eventually found herself again. Started dancing in the kitchen and laughing too loud and reclaiming her joy. And Paige was glad about that. But the difference was that her break was temporary. Paige's weight had never been optional. And the sacrifices she made had never been acknowledged.

"I don't want to keep having this conversation. I know I need to put myself first. I know I'm too beautiful to be single. I know my daddy ain't my problem. I know, okay. I'm fine."

What she didn't say was: I watched you fall apart. I had to grow up overnight. And I never got to stop. So please forgive me if your advice is a day late and a dollar short.

Once Myra came back from the ledge, she'd learned to lean on her daughter's strength, benefiting from Paige being bone dry, just like everyone else. So no, she didn't want advice from the same woman who'd let her carry it all.

“Fine?” she repeated, shaking her head. “Fine, is for white folks and liars, baby. And you ain’t neither.”

“I’m handling it.” Paige rolled her eyes snatching the blunt back. “And stop coming over here to smoke my weed, fuss, and dip.”

Her mom was right. She had been right for a while now. Paige needed to live for herself again. She would never tell her mother that she was right, ever. And knowing it and doing something about it were two different conversations. Where did you even start?

“Handling it doesn’t mean you’re happy, P. It means you’re surviving better than most. I’m telling you what I know. Stop trying to change the subject.”

She shoved the tickets across the counter and added, “Go. Put something on that makes you remember you got hips and a heartbeat. Laugh, flirt, drink something brown if you feel like it. Get some life back in you.”

Paige stared at the tickets like they might bite her. Her mother had never begged her like this. More suspicion rose in her mind.

“Momma, I’ve got Perry to worry about. His dialysis schedule is crazy until he gets his benefits and transportation. I got two audits coming up at the bank. Ashton needs me, I can’t up-”

Her momma cut her off with one look. That same look she gave her when Paige tried to talk back at sixteen. A you know better look, which made Paige shut up.

“Your daddy made his choices. You love him. I get that. But you gotta stop letting love be your prison.” Second conversation, her father.

Paige blinked hard. If she let those words sit too long, she might fold.

Her mom was still pushing, and she wasn’t only speaking about her father.

Her mother was always good at reading her like a book, but sometimes the worst thing about the truth was knowing it came from somebody who loved you enough to say it.

“Go,” her momma said, softer now. “I’m not saying you gotta go quit your job or act like you don’t have responsibilities.

But you need to remember you’re still alive.

A young woman with no kids. You should be living your best single life until someone comes along to change that. You don’t work this weekend, right?”

“No, Momma, I’m off but...”

“But nothing. It’s settled. Listen, Paige, I love you more than life itself. I know your heart I raised you to be this way but none of these niggas are your responsibility. That includes the man I once loved. Don’t make me worry about you more than I already do.”

Myra never stayed long, she came said her peace and left. A kiss pressed to Paige’s forehead; a heavy silence left in her place. Paige stood there in her tiny kitchen, the food steaming on the counter, the tickets limp in her hand.

Alive.

Paige shook her head and stepped back on the patio.

She hadn't even finished her blunt or processed her mother's visit before JT's call came crawling back.

She'd hung up on him earlier, and he still wasn't getting the picture.

She knew what she had to do. But she didn't want to.

However, she was a better woman than this.

The phone stopped ringing, but her email went off minutes later. A CorrLinks message in all caps.

ANSWER ME, PAIGE .

Ain't no way you playing a nigga like this.

The message glared at her, almost blowing her high. Paige stared at it. Because she wasn't playing. He was the one who wasn't taking her seriously and hurting his own feelings in the process. She wanted to relax and have a little moment of peace, was she asking for too much.

The blunt stayed lit, burning between her fingers, but the haze wasn't strong enough to quiet the mess stirring inside her.

Nights like this always dragged her back.

To that night. The sirens. Her mother's scream.

The hush that fell over their whole house when PJ didn't come home.

Her own guilt for not being with him when he went to the park that day.

She'd learned to sit still with panic back then.

Learned to brace for bad news without ever showing it on her face.

She set the phone down face first on the table with a muted thud, ashing the blunt into the chipped saucer.

"Fuck," she mumbled.

Before life got hectic, JT had been the easy choice. Not the dream man, but the safe one. He wrote her sweet letters. She wrote back even sweeter. He made promises she could manage from a distance, ones she never expected to keep.

With JT, there was no need to give up pussy, catch feelings, cook, clean, or make room for anyone else.

She could love him from the outside looking in, and that gave her control, freedom.

He didn't need her to show up in real time, purely needed her to answer the phone, drop money on his books, check in on his people, and remind him she still believed in him.

He was easy to love in his absence. Hard to picture up close. And the more parole hearings and appeal denials she sat through, the more she realized... she probably never would have to.

JT had fifteen years. Five down, ten to go. She'd be forty when he came home. If he came home.

The tickets sat a few inches away, flapping lightly in the breeze.

That little voice in her head told her how easy it could be, how simple it would be to go back; reclaim the life she swore she wanted.

But Paige didn't move. Because if she reached for them, she'd have to admit the hard part, it wasn't them. It was her.

The voice in her head wasn't JT's.

It wasn't even her mom's or her dad's.

It was her own. Quiet, tiny, but still there.

She took a long drag from the blunt, exhaled hard enough to make the envelope on the table shiver, and closed her eyes. She wanted more. Because who didn't. She had her career; she'd had her freedom and plenty of it. She'd even been catching herself watching other couples.

She didn't know what the next step looked like. But standing still wasn't it. Funny how the tighter you gripped something, the faster it slipped through your fingers.

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Friday

The waiting room at the prison was too bright.

Too clean. That kind of clean that didn't feel sterile, but sad.

This place was depressing, and the thought crossed her mind every time she came.

She would never get used to it. It was why she didn't come as often as she could.

Besides the drive being three hours, she hated how she felt coming in. .. and how she felt leaving.

The gray floors, metal chairs, and poor-ass vending machine with knock-off chips and snacks irritated her. The whole process pissed her off, the pat-downs, the stares, the little indignities you had to swallow just to see somebody you loved in a cage. Today was no different.

"Next time I'm charging your ass. You be taking your sweet precious time with me," Paige joked quietly as Wanda, her favorite CO, grinned and frisked her slowly.

"Girl, please I've felt up finer bitches than you," Wanda shot back laughing under her breath, trying not to get caught being friendly. For a second, it almost felt normal. She'd miss Wanda, in a strange way. But not enough to keep coming back.

Paige found her seat and crossed her ankles tightly.

The CO called for the three o'clock group visit, but she was still stuck on the fact that she had made the trip.

She wasn't supposed to be here. Not today.

Not anymore. But closure had a pull. It could convince you of anything, even something you knew damn well was full of delusion.

No one was owed anything. But she was too damn tired of carrying unfinished business and baggage.

This wasn't who she was. Paige Bishop didn't drag dead weight.

She cut through everyone else's bullshit.

It was her favorite quality. Her strength.

As the doors creaked open, she knew it was time she cut through her own.

And there he was. Same black-and-white jumpsuit she'd grown to know. Same half-smile, he wasn't happy about her actions and movements. His disappointment was written all over his stress-beaten face.

Joshua Tomlin, also known as JT, carried the weight of his choices in his face, frown lines, gray hairs, and bags under his eyes.

The pedestal she'd placed him on was finally crumbling under its own lies.

But he was still fine. Paige wouldn't deny that.

The Boosie fade, the soft eyes framed by those ridiculous lashes, he still looked like

the type of man you'd risk a little common sense for.

He wasn't in for any kingpin business. No cartel affiliations, no Scarface narrative. Just aggravated robbery and possession, enough to bury him under a long sentence.

Still, she'd loved him the only way she knew how, quietly, fiercely, and from a distance that kept her life intact.

"Damn, P. You still fine as a muthafucka," he said, sliding into the seat across from her like no time had passed. "I was startin' to think you forgot about me."

"Nah," she murmured, resting her arms on the table. "I didn't forget."

"Well, you sure moving like you forgot." A cocky grin was plastered on his face. "Dodging my calls, hanging up on me... What's up with that?"

JT wasn't stupid. He knew this bid had been hard on her, especially for a man she had no romantic involvement with before the system snatched him up.

A man who, even behind bars, had a roster of women waiting to send him money, come visit and do all the things she refused to do.

If he was honest, he was surprised she lasted as long as she did.

There was a time she had clung to it. JT embodied her comfort zone, her motivation to smile, her reason to rush home and wait for the phone to ring, his lazy drawl leaking through the receiver.

He became her security blanket, stitched together with late-night collect calls, sweet nothings, and promises sent through the mail.

Vacations. Diamonds. Dreams. More than anything, he promised to make her happiness his mission the minute he got out.

Jail talk was a hell of a drug. And maybe, for a while, she'd been high off it too.

She knew how it looked now, crazy, sad, desperate, like she didn't have better options.

But that wasn't who she was. Paige was a lover.

A fixer. And unless you had ever loved someone behind bars, no one could judge her.

Because unless you lived it, you didn't understand it.

There was a strange peace in loving someone at a distance.

No expectations.

No daily obligations.

No mess.

Just love, safe behind structure.

"So, you good? How's your pops?" the question was casual, but she caught the way his eyes flickered, searching for an opening an inkling that he still had a chance to convince her he needed her.

"He's... managing," she said, uninterested in the small talk. "Dialysis three times a week. I'm doing what I can."

“How’s work? Employee of the month. Seen that shit in the paper.”

He grinned, and so did she. She almost forgot why she was there. The visit didn’t feel final, but she wasn’t going to forget why she was there.

“Yeah. Promotion’s coming soon.”

A quiet whistle slipped through his teeth. “That’s what I’m talkin’ about. My baby out here elevating.”

“I’m not your baby, JT. You gotta hear me this time. That’s why I’m here.”

“Paige, you always gon’ be something to me. Fuck what you on.”

And he meant it. She could see it in the way he sat up a little straighter, the way his chest puffed out a little.

She could say what she wanted, but he’d held his own for her and about her.

He hadn’t missed a birthday or holiday. The gifts came on time with his love in them, and what he could help with, he did.

He had a right to know why now and why their dreams were ending.

He thought that was enough. And maybe once upon a time, it had been.

But not anymore. JT would never understand that.

And she didn’t expect him too because if the shoe was on the other foot, he wouldn’t be doing this for her.

She needed more than his promises. More than familiar arms that never showed up when she needed them most. More than the idea of a man, framed behind glass.

“I’m done with this, JT.”

“Done?” he repeated, leaning in. “P, we’ve been through too much. You held me down when nobody else did. You know I got love for you. Why you doing this?”

“I know,” she whispered. “But love ain’t enough. If love is for me, it needs to be free enough to help me, hold me, take shit off my plate... not add to it.”

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Because what could he say? She was right.

That their love was a wild ass dream they had to wake up from one day, sooner rather than later.

“You gave me something I needed at the time.” Her voice trembled as she spoke. “You made me feel wanted. Safe, even. But I need a love that’s consistent, stable and with me in the trenches.”

His jaw tensed. That flash of frustration he always tried to hide sparked across his face.

“You really done?” The question hung between them.

“I want more. Or nothing. And you can’t give me more. Not from in here.”

“I still love you,” he said finally. “I’m always going to love you. Please, pause for me ba- I mean Paige. Give me some more time to figure shit out. You know I’m tryna get outta this bitch.”

Paige smiled because she wasn't falling for that line anymore. Love was an action word, and she needed to see it in real time. "If you love me, wish me well and mean it. Stop calling. Stop the letters and the emails."

The buzzer sounded, forcing them into a silent stare off. Both searching the eyes of the other. Both of them wished it didn't have to be like this. But both were also clear that they'd reached the end of their beautiful out-of-the-box story.

"Visitors, please stand and step back."

She stood slowly, adjusting her shirt, and looked at him one last time. Not with pity. Not with pain. But with peace. She wanted to say something to reiterate what she needed from him moving forward, but his words stopped hers.

"I can't do it, Paige. You know that."

She nodded once, understanding that it would always be on her to ensure this goodbye stayed final. He'd still call. He'd still send letters. He'd still be wondering if she was okay. Waiting for her to come back. But Paige knew she wouldn't.

"Goodbye."

She didn't wait for him to respond. She didn't need to.

This goodbye wasn't for him. It was for the part of her that settled.

The part that confused crumbs with commitment.

Even put her plans on hold. It was time for her to reclaim her time, and she declared she would.

She didn't turn around. Didn't glance back.

Not even when his name showed up one last time later that night.

She didn't flinch, didn't open the message.

Just swiped and deleted. For once, she wasn't dragging closure behind her.

She walked away and let it stay where it fell, behind her.

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Saturday

The morning after visiting JT, Paige woke with a clarity she hadn't felt in months.

Ending things left her lighter. She was kicking herself in the ass for not doing it sooner.

She'd finally set down a weight she didn't need to continue to carry.

But Saturday was a dialysis day for her father, and some responsibilities couldn't be shed so easily.

She dressed in simple jeans and a tank top, trying to hold on to that weightless feeling, even as duty called her back.

"Momma, why are you threatening me? All I said was that I was still thinking about it. I don't know if I'm going, but I may also go. What's so hard to understand about that?"

"You outta watch that mouth, Paige. I don't want them to go to waste, that's what you need to get. I'll come pick you up myself if I have to."

"I called you to keep me company, not to hear you fuss about this car show. Who is having it again?"

There was something about the hum of the dialysis machine that haunted Paige. Not just the steady rhythm of it, but the way it echoed like a heartbeat, distant from life.

That's why she had called in the first place. It certainly wasn't to hear her mouth about a car show.

"Get your bald-headed daddy to keep you company. That's the only opinion you care about. It doesn't matter who's having it. You will be there."

"That's not fair. I love you both, but y'all could make it a lot easier if you would try and get along."

"We do get along, I don't see the need to do dinner, phone calls, and such. I don't need anybody on my roster getting the wrong impression."

"Goodbye, lady. You work my nerves so bad." Paige disconnected the line and laughed at herself before going back inside to sit next to her father.

When her father came back into her life, she didn't know what to expect. She didn't know how to welcome him back, how to move with him, how to create a new rhythm with a man she barely knew.

He had always been her father. No prison walls, no courtroom chains, no passing years could change that.

But Paige hadn't had her daddy in the flesh in over twenty years.

He'd missed everything: the school dances, the heartbreaks, the promotions she celebrated alone.

And yet, she loved him anyway. Even knowing it was his choices that took him from her.

She'd already buried enough family to know grief didn't end, it only shapeshifted.

The Bishops had buried more than their share. Now it was her cousin Brooks ensuring the family name set a new standard. Someone had to break the cycle. And collectively they were.

She had imagined their new beginning would be a beautiful one. Soft. Healing. But that wasn't the hand she'd been dealt. So, she adjusted her grip. Took what she could get. Made it her business to make sure he was comfortable. That's why she was sitting right there beside him.

He was fragile, shrunken, the rough outline of the man she remembered, softened by sickness and guilt. The stress of losing him again, this time happening in right before her eyes, no warnings, no mercy, no escape sat heavy on her chest every single day.

"Girl, your daddy is lucky to have you here. I know a young fine thang like you knows how to get into some trouble," the nurse said with a grin while adjusting Perry's IV. She'd unplugged a little. No work badge today. No planner. No catching up.

"Please, don't be fooled. I'm on my way to being a crazy cat lady," Paige replied with a quick smirk, dropping her phone into her lap.

The nurse laughed, shaking her head. "That means you picky, waiting on the right one. Nothing wrong with knowing your worth."

"Picky, jaded, tired. Ma'am, it's all the same thing these days." Paige said it with a laugh, but it stuck in her throat a little too long after.

She leaned back in the chair and crossed her legs, watching the soft rise and fall of her father's chest.

"You okay?" she asked lightly placing a hand over his.

“Yeah, but you ain’t gotta wait around, baby girl,” Perry muttered, voice dry and cracked from too many years behind bars and too many treatments pulling the life out of him. “Go live a little. It’s Saturday and your off day.”

Some days, Paige wondered if she’d already lived all the life she was supposed to. God knew she’d had her fun. Her mouth curled at the memory of reckless nights and louder mornings. Fast talking, faster drinking, and running a nigga’s pockets for his munyuns (money) and his pride was a habit.

She used to be hell on heels. Maybe it made sense she was slowing down. Maybe that was the natural order of things. She wasn’t a girl anymore. Thirty had come knocking a month ago. And truth be told, the streets had already stopped calling her name.

“I’m fine, Daddy.” Her eyes glued back on her phone, pretending to be locked into a hair tutorial.

She wasn’t fine. She was functioning.

Perry wasn’t blind. He saw it in her face, no matter how good she got at faking it.

And still, she didn’t know how to stop. Being last had become second nature.

He hated being a burden. Hated leaning on the only child he had left. But he didn’t have anybody else. The streets that used to know his name had gone quiet when he needed help.

After PJ’s death, her mother made it clear she wanted no part of Perry or the world he came from. She’d buried her son, changed her last name back to her maiden name, closed the door, and locked it from the inside. And maybe she was right too. Some hurts were too heavy to heal from and forgive.

But Paige had chosen differently.

She decided love meant staying, even when it cracked you wide open. And her mother, even in her distance, respected that choice. She never stood between them. Never made her choose. That was her way of loving Paige, too.

Perry shifted in the chair, grimacing slightly as he scratched at the edge of the tape holding the needle in place.

“You tired.” Perry looked over at her, not asking. Telling. “Running yourself ragged.”

“Daddy, you need me,” Paige replied, voice soft. “I’m going to be here.”

He smiled weakly.

“When that Medicaid comes through, it’ll get easier. Maybe your momma will come help me until then.”

He winked, wrong and hopeful all at once, the way only a man who still believed miracles were possible could.

Paige lifted her eyes and gave him a look, half exasperation, half tenderness.

He was serious. Still hopeful after everything.

Still a man who thought you could leave the porch light on, and forgiveness would find its way home.

But he knew Myra better than she knew herself.

She'd been the biggest stepper he knew. She wasn't going for it.

"Momma's still stubborn," she said, shaking her head. "She might kill you if you even blink at her wrong."

Perry chuckled.

"Fuck all that. I want you to leave. Find somethin' to get into. I ain't gon' let you rot sittin' here watchin' me fade out."

Paige frowned, crossing her arms over her chest, her whole body tightening like a rubber band stretched too thin. She was so sick of the real nigga til I die mess that came with him sometimes.

"Absolutely not. I'm taking you back home like I said I would. And it sounds like you've been talking to Momma already. I find it funny you both keep trying to get me outside," she said and motioned with air quotes.

He shook his head; stubbornness stitched into his every breath too. It was him who passed it to her.

"You keep pushing yourself and you gon' lose yourself doing everything and nothing at the same damn time. Because unless you work here, you can do nothing for me. I don't need you looking in my face."

Paige couldn't even argue. Between the bank, her side hustles, the endless appointments, and pretending she gave a damn about brunch invites and engagement announcements, Paige was exhausted.

Both her mom and dad were throwing truth bombs aiming straight at her head.

And the worst part of it all was that she'd become so accustomed to being last that she didn't know how to stop.

Even worse, she didn't know who she'd be if she did stop. Who would she be if no one needed her?

She gave him a playful side-eye, her mouth twitching despite herself.

"I'll have you know." Her voice lifted with fake pride, "I'm on the fast track to being the loan manager. Might even take over the whole damn bank one day."

Perry grinned wide, shaking his head.

"Girl, you ain't gon' do shit if you end up in the grave. Go outside. Go laugh. Go let some young fool look at you like the miracle you are."

"Daddy," she warned, but the warmth in her voice gave her away. He could be sweet like that, and she hated she missed out on so many years of her father being her biggest advocate.

He sank back, groaning under his breath, eyes shut like he needed that moment before meeting hers.

"Daddy my ass. Call Bishop. Let him get me. His wife makes the best strawberry shortcake on this side of the Mason-Dixon. I need that today."

A laugh bubbled out of Paige before she could stop it.

"You're deliberately trying to drive me crazy. Brooks has a family and doesn't want to be bothered with you."

“I’m trying to see my daughter live,” he said, softer now, the elephant in the room was sitting between them. “Before I ain’t around to watch it happen. Piggy, life is short. Call him for me.”

The nickname rattled her. She blinked, slow and deliberate, stomach tightening as she fought to stay cool. She hadn’t heard him call her that since she was little, back when life was simple. Paige released a slow exhale and stood up. She gathered her purse and keys.

“Alright, old man.”

Paige kissed the crown of his bald head. “You win today. I’ll go get into something. You sure you’ll be, okay?”

“I made it plenty of years on my own. I got it. Go.”

“Okay. I’ll call you when I make it in.” She adjusted the jacket around his shoulders, her hands lingering for a second longer than necessary. She knew he wasn’t only talking about today. She heard him.

Climbing the corporate ladder was nice. Promotions, titles, clean little boxes to check, none of them were wrong. But what was the point if she forgot how to breathe in the process?

Back in her car, she sat still for a long moment.

Eyes closed. Breathing heavy. She’d been given permission to not worry about perfection, responsibility, or how useful she could be.

She’d been given permission to live a little.

Laugh a little. Let herself be Paige, without apology.

She'd have to trust that everything would be fine.

Honestly, she didn't have a choice. Her parents had ganged up on her. She was sure to hear it if she let this weekend pass her by without letting the sun kiss her cheeks and the wind caress her skin.

She cracked the windows to let in the heavy summer air and grabbed her phone. Her thumbs moved fast. She texted the steadiest person she knew. Her cousin Brooks.

Paige: Hey, can you scoop my Daddy from dialysis?

Brooks would handle it. He always did. She knew she didn't have to worry about her father being safe and taken care of with him.

Brooks: Yeah, Davida on Memorial?

Paige: Yes, thank you. I owe you.

Brooks: Get on with that beady bee. We are family.

Paige: Go to hell! But thanks. I'm outside today.

Paige set the phone face-down on the passenger seat and drew in a deep breath, the first real one she'd taken in weeks. The kind that unclenched your stomach and loosened the invisible rope around your ribs. When she finally exhaled, laughter bubbled up and excitement coursed through her veins.

If her parents wanted her to go live a little, she'd go. She was gonna step back into herself, get cute, and find some good trouble.

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On the other side of town- Choosy Eats

He didn't come for all that.

He came for his people.

His mom, Betsy, sat across from him, already halfway through her grits and turkey sausage, seasoning packets lined up on her napkin.

Spirit, his baby sister and manager, mastermind, sat beside her, earbuds in her ear, typing away on her iPad between bites of salmon croquettes and smart-ass commentary.

"You still trying to cancel the bounce house?" Spirit asked, her eyes not leaving the screen. "I already paid the deposit, G. Let the kids have their moment."

Giovanni didn't answer right away. Just sipped his coffee slowly and stared out the window at the growing crowd trickling into the parking lot.

His mind was already working through logistics, vendor tents, staff assignments, and weather backup plans.

The car show was hours away, and the weight of it pressed against the back of his neck like it always did when something big was coming.

But it wasn't nerves. It was stewardship.

A sense of duty. This was more than a hobby for him.

He wanted to be an example to the young men around him.

The gifts they possessed could be used for good.

“Nah,” he said finally, cutting a piece of pancake with the side of his fork. “Let ’em have it. Just make sure somebody from the team is posted up over there. I ain’t tryna deal with nobody suing me behind they kid falling out the damn death trap and breaking their neck.”

“Handled it already,” Spirit said, barely looking up as she typed. “Waivers and all. It’s in that email you’ve been dodging.”

Betsy cut her eyes at him before buttering her toast. “You too busy to eat. Too busy to sleep. And now you seem to be too busy to read. One day your lil’ busy ass gon’ fall out and be sat down.”

Giovanni smiled; he liked it when she got on to him. It kept him accountable, but he didn’t need the lecture, his break was on the way, but he had goals to reach first.

“I’m good, Ma.”

“You not,” she said, reaching over to tap his wrist with the back of her fork. “You doing too much again. That’s how men miss their blessings. Ain’t no rest in the grave, Gio just death, bones, and dreams.”

He nodded because that’s what you did when your momma scolded you in public.

He didn’t push back. He couldn’t. Not when she wasn’t wrong.

He'd been moving on autopilot for a minute now, chasing the next goal, the next build, the next fire to put out.

That's how his mind worked. Always had. But here, at this table, with the women who either raised and protected him, who knew every version of him from buck-toothed middle school troublemaker to black-owned-business success story, here, he could chill. For a second.

"Everything's coming together though," Spirit said, glancing up at him, always saving him. "Vendors are locked in. Food trucks confirmed. I got the social schedule laid out through next week. Hashtags are trending. Today is going to be great."

"And the scholarship fund?"

"Fully funded," she confirmed, grinning. "Even got a few local sponsors to match what we raised last quarter. These kids gon' have a real chance, brother. You did that."

"Show?"

"Sold out. The fairgrounds will be packed today." Spirit's satisfaction was evident.

Betsy nodded; pride written all over her face. "This what we prayed for."

Giovanni didn't say much to that. He exhaled and leaned back into the booth, letting it settle over him.

It was easy to forget sometimes why he started all this, the car shop, the shows, the community stuff.

It was easy to get caught up in the shine and the scale of it all.

Especially when you didn't have much growing up.

He was hellbent on leaving this place better than he found it.

"Don't forget to stop by the raffle table today," Spirit added, swiping her screen toward him. "You need to be visible. Smile for the social media pictures. Shake hands. Kiss babies."

"I ain't a politician."

"No," Betsy said, lifting her coffee. "But you're a good man. And that matters more. And maybe you'll find someone while you kiss babies and smile for the camera."

Giovanni dipped his head, taking a long sip of his own. She was always sliding babies and women into the conversation. And he wished he could make her day, but he had trust issues and too much to lose.

"Not today with that woman talk. She out there somewhere."

Today was show day. Everything else could wait.

The fairgrounds would be buzzing soon. People would be pulling up, old schools polished and tires shining, ready to show out.

Kids would be climbing into their first hot rods.

Grown men would be pretending they weren't fanned out over custom rebuilds that reminded them of their dads and grandparents.

And he'd try to bask in it all. Try to have a good time, smile enough, thank the right people, impress the right people.

“Everything is in place. The network will also be there to film the drive through backpack giveaway. So don’t ruin that by going off script or going missing.”

His phone vibrated against the table before he could respond to his sister. Spirit forgot she was the younger sibling. He didn’t need her bossing him around.

It was his cousin Emon. He answered on the second ring. “Yo.”

“Cuzzo.” Emon’s voice dragged, worn and tired. “We ain’t gon’ make it out today. EJ woke up with a fever, and Blake’s not trying to risk it.”

“All good,” Giovanni said, even though a small pang hit his chest. “Tell Blake I hope he feels better soon.”

“I will. And G?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m proud of you, man. This thing you’re building is dope. And it’s needed. Don’t forget to enjoy it.”

They hung up, and Giovanni stared at the phone for a long second before sliding it back on the table.

Spirit had gone quiet, busy texting on her iPad. Betsy was sipping the last of her coffee, humming a gospel song under her breath like she always did when her spirit was full.

Giovanni leaned back, letting the simplicity of his life settle over him.

It was a good life. But some days, even good didn't feel like enough for him.

Not when you were the one everyone leaned on but had nowhere soft to fall for yourself.

And it was his own fault. He had plenty of women to choose from, but after what his ex-girlfriend Sienna did to him, he'd shut his heart off and down. End of story.

It was recently that he started thinking differently about it and his choices to remain single. A certain someone had his attention, his interest piqued, but he wasn't sure how to approach her. He didn't want to hurt her or ruin a gift he'd been waiting for. But he also didn't want to be hurt.

He smiled thinking about her but kept it pushing. He had a show to run. A community to pour into. A name to keep solid. Love would come when it was supposed to.

At least that's what he told himself.

He dropped a few bills on the table, kissed his momma on the cheek, tapped Spirit's shoulder, and headed for the door.

Giovanni headed home fast to change into his fit for the day. He'd kept it light; it would be a busy day. He headed back out quickly and floated to the fairgrounds. He smiled as he pulled up and saw his community mixing and mingling.

The sun showed no mercy today. It poured down in waves, sticky and relentless, making every chrome surface at the fairgrounds burn hot to the touch.

Giovanni didn't mind the heat, though. Not when he was surrounded by the rumble of old school engines, the smell of fried and grilled everything, and the sound of his name being shouted every few steps.

"G! This you?" a man hollered, pointing to a pristine '88 Regal with blue candy paint

and peanut butter guts.

“Nah, that’s Keon’s. But I supervised the framework. She clean, though,” Giovanni said, slapping palms and pulling the man in for a quick dap.

Everywhere he looked, someone had a camera phone out, catching the bounce of the lowriders, the line dancing circle near the food trucks, the pure joy of Black folks loving each other out loud.

Kids ran wild with snow cones dripping down their arms. Old heads arguing over who would win the Superbowl this year.

The DJ was spinning classics, talking his shit between songs.

This was his element. His people. It was the vibe he lived for.

Spirit kept him on schedule, tugging at his elbow and pointing toward the raffle table like a damn campaign manager. “You still ain’t kissed the babies, Gio,” she teased. “You’re one grilled wing away from a mayoral run. I’m free if you decide to do that. Mayor Dowlen has a nice ring to it.”

He let out a deep laugh this time. “I ain’t kissing nobody’s baby. And they wouldn’t know what to do with me as the mayor. I’d turn this whole city upside down.”

“You’re so full of yourself. But one last thing before you have to go. Smile”

Doing as he was told he posted up at the table, took pictures, handed out raffle prizes, hugged women who knew his momma too well to be flirting with him, and posed with little boys and girls who looked up to him and loved his work.

Everything he did was for them, the generation coming behind him.

Too many were growing up without fathers and mentors.

And with that, they lost the trades: fixing cars, cutting grass, building, using their hands.

Giovanni wanted to bring all that back. That's why he built the shop.

Not for the money, for the clout, or the horsepower. He'd built the shop, for the impact.

A grandmother came up to him with a folded envelope. "This for the scholarship fund. My grandson can't go this year, but maybe another baby will."

Giovanni took it with both hands, nodding his thanks. "He gon' get his time. Promise you that. And you know you can always send him to the shop on Wednesdays."

On Wednesdays Giovanni ran a youth program at the shop. He taught kids how to change tires, check oil, basic maintenance. Fed them dinner, helped with homework. Whatever it took.

"You're a good man. Never change." Mrs. Carpenter thanked him, and he hugged her before she walked off.

For a moment, the noise faded, and Giovanni stepped back from the crowd, wiping sweat from his brow with a folded paper towel to take it all in again. His eyes scanned the sea of bodies, polished hoods, and vendors lined up. The vibe was alive.

He should have felt full.

But he didn't.

Everybody around him had somebody. A woman wiping barbecue sauce off her man's beard. Teenagers leaning into each other over funnel cake. Even Spirit, posted up near the detailing tent, smiling too long at some dude.

But it wasn't that easy for him. He was still moving, building, and pouring into the world, hoping someone might see him and want to do the same. It was simp shit, but he wanted to be chosen. He wanted to know what it felt like for someone to say, 'let me hold that' .

His phone buzzed in his pocket. The name that flashed across his screen had his pressure going up, hand shaking, neck tightening. What the fuck did Sienna want? She'd had two years to reach out. Now she wanted to talk about what he didn't know. They had nothing to discuss.

"Fuck that. No time for ghosts," he muttered. Kids were waiting for backpacks with school supplies. That was what mattered.

Giovanni pushed off the post he'd been leaning against and rolled his shoulders back and stalked toward his Monte Carlo.

His eyes swept the growing crowd, half sizing up the success of the day, half checking for trouble.

This moment right here, before the parade lap, always got his blood jumping.

It was the part where all the cars cruised through the fairgrounds at walking speed, handing out school supplies.

He made sure every kid saw what was possible when you built something with your own hands instead of taking what someone else made.

Engines growled to life in the distance, a mechanical thunder that vibrated through the soles of his Jordans.

Speakers shifted from trap to something smoother.

Old school cuts floated through the air, the kind that reminded him of where he came from before showing him where he could go.

Vendors scrambled to fix tablecloths and banners, already bracing for what was coming.

The air was heavy with heat, anticipation, and gasoline.

That was the holy trinity of a proper show.

Giovanni rolled his neck until he heard the familiar pop.

It had been too long since he'd had a day like this.

Sun on his back. Respect in the air. His name carried weight without him needing to open his mouth.

He planned to soak it up the only way a man like him knew how. By showing up and showing out.

Every car he rolled out was a piece of his vision made real.

Every build was precise. Every detail meant something.

When Giovanni Dowlen pulled up, people paid attention.

Not because he could flex, but because every head that turned and every hand that reached out meant more money flowing back into his community.

He slid into his baby, a cherry red Monte Carlo.

The leather creaked under him, recognizing its owner.

One hand gripped the custom gold chain wheel while the other adjusted the mirror.

He leaned back, let out a slow breath. Something was coming.

He couldn't name it, but he could feel it in his chest. It felt like peace and opportunity, soft and sweet at the same time.

The Monte came alive with a roar, then dropped into a dangerous purr.

Giovanni leaned back and put the car in drive, rolling slowly through the fairgrounds.

It was his final lap. The crowd parted as he cruised by, but something in his peripheral vision made him brake gently.

His foot eased on the brake. His posture shifted.

Then came the grin—the kind a man wears when the whole night just got better.

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After listening to both her parents tell her to live a little, something had shifted inside Paige. She'd spent the drive home with her windows down, letting the wind whip through her hair, thinking about her daddy's words.

'Go let some young fool look at you like the miracle you are.'

Paige stood naked in her bedroom, staring at her reflection.

Kamaiyah bumped through her speakers, the beat rolling thick through the air as she lit an incense, then the end of a leftover blunt.

The smoke laced itself into the air, her hips already moving to the rhythm.

The car shows tickets her mother had gifted her sat on her dresser.

It was time to be somebody other than everybody's rock, for one night.

"Alright, bitch." She spoke to her reflection, voice full of quiet conviction. Trouble was in the air and on her mind. She had one night. Paige laughed at herself for treating this like a fairytale. When the clock struck twelve, she'd go back to exhausted Paige. "Let's see if you still got it."

At the vanity, she flipped on her mirror lights and got to work.

She pulled her hair into a tight, high ponytail, curling pieces and giving the ends a '90s flip.

Her bangs framed her face; edges laid with a smooth hand.

She was giving soft, hot girl chaos only a real one could pull off.

She misted her crown with spray and leaned back to look at herself.

Still pressure.

Kamaiyah kept rapping encouraging her and boosting her confidence as she sashayed around the room.

“I got a nigga goin’ down like I paid him for it,

and I shine so hard that you can’t ignore it...”

Paige sang along, ass rolling lazy, body loose as she moved through the room.

Anytime she’d catch her reflection she’d stop and smile. Paige was gorgeous with cinnamon toasted brown skin, large doe eyes, and pouty lips to match.

On the bed, she had faded cutoff shorts, frayed enough to show a little ass but not too much. She stepped into them slowly, dragging denim over thighs that had grown too used to staying closed. The shorts clung to her curves, brushing the tattoos on her thighs.

Next, a tiny white halter top stretched across her chest and tied behind her neck. The open back left no room for misunderstandings. The cropped shirt left her belly bare only showing the gold belly chains that adorned her midsection.

She layered gold bangles onto her wrists, slipped on her rings, toe rings flashing against fresh white sandals, a slim gold anklet glinting low. She slicked on lip gloss

in two slow, perfect passes. With a click, she slid in her bottom row of open-faced golds. She admired herself in the mirror.

“A bitch still got it.” And she wasn’t lying.

She had gotten herself together for her own satisfaction.

She wasn't looking for validation from anyone.

But she was sure to catch somebodies eye today.

She was slowly emerging, hoping the night would bring nothing but good vibes, laughter, and who knew what else.

There would be no second-guessing. No turning back.

Wherever the night took her, is where she’d land.

She wouldn’t complain, grumble, she’d go with the flow.

The sun kissed her shoulders when she stepped outside, causing the body oil to gleam like crushed gold dust. Pedro, her neighbor, caught a glimpse and snapped his fingers so hard it echoed down the block.

“I know that ain’t who I think it is!” he hollered.

Paige laughed, one hand on her hip and the other playfully pointed at him.

“Pedro don’t play. You know how I come when I come with it.”

“I love this Adina Howard vibe! Girl, I might sneak through your window tuhnight.”

She cocked her head. “So, you like cat now?”

They both burst out laughing, loud and carefree.

“Bring us back a treat, friend!” Pedro called after her. “Light skinned, faded, muscle-bound, and tatted. You got options tonight, make me proud!”

“I ain’t bringin’ back nothing but leftovers for me!” she hollered over her shoulder. “And he better be trickin’, too.”

“Rule #1!” Pedro shouted, blowing kisses as she slid into her car. Paige opened her sunroof, turned the music up and slipped on her shades before taking off.

The ride to the fairgrounds took a little over thirty minutes. The crowd was already thick when she pulled up, but Paige wasn’t worried about being solo. She never needed a crowd. A lot of her life had been the same, she kept a small group of loved ones. And she also kept a .380 in her purse.

The minute Paige stepped onto the fairgrounds; her mood shifted.

She inhaled the grilled meat and body heat.

She felt the old-school bass rolling from somewhere deep in the crowd.

Kids laughed as their parents chased after them.

Trap music spilled from custom trunks, giving the whole lot a heartbeat.

She smirked. Already glad she came and didn’t let the weekend pass her by.

Paige moved through the crowd with deliberate steps, unbothered and unbent, her

skin glowing under the sun while gold bangles sang every time her arm brushed her hip. She wasn't the flashiest, but heads still turned, anyway. Energy like hers didn't go unnoticed.

Eyes trailed her, slow turns, quiet jabs, murmurs passed between homeboys, and whispers behind painted nails. She passed clusters of girls perched on hoods, men two-stepping beside their rides, old heads laughing over spades. This was it. This was the culture, loud, alive, and laced with joy.

She made it to the vendor area, ready to look at the custom cars, when a slow rumble grew at her side, a deeper bass that wasn't coming from any of the speakers scattered through the lot.

She didn't turn to look at first. Instead, she slowed her steps and let the sound catch up to her. Someone wanted her attention. The engine purred as it accelerated, then purred again beside her, low enough that she could feel it rumbling in her ribcage, vibrating against the pulse in her wrist.

Curiosity finally got the best of her. Paige turned her head just enough to catch sight of the car, a red Monte Carlo with gold specks in the paint that sparkled under the sun. The tires gleamed with fresh spray; she could smell it.

She knew that feeling, those eyes on her, that presence.

She'd felt it before. It was Emon's cousin, Giovanni with his fine ass.

Paige had spotted him in a crowd one too many times but understood she was in no position to entertain a man.

But she had certainly looked and enjoyed her view a time or two.

Giovanni was posted slouched in the driver's seat, dark shades covered his eyes, plain watch glinting against tatted skin. He had one hand on the wheel, while the other tweaked the volume enough for Big K.R.I.T.'s "Temptation" to creep through the speakers.

And we ain't trippin' on the summer 'cause the stars out.

Chrome wheels, candy paint, bring the broads out.

The beat hit. Her hips moved on reflex. Of course, that's the song he chose.

His black V-neck T-shirt stretched across thick arms and a chest that looked like it bench-pressed problems for fun. He didn't speak. Didn't wave. Didn't rush. Just tapped the brake and let the car roll to a stop right in front of her like she was the destination.

She watched him step out and steal the air from the area.

His movements were clean and slow. Telling the crowd, he had time today.

A few folks behind him grumbled at the hold-up.

He didn't even blink. This was his show.

This was his shit. And when he turned back to look at the cars lined up behind him, everyone knew to proceed accordingly.

The crowd shifted and parted slightly; it knew this moment needed space. The universe itself understood it was about to bear witness.

He walked toward her, seizing her attention and possibly everyone else's with his big

slanted light brown eyes. A diamond stud caught the sun in his ear. Clean gold chains around his neck. Black onyx ring on his pinky. He looked like money.

Paige leaned back on her heels, removing the sunglasses adorning her eyes. She wanted to see the man with no filter. He was gorgeous, with light brown skin, smooth but marked with tattoos. And eyes that screamed summer lovin'. She could get lost looking into his eyes.

She didn't flinch when he got close. She didn't flutter, soften, or sidestep the gravity between them.

Her daddy's words replayed between her ears, 'Go let some young fool look at you like the miracle you are.' If anything, she leaned into it, welcomed it.

Because that's what his look was giving.

Christmas had come early, and he was glad about it.

Paige hadn't had someone try and see through her soul in years.

Her smirk was one of confidence and ego.

Giovanni's eyes swept over her slowly, taking in the brown of her thighs glittering in the sunlight, the curve of her waist hugged by delicate chains, those curls framing a face that wasn't checking for what wasn't checking for her.

Her sunglasses tucked between full, glossed lips made him pause.

He'd finally understood what Emon had warned him about.

When he stopped in front of her, a slow smile took over his face.

He'd seen her before, but not like this.

Not looking like his fuckin queen-to-be.

Her brown skin reminded him of cinnamon, and that high ponytail gave her an energy that nobody around here had.

No disrespect, but nobody was fucking with Paige Bishop.

This beauty had style and was exactly who she thought she was, a ten on her worst day and an answer to a complex math problem at her best. Her face was softer today, softer than he'd seen before.

Her intentions were hard to ignore. She was tryna catch herself something.

A man? A trick? Some back shots? He couldn't say for sure. Shit, he could be all that in one.

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Her glistening thighs made him want to pull her closer. His palms itched to grip her waist and look into those big, bright eyes. When his gaze traveled to her mouth, those lips resting above a bottom row of gold teeth, he knew exactly who he was fucking with.

The people. The noise. The air. All of it was gone, his sole focus was on her and whatever she planned to get into tonight.

“Damn,” he said, voice deep enough to settle into her marrow. The loud clap and rubbing of his hands like he was Birdman made her giggle and kiss her teeth. “Three times the charm, huh?”

Paige arched an eyebrow, cool as the ice in her veins. “You keeping count? That’s cute.”

“Gotta recognize a blessing when it spins the block.” Voice thick with truth. “God, don’t do reruns, I’m not messing this up.”

She smirked.

“Convenient.” The way he looked at her made it hard to play it cool, but she wasn’t about to let him have it that easily. Not yet. She wasn’t new to men like him, fine as hell, money, with a panty-dropping smile. The type of man you had fun with, but you didn’t plan a family.

However, she loved his stature. Giovanni was built like a security guard—thick, solid, with arms made for both protection and problems. The kind of man who’d be a

perfect comforter in the winter and a breath of fresh air in the summer.

Air escaped her in a rush as she tried to calm the butterflies in her stomach.

“Big hands,” she murmured, loud enough for the wind to catch. “Just my type.”

“Nah,” Giovanni said, tipping his shades down to let her see the full weight of his eyes. “Perfect timing. What’s good? I don’t ever see you outside.”

“I decided to switch it up. So, I’m trying to enjoy my day off and look good doing it.”

He dipped his head closer, and the manly scent of Black Ice, his cologne slid over her in a slow, delicious wave. She exhaled again, bracing herself as her breathing quickened with awareness.

“No doubt you doing that, gorgeous. Where your man at?”

“I’m single like a dollar in a stripper’s thong and not looking. Next question.”

“Yeah, aight. I hear you.” He smirked without missing a beat.

He stepped back, eyes never leaving hers, and nodded toward the passenger side of the car. “Get in,” he said, the words clearly a command. “You with me today.”

“You don’t even know me.”

He laughed. It was low and smooth; he didn’t need to know her. They could do that after she slid in. He took his shades off completely, wanting her to see he wasn’t fucking around or accepting no as an answer. He stood up tall, car door half-open behind him.

“Paige.” He called out, savoring her name on his tongue like it was fine wine. “Ride wit a nigga today.”

She searched his eyes, hesitating for just a beat, then saw nothing but a real nigga looking back at her. He'd stopped traffic for her. And he wasn't going to ask again. She'd be a fool not to let him entertain her if only for a day. This was what the day was about. Letting her inhibitions go.

“Fine, but I hope you got yours on you because I keep mine on me,” she said patting the crossbody against her chest.

Giovanni smiled, yeah, she was going to be a good time.

“I mean you no harm Thug Misses.” Hands raised in surrender with a small laugh.

“Okay,” she grinned again before she slid in and over to the passenger seat, and Giovanni climbed in behind her.

For a minute, he stared at her. He couldn't stop drinking her in.

She looked good against his leather seats.

She settled in completely unfazed by his staring.

He watched her put her seatbelt on, flip the mirror down to check her lip gloss.

She was already claiming space he didn't know he'd left open.

He didn't know what this was going to turn into, but she'd changed his whole night by sliding in.

There was no hesitation. No coy games. Just her sliding in, trusting him to take the wheel. That did something to him.

He held back another smile and put the car in drive. Whatever was left to handle for the event, his sister could take care of it.

Tonight, he had other priorities. As they pulled away, Giovanni's mind drifted to the first time he'd really noticed her. That night at Blake's, when everything hit the fan.

Blake was on one, accusing Emon, tension thick enough to slice.

Folks were shifting uncomfortably, not sure where to look.

Except Giovanni. He wasn't looking at Blake.

Didn't give a fuck about what she had going on.

He was watching Paige. Off to the side, studying her move around the kitchen.

His watching wasn't creepy, at least not to him.

It was intentional, he wanted her to feel it.

Wanted her to remember the weight of his eyes on her so she'd know it when she felt it again.

And she did.

Paige smirked at his relentless staring and looked away.

The anticipation was swirling in the car.

She couldn't pretend she didn't feel that same pull sitting right beside him because she did.

The engine purred beneath them as they pulled away from the fairgrounds, bass thumping low through custom speakers.

Her fingers tapped her thigh, rhythm synced to the buzz between them. It was electric, dangerous even, the kind of chemistry that couldn't be put into words. Her mind was racing. What were they going to do? Why did she trust him? He was a stranger, a fine ass stranger but a stranger, nonetheless.

But there was something about Giovanni, something familiar in his silence, something sure in the way he handled his car, his business, himself, that made caution feel unnecessary. He radiated the kind of confidence that didn't need to be proven, merely witnessed.

She said a silent prayer asking God to keep her covered as she enjoyed the rest of her night.

Then she relaxed into the seat, rolled her window down further, and let the warm summer air whip through her ponytail.

Whatever Giovanni had planned, she was ready for it.

For once, she wasn't calculating the cost of joy or measuring the weight of her own desires against everyone else's needs.

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The city rolled beneath them, smooth as butter on fresh cornbread.

Giovanni gripped the wheel with that easy, dominant calm.

One hand on the wheel, the other resting out the window, claiming the road and everything under the sun.

Paige settled into the seat, an unfiltered smile riding the wind.

For the first time in months, she wasn't bracing, she was breathing.

Her ponytail had given up. Belly chains jingled, thighs stuck to leather.

She felt good. Comfortable. Held without being touched.

Giovanni was smooth, no doubt. But silence could be a strategy or a sanctuary. Either way, she wasn't rushing to decode him. All she had for trade was the premium package of pussy between her thighs. A commodity she hadn't decided to put on the market yet.

The only sound came from the stereo until Giovanni glanced over and asked, "You always this quiet?"

Paige turned to face him. "Not usually." A small smirk played on her lips. "But I don't feel like I need to fill the air with bullshit, you know?"

Giovanni nodded, appreciation flickering in his eyes. "Most people can't handle

silence.”

“Most people ain’t me,” she replied, a small smirk playing at her lips.

“Figured that out already.”

When he reached to adjust the volume, his fingers found hers on the console. Not entirely an accident—he was reading her energy, gauging her interest. A whisper of contact, but enough to send a fuse up her arm and make her shift in her seat.

“Emon warn you about me?” Paige asked, keeping her voice light, curious.

Giovanni let out a low, rough chuckle, still not looking at her.

“He did.” Giovanni paused. “But not the way you think. Said you ain’t for the bullshit. Said you the type that makes a man either boss up or bow out.”

Paige arched a brow. “Smart man. Hopefully, you listen to him.”

“I don’t need anybody to tell me what I’m looking at. I know a one-of-one when I see it.”

The words made her ears perk up and ring.

Paige turned her head, pretending to study the passing scenery, as if the heat crawling up her neck came from the sun and not his mouth.

But the truth was, she’d felt this brewing since the first time they’d locked eyes at Blake and Emon’s.

Giovanni was Emon’s first cousin. Blake was hers.

That made the tension between them feel even more undeniable.

Their circles had been overlapping for months, awkward hellos, brief nods, shared glances across rooms. They'd been orbiting each other like planets pulled by gravity, never quite colliding until now.

"You think you know me off a few looks?"

"Not at all," Giovanni replied. "But I know energy when it calls mine back. And your energy been ringing my line for a minute."

Paige went still. His words stripped her bare, sweet, steady, and full of things she wasn't sure she deserved. She cleared her throat, trying to reset.

"I'm not lookin' for what you're lookin' for," she said, tossing it out like she could read his mind.

Giovanni's smile deepened, full of something wicked and patient.

"And what exactly do you think I'm looking for, Ms. Bishop?"

She gave a shrug, nonchalant. "Whatever you think you see... it ain't up for grabs. If it ain't dick and fun I don't need it."

Giovanni didn't argue. He wasn't going to give it any more thought or conversation on the subject because they'd see. "You hungry?"

Paige shot a side eye his way. The change of subject threw her off-balance. She was waiting for pressure. None came. She swallowed her thoughts and decided to play the game, however, he was playing it.

“A little.” She tried to sound breezy, even though her stomach had been hollering since they left the fairgrounds. She’d picked at a smoked turkey leg, but it didn’t hit like she thought it would.

Giovanni flicked the turn signal, the low click mimicking her beating heart.

Don Toliver’s Glock bumped low between them.

He’d turned down into the old part of town where the concrete was cracked from years of neglect.

No fancy spots tonight, he’d chosen a Coupeville classic.

The dingy building flashed FISH - WINGS - FRIES in red neon lights as he helped her from the car.

She noticed how the men posted up outside nodded as Giovanni stepped out, their recognition immediate.

Inside smelled like heaven wrapped in grease-stained paper, the air thick with perfectly seasoned fried food and decades of history. She was with a hood nigga through and through.

Paige leaned against the counter, pretending to read the menu while feeling Giovanni’s presence heat the space behind her.

He stepped in close, his chest brushing her bare back, when he pointed at the board.

The graze was nothing, but his breath on her ear caused a little ripple down her spine and the hair on her arm to stand.

“Six-piece hot honey, extra crispy,” he said breath teasing her ear. “That sound like you?”

Her laugh cracked out before she could stop it, full, warm, and genuine. She turned around and found herself caught between his arms. His eyes were beautiful, a light brown that made the dark tattoos on the side of his face fade into the background.

“You a psychic now?” she teased, but she was a little shocked.

“I don’t know,” Giovanni murmured, smirking. “You kinda got heat and honey all in your face.”

The older woman behind the counter caught the exchange, popping her gum and shaking her head.

“Baby, whatever y’all got going on here is working. Keep this one, G,” she called out, grabbing a to-go box.

Giovanni smiled, showing his perfect teeth.

His cologne was planting seeds in her brain.

They’d be the reason this grew into something more.

He smelled so damn good and looked even better.

His full lips were practically begging her to pull his face down to hers.

She was losing her mind a little, and they hadn’t even left the chicken spot yet.

His hand found the small of Paige’s back, thumb tracing slow circles across her

exposed skin as he locked eyes with her and replied, loud enough for the woman to hear, “Trying to.” His head tilted slightly as he continued, “She says she ain’t what I’m looking for.”

“Snitch,” Paige muttered under her breath, but her voice came out softer than she meant.

She didn’t move away.

Instead, she allowed the contact, soaking in the heaviness of his hand, the silent reassurance behind it.

She let herself drift, for a second, into the idea of this.

Wanting it. Letting it unfold without checking for strings.

But it didn’t last long as reality smacked her upside the head, reminding her that this was one night.

Life was heavy enough without overthinking a man’s hand on her back.

She wasn’t looking to make space for anyone new, not long term at least.

Tonight, she just wanted to remember what it felt like to be out after the sun went down. But everything about Giovanni was whispering that he would make her space ten times better than it was. She was conflicted, and she didn’t like that.

“Why don’t we eat here?” Giovanni nodded toward a small seating area in the back corner of the restaurant. “I like my shit fresh. And I’m tryna figure out if you really ain’t what I’m looking for.”

Paige had just picked up her phone, skimming for any missed alerts. It wasn't blowing up, but that wasn't the point. It gave her a moment to breathe. To dodge the weight in his words. She raised an eyebrow at him, lips twitching. "Sure. That's cool."

"You plan on checking that thing all night?"

"No," she said, slipping it away. "It's on DND, nosy."

"Cool." A smirk formed as they settled into a worn booth tucked away from the counter.

The vinyl seats had seen better days, but the table was clean, wiped down with lemon-scented cleaner.

Ms. Leah herself brought over their plates, golden catfish, wings glistening with sauce, extra hush puppies piled high on a separate plate.

"I threw in something sweet for y'all too," she added with a wink, sliding a small container of peach cobbler between them.

"Appreciate you," Giovanni said, genuine warmth in his voice.

When Ms. Leah walked away, Paige bit into a Hush Puppy and her eyes fluttered at how good it was, crisp outside, soft inside, with the right amount of onion.

She wiped her fingers on a napkin. "So, you must come here a lot."

"Since I was knee-high," Giovanni replied, flashing a grin. "Ms. Leah used to slip me extra Hush Puppies when my pops wasn't looking."

“She still is,” Paige noted, nodding toward the overflowing plate.

“Some things don’t change,” he said, dipping a piece of fish in hot sauce. “What about you? Where’d you grow up?”

“Born and raised in South Coupeville. Never left except for college, and even then, I was only an hour away.”

“So, you’re real Coupeville too,” Giovanni said, eyes still on her. “I dipped out for a bit, tried the Midwest. That cold and wind? Nah. I’m a tropical nigga.” He shrugged like it explained everything.

“Is that the only thing that brought you back? No woman? Babies?”

“Nice try, but no, it was family. Roots always pull you back.”

Paige nodded, her smile dimming into something thoughtful. “Families like gravity sometimes.”

“For better or worse.” They shared a look that cut a little deeper than casual should have allowed.

Paige broke the moment, reaching for her drink. “What took you to the Midwest?”

“A woman,” he admitted without hesitation. “And opportunity. Thought I’d build something bigger there.”

“And?”

“Built something, but it was shaky foundation. Didn’t take long to crumble.”

He wiped his mouth slowly. If they agreed to see each other again, he'd tell her more. But just as guarded as Paige could be he could too. "What about you? What keeps you in the city?"

"My job and family," she answered.

"Dig that. That bank job must be treating you right?"

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“Yeah, and I’m good at it. About to run things while my boss is on maternity leave.”

“They lucky to have you.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly at the realization that she hadn’t told him what she did for a living. “You’ve been asking about me?”

Giovanni didn’t deny it. “I told you; you been calling out to me. I didn’t want to come at you wrong. I can tell in the way you carry yourself you know your worth and you on your shit. You gotta come to that correct or not at all.”

A comfortable silence fell between them as they ate.

Paige watched him, the careful way he separated the bones from his fish, how he savored each bite instead of rushing.

He licked his curved thumb, and her thighs quivered under the table.

A man who knew how to appreciate things would always be her weakness.

“So, what’s the deal with your shop?” she asked finally, needing to get back to the conversation at hand. “Emon mentioned something about custom work. Blakes Bronco was fucking fire.”

Giovanni’s face lit up, and for the first time that night, his cool demeanor cracked to reveal genuine excitement.

“Aww look at your cheeks. You love it.”

“I do. Not gonna lie.” He grinned. “It started with me and a small garage ten years back. First it was fixing cars until I realized there was so much more to do. I could infuse my love of art and vehicles. Now we have the best custom shop in three states. We do more than trick out cars, we build art.” He pulled out his phone, swiped through a few pictures of gleaming vehicles.

Paige leaned in, genuinely impressed. “That’s big shit. Self-made?”

“Every inch,” he confirmed. “My pops taught me the repair side, but everything else...” He gestured to himself. “Trial and error.”

“Your daddy still around?”

The question brought a subtle shift in his expression. “Nah. Lost him six years ago. Cancer.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice softening. “That’s hard.”

“It’s life, baby. He got to see me start the place,” Giovanni replied. “Would’ve loved what it’s become, though.”

“My daddy’s sick,” she found herself saying before she could think better of it. She didn’t know why she shared that with him, but she felt like only he could understand. “Dialysis three times a week.”

Giovanni didn’t offer sympathy. Didn’t tiptoe around it either. He nodded, eyes holding hers like he saw something familiar.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice low unwavering. “I get it now.”

“Get what, Giovanni? You swear you can read me.”

“I can.”

He didn’t rush the words.

“Peace feels foreign. Stillness makes you itch. You’ve been holding everything together so long, you forgot what it feels like to be held, if you’ve ever known.”

His eyes dropped on her phone, then back up.

“You keep checking your phone not because you expect anything. Just habit. You said it was on Do Not Disturb... that was a lie. Let that be the last one.”

Her brow lifted, lips parting slightly. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I don’t need lies.”

He let it breathe, then continued, voice lower now. Not backing off—just reaching in deeper.

“I know what that kind of tired looks like. My mom cared for my pops when he was sick. It wasn’t sponge baths and soft music—it was chemo, decisions, watching the person you love slowly disappear. She stopped checking in on herself just trying to keep him breathing.”

He leaned in, elbows on the table.

“And you got that same look. Like rest feels like a setup. Like if you sit still too long, something bad might happen. But it’s not just about the night out. You needed stillness. You needed somebody who’d show up and not ask anything from you. Just

be there.”

He sat back slightly but didn’t break eye contact.

“I can be that. And not just for tonight.”

Paige blinked, her throat tight. She turned toward the window, letting the streetlights blur.

He didn’t push. Didn’t prod. Just watched her, silence didn’t scare him.

She inhaled slowly. Her reflex was to pull it all back in. To be fine. To be composed.

But something about him felt like a quiet room after a storm.

She wasn’t ready to enter, not yet—but she wanted to linger by the door.

But the fact that she even considered it? That shocked her. She smiled until his voice called her back to the moment.

“You must be close with him?” he asked, not pushing, more curious than anything.

She hesitated. “It’s complicated. But I’m all he’s got right now.”

Giovanni nodded again. “That’s all I needed to know.”

He made a quiet mental note to figure out how to take something off her plate, whether she wanted him to or not.

Ms. Leah appeared at their table, refilling their drinks. “Y’all look too serious for a Saturday night,” she chided. “Giovanni, are you boring this beautiful woman?”

He laughed, leaning to the side. “Ms. Leah, I’m trying my best to make this a good first date.” Paige smiled and tilted her hand back and forth, saying he was doing okay. He winked at her as Ms. Leah continued.

“Does she know I watched you grow up? Chile, he always had his eye on a pretty girl. Nothing’s changed I see,” she said to Paige with a wink and laugh before walking off.

Paige laughed, “She’s a trip.”

“Too many memories,” Giovanni said, watching her. “But she’s not wrong.”

Their eyes held for a second too long.

“You always this direct?” Paige asked, tilting her head.

“You always this guarded?”

That made her laugh. “Touché.”

They fell into a rhythm then, eating in easy silence. When Giovanni leaned back, arm stretched along the booth, his tone shifted again, personal now.

“You ever let anyone help you with the load?”

He hadn’t meant to ask it out loud or bring it back up but the thought of her doing it all alone was sitting wrong in his chest. Heavy. Now he was the one caught off guard.

She picked at her plate. “That’s not other people’s job. I can take care of myself. I have been for a long time.”

“That don’t mean you don’t need it. And it damn sure don’t mean nobody wants to.”

He leaned in a little, not aggressively, but with heaviness.

“I didn’t stop traffic today just ‘cause you fine as hell—though let’s be clear, you are.

” A small smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“I stopped because I saw a woman locked in. Focused. Holding back more than she’ll ever say out loud. ”

Paige held his gaze, lips twitching into a small smirk.

“Are you offering your services? Tryna be my knight in shining armor?”

Giovanni smiled. “I’m saying I see you. I’ve been you. And I won’t forget you sharing what you shared with me. I guess I’m saying I’d do it if you let me.”

The directness of his words made her dizzy. She loved a direct man because she was a direct woman. She didn’t need lines, thrills, or frills. She took a sip of her drink, considering him. This man who’d stopped traffic for her, who’d somehow seen past her carefully constructed walls.

“What made you say yes?” he asked, trying to get into her head some more.

Paige twisted the ring on her thumb and turned her head, meeting his gaze head-on. “I don’t remember it being a question, Giovanni. Or did I misread the vibe?”

He laughed at that from the chest. It rolled out of him slowly, like it had been marinating.

“I ain’t never heard nothin’ truer.” He nodded once, gaze fixed on her. “Been clockin’ you, Paige. Just waited for the lane to clear.”

His voice didn’t rise, but the intentions she was so unsure about earlier were becoming clear.

“I hear you.”

“Listen, you were either gon’ be with me, or I was gon’ be with you. And don’t let go over your head.”

Paige smirked, the old version of her, the cocky, outside, fine-ass Paige, sliding back into her bones like she’d never left.

“And let’s be real,” she added, tapping her nails against the table. “You don’t stop traffic for just anybody. Made a bitch feel special.”

“I wouldn’t,” he said simply. “Only for the baddest.”

Giovanni stood and extended his hand to help her up, “You tryna get out of here or you want more stories from Ms. Leah?”

“And then what?”

“You want to see my spot?” Giovanni asked, keys already in hand. “Got some people hanging out tonight. Good music. Good vibes. A little after party.”

Paige hesitated for a moment, but the night felt too full of possibility to end now.

“Lead the way.”

He paid the bill despite her protest, and they stepped outside into the evening heat.

Neither of them wanted the night to end.

Paige was all of a sudden feeling shy standing in front of him while he examined her all over again.

Giovanni opened the door for her and walked around to the driver's side.

Before he could reach for the handle, he saw her lean across the seat to unlock his door.

“Nah, no way,” he muttered under his breath, grinning.

Within thirty minutes, Giovanni pulled into the parking lot of his pride and joy, Customs by Giovanni.

Paige studied the place through the windshield, three buildings spread across what used to be an old warehouse complex, now transformed into something that screamed success.

The main building had the shop logo lit up against the brick, custom paint jobs gleaming under string lights that crisscrossed the yard.

But it wasn't the cars catching her attention. The place was alive, bodies moving between buildings, music spilling out onto the lot, laughter punctuating the night air. This was more than a shop, it was a whole damn community.

“You built all this?” Her eyes grew wide as she was unable to keep the admiration from her voice.

Giovanni watched her reaction, enjoying the surprise in her eyes.

He'd imagined this moment before, showing someone special what he'd built.

But he'd never actually brought anyone here who mattered.

Seeing that look of admiration on Paige meant everything.

His daddy had always told him to build something that would make a good woman look at him twice.

This place had finally made one look at him three times.

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“Renovated every inch,” he confirmed, resting one arm over the steering wheel. “Took these old warehouses and made them mine.”

Paige felt a dangerously warm feeling that had nothing to do with attraction and everything to do with respect.

She’d always been drawn to builders, people who created something from nothing, who saw possibility where others saw empty lots and pipe dreams. It was why she’d stuck with the bank, why she was climbing that ladder to be the loan manager.

She wasn’t pushing paper; she was helping people build their own dreams, brick by brick, dollar by dollar.

But there was a difference between helping others build and building your own empire.

Giovanni had done both.

“Impressive.” That was the understatement of the year. Her eyes traveled from the custom cars to the crowd. It felt like she had walked on the set of Fast music switched from trunk-rattling bass to something smoother as they approached the third building.

“I don’t know Paige, it seems like you may be what I’m looking for. Why you playing hard to get? I know it ain’t about that nigga in prison.”

Paige stiffened, her gold teeth flashing in a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Oh, so you’ve been in my business.”

“Oh, you thought I was fucking around? I’m just making sure I ain’t gotta shoot it out with a nigga about you.” His eyes held hers, unwavering. “I don’t mind it; I just need to be prepared.”

She studied him for a moment, weighing his words against his actions. He was blowing her mind. Men didn’t usually choose women like her, too busy, too guarded, too tied up by life.

“JT’s out of the picture. No shootouts required.”

Something subtle shifted in Giovanni’s expression, not quite relief, but satisfaction.

“Good,” he said simply. “But on the other hand, he’d better bring the Navy to get his bitch back fucking with me.”

“I know that’s right.” Paige laughed and snapped knowing damn well tomorrow she’d be back to business as usual.

A call from across the yard caught their attention.

“Giovanni! That Detroit client called again!” A woman with short-cropped hair and coveralls waved from the door of the office building.

“Tell him I’ll hit him back Monday, Trina!” he called back, then turned to Paige.

“Let me show you my lounge and office.”

He guided her toward the third building, hand firm at her lower back. Inside, the industrial shell gave way to leather couches, a pool table, a gleaming bar, and one full wall covered in photos. Cars, milestones, and memories all tracked Giovanni’s rise, moment by moment.

She let out a quiet “Damn,” taking in the space one detail at a time before placing her crossbody on the table. Giovanni did the same, placing his gun, phone, and wallet next to her stuff. She caught it. It was something about the weight of a gun hitting a hard surface that made her kitty purr.

“Grab whatever you want to drink,” he said, nodding toward a full-sized fridge in the corner. “Got everything from water to whiskey.”

Paige headed for the fridge, pulling out two waters. When she returned, she settled onto the leather couch beside him, closer than necessary but not quite touching. She handed him one of the waters.

“So, this is where you bring all your conquests?” She was teasing but also wanting to know in case she changed her mind.

Giovanni shook his head, taking a long drink. “Most people don’t make it past the front lot to be honest. I don’t play about my spaces or the people I let enter them.”

“So why me?”

He studied her, taking his time. “You’re different. You got layers. A different vibe. And why not you?”

“That your way of saying complicated?” She raised an eyebrow, licking the rim of her water bottle.

“That’s my way of saying you’re worth the investment.” His eyes were stuck on her mouth like he already knew the return would be crazy. “Life makes us all complicated. Changes our roles, our dreams, what we need. I’m here for all of that.”

“Why?” she blurted before she could catch it. He looked at her and sat back.

“Because I’m there too.”

“So smooth, saying all the right things. Could you be a dream?”

“Never,” Giovanni said, eyes still locked on her. “You don’t look like a woman who believes in dreams. And that’s good because I’m not here to sell you any.”

The silence wrapped around them, heavier now than before. Paige looked away first, her gaze drifting toward the wall of photos. She stood and headed to look closer. A soft out. A brief reprieve.

There was Giovanni as a teenager, grinning wide beside a line of old cars. Another photo showed him with an older man who shared his eyes, both of them grease-covered and proud.

“That’s my pops,” he said, stepping up beside her. His voice softened. His fingers brushed her bang from her face. The simple gesture felt more intimate than it should have. “He’s the reason we’re here.”

She swallowed thickly, her thumb brushing the inside of her opposite palm, grounding herself. Somewhere, deep in her chest, she felt a door creaking open. Slowly. Reluctantly. But open.

“I like your shop. It’s impressive,” she expressed finally, her voice evened out, despite the chaos rolling through her bones.

“I like you in it,” Giovanni said, eyes still on her.

They stood like that for a moment, the hum of music pulsing through the floorboards, outside voices drifting in like background static. Paige hated how damn comfortable she felt in his space. Hated that she didn’t want to walk away, no matter what her

better judgment screamed.

A part of her still felt the urge to bolt, to protect herself. But the part that craved presence, peace, conversation, and just a little bit of being held kept her feet right next to his.

“You want a real drink, Ms. Bishop?” he asked, flashing that grin, chin tilting toward the fridge. “Or you tryna be on your best behavior tonight?”

She smirked, her lips slick and unhurried, every inch of her saying try me.

“Vanni, if I was tryna behave.” She stepped closer. “I would’ve stayed my ass at home.”

The tension between them simmered hard. One spark, and it’d burn this whole city down like a house of matches. And the night had only begun.

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Two Hours Later

“What’s your sign?” Paige asked randomly.

Giovanni laughed.

“Oh, we on that now? Real nigga, that’s my sign.” He was a little tipsy and enjoying her company. They had a playful vibe, and he could dig it. She’d spent most of the night laughing and talking. And he let her.

“Answer the question,” she said, kissing her teeth and rolling her eyes.

“Leo.”

“Explains the boss vibes.”

He grinned. “What about you?”

“Gemini. Duality, baby. Two sides to everything and a flirt.”

“That so?” He leaned in a little. “Are you showing me both or the side that’s not looking for what I’m looking for?”

“You’re still on that, ain’t you?”

“Damn right, I’m tryna figure out how you think you can tell me what I’m looking for.”

“I’m woman enough to say I’ll probably eat those words later. But it won’t be tonight.”

The night flipped without warning because this thing she was doing with him was igniting something in him.

The mood thickened fast, the way heat rolls in before a storm.

The air inside the lounge was heavier now, syrupy with smoke, laughter, and the low, sticky hum of old R she was sprawled out, comfortable, body speaking its own language.

And Giovanni stayed close but cool, lounging in the cut with a slow sip of brown liquor, eyes glued to her.

He was already making space for her in his world.

He let her breathe, but he was clocking everything.

Every smirk. Every stretch. Every easy roll of her wrist when she talked.

Every flash of thigh when she adjusted her seat. That laugh?

Trouble. And charming as hell.

Paige had that rare pull. Funny. Fine. Miss Congeniality in a body that reminded him of his favorite car, curves in all the right places, built with care, made to be driven but never mishandled. She was the kind of woman a man like him would go too far for.

He knew better. He’d been there. Had his heart handed back to him in pieces by someone who mistook his devotion for desperation.

But it was already too late to act like he didn't see it. She could easily become his next masterpiece. He'd take care of her. Wax her down. Keep her gleaming. Never let her lose her shine. Yeah... Paige Bishop was more than pressure.

She was his white whale.

A diamond in the rough.

A rose through concrete.

Not for everybody.

Not for casual hands.

And definitely not for the weak.

Good thing he didn't have a weak bone in his body.

Paige caught him mid-glance, her lip curling up into a smirk. She knew he was watching; she couldn't miss his gaze, couldn't miss the heaviness of him, hanging on to every word she uttered.

"You always stare at women like that?" she asked, sucking on an ice cube, baiting the last nigga she wanted to bait. Giovanni didn't even blink, didn't fake any shame. He lifted his glass, took a sip without breaking eye contact, and let his smile creep out.

"Tell me what you want..."

The first few notes hit, and Paige nearly lost her mind.

"Oh shit, Vanni! That's my jam!" She threw her arms out like she was performing at

the Apollo.

“Look at you,” he said, amused. “Ain’t even ashamed with yo non singing ass.”

Paige didn’t even hear him. She was too far gone, singing along loud and proud, off-key but so damn full of heart.

“Is it moneyyyy, is it cars, is it things!”

She belted it out, hips swinging side to side in a sloppy two-step.

She spun around, pointing at Giovanni like she was accusing him of something. “Tell me what you want!”

He shook his head, laughing.

“Shorty, you wild.”

The look on his face told the story. He was ready to risk it all over a five-foot-something bombshell singing old school Dru Hill in his shop at damn near midnight.

“Vanni, I wanna slow dance.” She slurred a little, the words rolling off her tongue. “Let’s slow dance.”

She felt good. Not drunk enough to forget. Only drunk enough to remember exactly what she wanted and give herself permission to have it without apology.

Giovanni set his drink down with a soft clink against the table and stood. Paige watched him move with his broad shoulders back and smoldering eyes.

Little did she know Giovanni was willing to do whatever she wanted to ensure she

had an unforgettable night. He extended his hand, and she giggled, shocked that he was going along with her drunken request.

“Really?”

“Bring yo ass to me,” he commanded. Her mouth formed an O, at his command as she batted her eyelashes. She slipped her fingers into his and allowed Giovanni to pull her closer, his fingers closing around hers.

Paige did as he told her a little unsteady from the drinks and the heat pooling in her belly, but she didn’t falter. She stood toe-to-toe with him, close enough to smell him again. She inhaled the cedar and saffron and closed her eyes.

The song shifted to Forever Mine by The O’Jays.

Giovanni slid one hand around her waist, guiding her other to his shoulder.

Then he drew her in, closer than necessary, closer than she’d been held in a long, long time.

Paige didn’t resist. She went with it, melting into him releasing a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

She tried to hide by biting her lip, but he felt it. He felt the way she surrendered to him.

Giovanni’s hand flexed at her lower back, keeping her pressed to him, every breath syncing with the rise of his chest. He wasn’t planning on letting go anytime soon. He liked her in his arms.

He moved first, a slow, lazy rock from side to side, nothing technical; he wasn’t a

dancer. But he was a real nigga slow dancing with a woman he wanted to unravel, piece by piece, if she let him.

Paige moved with him, instinctively falling into his rhythm.

Her bare thighs skimmed the rough denim of his cargo shorts with every step.

Her pulse pounded, louder than the bass line, beating wild inside her chest. Space didn't exist anymore.

It was a concept, a mere construct. If this was a mistake, it was the kind she didn't want to stop making.

“You smell like the sweetest taboo,” he murmured at her ear, voice rough enough to curl her toes. His hand gripped her waist, catching her as her knees started to give in a little.

Paige lifted her chin, eyes locking with his in the dim light. The music kept playing, but they weren't dancing anymore, they were standing in the middle of the room, suspended by gravity.

Then Giovanni's hand moved. They left her waist and traced her side slowly.

Rough fingertips dragging over her ribs and the curve of her collarbone, making her hiss.

He cupped her face, brushing the base of her neck, eyes meeting hers.

His teeth ground together, throat working around a hard swallow.

His stare had shifted to a darker and deeper stare that both scared her and turned her

on.

When Paige stepped back, she gave him the full view, thick thighs, soft waist, the curve of her back perfect enough to make a grown man forget his own name, their eyes clashed into each other like a head collision. Within seconds the air between them combusted.

She could feel herself tipping, leaning, surrendering.

“What’s on your mind, P? You good?”

“I didn’t come here for this.” Her voice dropped as she shook her head.

He smiled; he could see straight through her. “I’m callin’ bullshit,” Giovanni said. “You came for somethin’. You gon’ leave with somethin’. If you want it.”

He didn’t let go. His grip tightened, grounding her in the kind of presence that left no room for doubt. No tremors, no nerves. Giovanni was clear on his mission.

“Is that what you want?”

Paige nodded, slow but sure. Her hands moved first, reaching for him before her pride could protest.

She wanted him. She wanted this. Whatever he wanted, she would give.

“Then let me take care of you tonight,” Giovanni said lips near her ear. It was his vow to her, she was in good hands.

Before she could second-guess herself, he lifted her gently by the hips and sat her down on the pool table like she was a feather.

Paige leaned back on her hands, body arching slightly as she watched him. Her chest was heaving, lips parted, mind racing with every breath she took. Every second she waited for what would happen next.

Giovanni grabbed the Hennessy bottle from the table beside her, tipping it slowly.

Paige tilted her head back, mouth open, laughing as he poured a slow stream of the dark liquor past her lips. Some of it spilled, trailing a thin line down her chin and throat to the valley between her breasts.

Before she could wipe it away, Giovanni was there.

“Nah, I got it,” he muttered, hand firm on her waist, guiding her in with slight pressure. His thick tongue chased the drops, hunger, and reverence all tangled together in one excruciating drag.

Paige gasped, her hips rocking helplessly against the pool table. Giovanni didn’t rush. He savored her, tasting, breathing her in slowly.

Paige’s eyes fluttered shut. Her legs opened wider, a silent invitation.

Giovanni stood back before pulling her roughly by the neck to kiss her lips. The taste of the alcohol, a hint of the weed, danced on her tongue. His massive hands fit around her neck, and she almost caught her first orgasm.

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There was no learning curve between them, only chemistry, loud, full-bodied, and fluent. The deep kiss found a rhythm that matched the music flowing around them. His hands slid lower, unbuttoning her shorts, pulling her closer, creating anticipation that made thinking impossible.

Paige felt it building, that telltale tightening low in her belly, the trembling in her thighs. She wasn't even naked. But the way Giovanni kissed her, watched her, told her that tonight she was the only thing that mattered in the world. It had her tipping dangerously toward the edge.

Paige had survived everything life threw at her, the mistakes, the highs, the crushing lows, even finding her way back to a father she barely remembered. But him looking at her, reminding her she was worth the effort, worth his time. His presence. His space would be the thing that ruined her.

When his mouth found hers again, the kiss was neither gentle nor rushed.

It was consuming. He untied her halter top and allowed the fabric to drop, exposing her perfect breasts.

No time was wasted when his tongue circled her hardened nipples, teasing until she arched toward him.

Left, right, then both captured between his lips while he breathed her in like oxygen, branding her scent into his senses.

“Take em off.” The bass in his voice caused her pulse to kick up a notch.

She peeled off her top, but when she reached for her shorts, her hands stuttered, desire, nerves, and anticipation all hitting at once. “P, calm down, baby. We ain’t gotta rush.”

Giovanni slowed her hands with his own, he brought her knuckles to his lips. “Look at me,” he said, almost pleading.

Paige lifted her head, her eyes hazy, unfocused.

“We got time. I ain’t tryna rush somethin’ I might not get twice.”

She nodded, breath shallow, brain buzzing from more than the liquor.

Giovanni kissed her again, slower this time. Deep. Her thighs were trying to clench together. He lifted her by the waist while his other hand slid to the waistband of her shorts, peeling them down inch by inch, his knuckles grazing every curve and dip he uncovered.

He dropped the denim to the floor, leaving her in nothing but those glittering gold chains and her bare thighs parted across the pool table like a gift he couldn’t believe he’d been allowed to unwrap.

“Goddamn,” he muttered, his eyes heavy, roaming every inch of her.

Paige shifted, a low whimper escaping when the cool air caressed her now bare skin. Her hips lifted slightly, a silent plea she didn’t even realize she was making.

Giovanni knelt in front of her, dragging his rough palms up the backs of her thighs, savoring the way her muscles trembled under his touch.

“You so fucking pretty, and so is this pussy.” His voice was low and eyes on fire. He

kissed her thighs first, slow, tongue dragging along sensitive skin in teasing, dedicated strokes. He bit gently, then soothed the spot with soft licks, leaving her trembling.

Paige gripped the edge of the pool table, nails sinking into the felt.

Giovanni glanced up at her, before asking in a strained voice, “Why you ain’t got no panties on, Paige?”

She grinned, but before she could tell him she didn’t wear them, his lips latched onto her swollen bud.

His tongue lay heavy and flat on her, dragging upward with focused intent.

Paige cried out, hips jerking, but his hands held her firm, kept her open.

He ate like it was divine instruction, like somebody told him her pussy held the answers.

He was marking her, claiming her, carving his name into her body. She’d never forget.

He took his time, tongue drawing slow, wicked circles around her clit, dedicated, and so damn sure of himself.

“Shit,” she cursed as two fingers slid inside. She was ruining his pool table, and he didn’t give a damn. Giovanni devoured her like a menace, until her legs trembled so hard she thought she might come apart at the seams. “Fuck.”

He leaned back just enough to murmur, “You don’t even know. I could lose myself in you tonight. This pussy? Addictive.”

Paige couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Every inch of her was dialed into the obscene, devastating sounds he made between her thighs. The wet kisses. The low groans. The suction. Her release crept up hard and fast, curling tighter with every flick of his tongue.

"Vanni... fuck..." Her voice cracked as she rolled her hips toward his mouth.

He slid one hand up, pressing down on her lower belly, anchoring her, making sure she felt everything he gave and everything he took.

"That's it, baby," he whispered, tongue relentless. "Don't fight it... fall for me."

And she may have.

Paige shattered against his mouth, the orgasm ripping through her in a way she hadn't experienced in a long damn time.

Maybe ever. She sobbed out his name, hips jerking, thighs clenching around his head, but Giovanni didn't move, didn't stop, riding her through every tremor, every aftershock until she collapsed panting against the pool table.

He finally looked up with a glistening face, he licked her off his lips with a mischievous smile.

"Show me your favorite position."

A devilish grin grew on her face. She should've known he was a freak. But she was, too. He watched Paige slowly roll over and toot her ass up on all fours. Giving him a full view of her beautiful ass cheeks and glistening pussy. "I had a fuckin feeling."

Giovanni slapped her on her round ass and watched it jiggle before he caressed it.

“Do it again.”

He obliged giving her what she wanted. He smacked her other ass cheek, and she yelped before wiggling her ass in his face. He bit down on his lip and almost drew blood.

“You like that shit?” he asked caressing her ass cheek with one hand while the other slid up and down her pussy lips. She was writhing beneath his touch. She couldn’t form words, but he wanted an answer. “Answer me, Paige. That’s what you like?”

“Yes, yes I do.” A breathless answer escaped as he smacked her ass cheek again. She was fifty percent sure she needed a minute, but also sure she didn’t want him to stop. She was already naked, no need to deprive herself of the many orgasms she knew the night would bring.

He stepped back to remove his clothing and give her a minute.

She peeked over her shoulder, and her eyes grew wide as saucers, at the sight of his thick dick.

Her mouth watered and lip drew in between her teeth.

She went back and forth on returning the favor, but she knew sucking his dick with her eyes on his and swallowing his kids after was too much for the first night.

He’d be at her doorstep tomorrow and every day after.

“I’m not calling you tomorrow.” Her voice was shaky, already betraying her. “And I’m not falling in love with you either.”

Giovanni’s nostrils flared and face twisted. She didn’t know it yet, but she’d just

signed herself up for ride on the fuck around and find out express. Her words hadn't even settled before he had a handful of her ponytail, dragging her back with an arm at her waist. "Repeat that, I dare you."

Her feet stayed planted, even as every nerve ending fired off like warning shots.

Giovanni nodded, gripped her throat, and eased deeper—slow and unrelenting.

Her mouth fell open on a gasp. Thighs trembled.

He filled her, muted her, owned every inch of breath and body in one relentless rhythm.

"Say that shit again, P. I can't hear you," he barked, slowing to that deep, dragging pace that made her walls stretch and cling like she was trying to keep him. He leaned back just enough to watch the mess she was making on his dick—thick, glossy, proof she'd wrote a check she couldn't cash.

He groaned, jaw tight, but it wasn't enough. Not yet. If she wanted to act up, she could holler his name loud enough to shake the damn shop. Giovanni gripped Paige's throat tighter, not to hurt, but to make sure she felt him everywhere. To make her listen.

His other hand held her hip firm, anchoring her while he buried himself again, deeper, harder, slower.

The sound of skin meeting skin, wet, ruthless, undeniable, drowned out the bass still rumbling from the speakers.

"Say it," he growled, teeth clenched, eyes locked on the way she took him in.

Paige tried. She really did. But all that came out was high, broken whimpers. The words were gone, drowned somewhere in the tingle at the base of her spine and the way Giovanni kept pulling her back onto his dick ruining her for anybody else.

“I’m about to cum again,” she panted. He grinned and pulled out of her abruptly. He leaned forward, pressing his chest to her back, his hand resting on her heart. He controlled her breathing, her moans, her entire body.

“You said you wasn’t gon’ call me...” he taunted against the shell of her ear, dragging his lips over her skin, savoring her shivers. “That you weren’t gon’ fall in love with me.”

He snapped his hips harder, diving back in with so much force he almost bottomed out. That act alone pulled a desperate, broken moan from her lips that bounced off the concrete walls.

“But here you go,” he grumbled the words poured from his mouth as he pressed deeper, grinding, staying there, letting her feel every vein, every inch. “Creamin’ all over this dick. Telling me you’ll be back and soon.”

Paige clawed at the pool table, the edges digging into her palms, the weight of his body and the sheer stretch of him sending her mind skidding out of control. She hated that he was right. Hated how easy it was to lose herself under him.

She tried to pull away, tried to catch her breath, but Giovanni wasn’t letting her run.

He yanked her back by the waist, forcing her to take him even deeper.

“You started this, talking all that shit,” he bit out, low and filthy in her ear. “You gon’ finish it.”

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Paige could feel herself unraveling, the pressure building again, approaching quickly. Paige braced herself, the pressure closing in, sharp and intense. Every thrust drove her higher, until all she could do was cling to the edge, shaking, blinded by pleasure.

“Giovanni p...” she gasped, voice cracking, the tears slipping down her cheeks now from the sheer force of the orgasm bearing down on her.

“Give it to me Paige,” he demanded, hand slipping down between her thighs, his fingers finding her clit and rubbing in a tender circle. “I earned it.”

“Tell me I earned it,” he urged, making her arch her back more as he moved deep and deliberate.

“You earned it, you earned it,” she whimpered as she came apart so violently, she thought she might black out. Her entire body locked up, walls collapsing around his dick, squeezing him so tight he had to grit his teeth to keep from busting right then and there.

“Fuck, Paige,” he groaned, grinding through it, not giving her an ounce of space to recover, fucking her through her orgasm until she was shaking, begging without even realizing it.

Her chest rose and fell, skin dewy and flushed, glowing from the heat they’d created between them.

Giovanni wasn’t done, though. He flipped her over gently, cradling her head in his palm like she was precious cargo.

He slid in softly as he kissed her forehead, her nose, her mouth, slow, lingering kisses too tender for what they'd done.

"You ain't gotta call me," he whispered, so close their mouths nearly touched. "I'll call you."

Paige's eyes fluttered open, dazed, glossy, still trying to gather her bones back together. Giovanni smiled that unhinged smile again, gripping her neck and pulling her ear to his lips, "And you better fuckin answer too."

It was those words that sent her flying. Paige came again, and he was right behind her with his head tossed back in euphoria. When she finally opened her eyes, he was watching her with a smirk on his face. He was satisfied looking at his handiwork.

The music thumped softly in the background, but the world around them had stilled. Paige lay sprawled against the pool table, chest rising and falling in ragged pulls. Her thighs still trembled, her skin flushed and glistened.

Giovanni ran his tongue over his top lip, slid his boxer briefs back on before caressing the side of her cheek. "You good, P?" he asked in a scratchy voice that he'd earned from the work he put in.

She could barely nod, floating somewhere between heaven and the stars.

"I'm good. I need a minute."

He smirked then kissed the side of her face, then her nose, then her lips,

"The next time you start talking reckless, Imma fuck you until the cops come knockin."

He wasn't playing. He'd let her slide all damn day, mouthing off, thinking she was running the show.

But she ain't fool nobody, least of all him.

She slid in to his ride, batted her eyes, smirked at him, and complimented his vision.

She knew what it was. When she got in his car, she signed her fuckin' soul over to him.

Death Row Records, baby. And he'd ensure she understood that, and it would be when she least expected it.

She was too drunk, too full of him to resist. She didn't even want to.

Giovanni scooped her off the pool table like she weighed nothing, carrying her through the lounge in silence. He pushed into the apartment connected to the shop, carried her straight to the bathroom, and set her gently on the counter.

One hand reached for the shower knob, turning it until steam filled the air.

When the water was hot enough, he stepped out of his boxers, got in the shower and pulled her under the spray with him.

Neither of them said a word. They didn't have to. Her staying quiet, pliant, wrapped around him, said everything. The water beat down over them, washing away the sweat, the liquor, the mess they made of each other.

Giovanni rested his forehead to hers, the loofah tracing a slow path down her hips, her thighs, her ass. He was still mesmerized. Paige leaned into him, her body soft and trusting. She hadn't expected this. Not from him.

She'd read him wrong. Completely.

He took his time, lathering her up with calm tender hands.

"Thank you," she said softly as he helped her out of the shower.

"You're welcome. Oil or lotion?"

"Uhm, oil."

He grabbed the body oil from the cabinet and started working it in, palms gliding down her back, over her legs. She let out a soft moan when he hit her calf just right. He stopped and gave her a warning look.

"Be cool," he said, feeling himself get excited. He could go for another round. Another taste. Easy.

She let him do whatever he wanted, too tired to keep pretending she didn't need this. It wasn't sex, it was something much softer. And she'd forgotten what that felt like.

Her voice cracked, almost disbelieving. "I thought you were just trying to fuck me outta my head."

Giovanni met her gaze as he worked oil into her thigh. "I was," he said, smirking. Then quieter, more serious, "But I'm tryna bend right with you too."

That stopped her breath. That line. That truth. She didn't expect that from him, not like this, not now. He barely knew her. But somehow, it still felt like they'd known each other intimately.

Later, he slipped a dry shop t-shirt over her head, the hem brushing her thighs. When

they hit the bed, she tucked herself into his side, her palm resting lightly against his chest.

Paige was never quiet. Never still. She was a live wire on any normal day. And yet, here she was. Soft. Still. Safe. And shocked by how much she didn't hate it. She had built her entire identity around not needing anybody.

Giovanni had done what no man before him had the patience or presence to do—put her right where she was supposed to be. At ease.

He wrapped his arm around her, dropped his chin to the top of her head, and let sleep take them both.

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Giovanni crouched beside the bed, his hand lingering against the warmth of her thigh, debating if he should even wake her yet.

She looked so peaceful and completely unbothered.

The stresses of her life had melted into the sheets in the night.

There was no tension in her face, no tight jaw or furrowed brow.

Just quiet. And he wanted to keep her there, untouched by the world, for as long as he could.

“Paige,” he whispered.

She was curled toward the space he’d left in bed, one arm tucked between her legs, the other stretched across where he’d been lying. His T-shirt had twisted around her during the night, hanging off one shoulder, riding high enough to expose the dips and curves he wanted to touch every night.

He dragged his thumb lightly over the curve of her leg, assuming he had every right. Maybe he did now. Maybe last night had given him that.

Paige stirred, a soft noise rumbling in her throat. She shifted toward him, brushing her foot against his arm like she was searching for him even in sleep.

Giovanni exhaled through his nose, a low, quiet breath.

She didn't even know. She had no fuckin' idea what kind of spell she had dropped on him.

This wasn't just a night or a nut. He didn't just crave her skin.

He wanted everything . The attitude. The softness.

The secrets. The fight. She smelled like heaven, sun-kissed, sweet, enveloping, he'd never forget it.

He could see her, read her. She was stubborn, reckless, and beautiful. And he wanted that headache.

"Wake up, baby," he said again, voice rougher now, luring. "I made breakfast."

Paige's lashes fluttered, her lips parting with a soft exhale. For a second, she blinked up at him, dazed and adorable, looking like she had forgotten where she was. Then recognition flooded back and with it came panic.

She bolted upright, the sheet falling away as her hands flew to her hair, her face, herself, making sure she was still intact.

"Shit!" she hissed, eyes darting around the room, searching for her clothes, her phone, any evidence of the woman she was supposed to be instead of the woman she'd been last night.

"What time is it? My car, Oh my God, it's still at the fairgrounds.

I didn't even tell anyone where I... fuck, my family is gonna think I'm dead in a ditch somewhere! "

Giovanni straightened, watching her spiral with a small smile lifting the corner of his mouth.

“Breathe, P,” he replied. “It’s only 9:30. Your car’s fine. I can take you to get it whenever you’re ready. I ain’t holding you hostage unless you into that.”

“My phone,” she said, ignoring that last part, already halfway off the bed, his T-shirt riding up dangerously high on her thighs. “Where’s my fucking phone? I’ve got work tomorrow, and I need to check on my daddy, and...”

“Paige.” His voice was firmer now, cutting through her chaos.

He caught her wrist, his grip gentle but secure.

“Stop. Your clothes are folded in the bathroom. Your phone’s on the charger in the kitchen.

Nobody’s called or texted. The world didn’t end because you took one night for yourself. Chill for me.”

She froze, staring at him. Reality hit her all at once. She was in Giovanni’s bedroom, wearing his clothes, the spots he touched still humming, thighs tender from being gripped around his waist, and she had absolutely no regrets. The realization terrified her.

“This isn’t me anymore,” she said, voice quieter now, more vulnerable than she meant it to be. “I don’t do this. I don’t spend the night with men I barely know. I don’t... forget all my responsibilities.”

What she didn’t say was that forgetting, even for a second, scared her more than anything.

Paige had built a life that worked. It was hers.

A path she carved with no promises and no passengers.

She knew how to function alone. Fully. And maybe that was the problem.

Slowing down made room for thoughts she usually outran.

One night didn't mean forever. And they hadn't even scratched the surface yet. Her future was already spoken for, stacked with goals, promotions, and caring for her father; she wasn't about to blow up her life chasing a maybe.

Giovanni nodded, clocking her energy. He understood boundaries, but with her he felt tethered, close without effort. He wasn't saying it out loud, not yet, but he already knew he wasn't staying away. He'd lie before he let her think he could.

"Maybe that's exactly why you needed it," he said. "When's the last time you put yourself first, even for a few hours?"

"Don't do that. Don't judge me." She flopped back down on the bed, her heart was beating so fast, she needed a minute.

"I'm not judging," he added, meeting her defiance head-on. "Just saying... sometimes the most responsible thing you can do is be a little irresponsible."

Paige laughed, shaky but real. "That's some backward-ass logic, Vanni."

"Maybe." He shrugged, the slow grin returning. "But I'm right. And you're still here, so..."

She was. And despite the voice in her head telling her she should be anywhere but

here, she didn't want to go. Not yet.

Giovanni's hand slid up her arm, settling on the nape of her neck. "Now, you got two options. You can keep spinning out over shit that's already handled, or you can come eat this breakfast I made before it gets cold."

Paige studied his face. No pressure. No judgment. No angle.

"You cook too?"

"Not well." He laughed. "But I make a mean omelet."

That pulled a genuine smile from her. "Impressive."

He offered his hand. She slid her fingers into his and let him pull her to her feet, still feeling the echo of what they'd done together.

The kitchen smelled like cheese, bacon, and black coffee. His place was warm. He was surprisingly warm, kind, and attentive. He'd been raised by women or around women, she could tell.

The apartment above the shop wasn't what she'd expected. It was clean but lived-in, masculine but not bare, with touches of his personality everywhere, framed blueprints for custom cars, old vinyl records stacked neatly in a corner, a well-worn leather jacket draped over a chair.

"You live here?" she asked, hopping onto the counter.

"Nah. Only when I'm mid-project. Sometimes I don't wanna leave the shop. But I got a spot in Haven Springs."

“Damn, money bags.”

“I work hard.”

“I see that.” Her eyes swept the room again. “I like seeing a man passionate about something. It’s beautiful, and I can tell this all brings you joy. It’s cute.”

Giovanni smirked, moving through the kitchen like he’d done a hundred times but never with anyone watching his every move.

She watched him in silence, taking him in. The warehouse looked different in the morning. Everything felt sharper. More exposed.

She nibbled a piece of bacon, her leg swinging off the counter.

“You’re cute,” he said, “But not when you let that grizzly bear come out.”

She swatted at him, trying to hit him, but he dodged with her swinging arm. He chuckled, dragging a stool in front of her, her foot finding its way into his lap without instruction. His thumb worked patient circles into her arch.

“I was snoring?” Embarrassment covered her face.

“That means you ain’t sleeping,” he said quietly. Making an observation. Every so often, he’d glance up at her, checking in, letting his touch ask questions his mouth didn’t know how to shape yet.

“I sleep, just not good sleep. Not like last night,” she expressed with a shrug.

“You had some dickquil last night, that sleep always gon bless you.”

“Is it for sale? I need that regularly. I slept so well. I’ll be writing in my diary about it.

” The thoughts of his soft but firm mattress, his expensive sheets, the slight scent of his cologne and bodywash had infiltrated her brain.

Everything about yesterday had her mind doing the math and wondering how they just went back to being strangers.

“I’d give you a good deal. Let’s say, weekends and one lunch break a week,” he winked and she exhaled thinking about her legs being to the ceiling last night.

“Oh, it seems you already thought about offering your services again.”

“It crossed my mind. I’m tryna see you again. I won’t bullshit with you.”

“You out here rubbing feet unprovoked, so you might,” Paige murmured, sipping orange juice from a tall cup, eyes on him.

“I learned early, take care of the parts most men forget.”

His words settled into her, warm and weighted with a significance he probably didn’t even realize.

That was exactly what he’d done last night, seen the parts of her that most people overlooked.

Not the curve of her body, but the weight in her eyes.

The silence in her sighs. The need buried beneath all the doing.

Paige's eyes dropped to where his hand curved around her ankle. She hated how easy it felt, how he made space for her without pressing. She wasn't dodging his questions, and that alone felt risky. It had to be the foot rub.

"I needed that last night," she admitted, feeling vulnerable.

Saying it out loud made it heavy. She needed comfort, connection, things she trained herself not to need over the years.

It felt dangerous, giving a man the blueprint to her soft spots.

But his peace made her want to tell the truth. The kind she usually swallowed.

"I have been carrying a lot," she admitted. "Daddy, work... holding myself together in between. Sometimes I just want to be a girl."

The world always wanted more. Competence. Strength. Poise. Giovanni hadn't asked for anything. He gave. And that was the part messing her up most.

He leaned in closer. He didn't speak, only held space and gave her the kind of listening that was rare to her. It made her feel understood, not judged. And she knew without asking, his momma had raised him right.

Her voice dropped low. "You didn't ask for anything last night. You just... gave."

"I saw what you were carrying. It didn't feel right to add to it. The night was about you."

"You made me feel soft," she admitted. "That's rare for me."

That truth sat between them. Heavy. Exposed. But she didn't take it back.

Giovanni lifted her foot and pressed a kiss to the top of it, and then to her ankle, while she squirmed on the counter. She was gorgeous.

“Let that be the new standard,” he said. “You ain’t gotta stay hard because the world is. Nothing you do will ever change that. We just gotta roll with it and not let it harden our hearts.”

She’d been waiting for permission, not from the world, but from herself.

And as she started to believe she could give it...

Her phone lit up.

Then rang, hard, loud, urgent. Reality crashed back in like a wave she couldn’t outrun. Her body stiffened instantly, muscles tensed and face hardened. The peaceful bubble around them shattered, the outside world demanded entry.

Giovanni’s hand stilled, resting on her shin. He didn’t pull away, didn’t make a sound, simply watched as the transformation happened. Paige the woman... becoming Paige the caretaker, the problem-solver, the one everyone could count on.

She snatched the phone off the counter and answered, her voice already shifting back to that capable, controlled tone.

“Hello?”

A pause. Her face hardened slightly, the softness Giovanni had coaxed out of her receding with each passing second. Then her face changed slightly. It was enough for Giovanni to read the worry, fear, and resignation settling in.

Her hand gripped the phone tighter, knuckles going white. “I’m on my way.”

She ended the call, not saying anything for a beat.

The silence felt different now, heavier, amped with something that hadn't been there moments before.

He stood slowly, already moving, like he knew before she said it.

Like he could already read it in her stance, in the way her shoulders squared, and her jaw tightened.

"That was the center," Paige finally said, her voice clipped and professional, eyes duller now. "They rushed my daddy to the hospital. Blood pressure dropped. He passed out during breakfast."

He grabbed his keys.

"Let's go."

Not I'll take you.

Not You should go.

Let's. Go.

Her problem became his without her having to say a word. Another gift she hadn't known to expect.

She almost argued. But she didn't have a ride, and her mind wouldn't rest until she saw her father's face. She nodded, silently thanking him.

Giovanni provided her with a pair of his sweats and a hoodie. She looked a mess, but

that was the least of her concern. He grabbed her hand, and they headed for the door.

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Everything in the room buzzed or beeped.

Cold air, hard light, and too many wires.

Paige hated all of it. But she stayed, attention stuck on the slow rise and fall of her father's chest. This was reminder of how quickly paradise could turn into purgatory for her.

This was a lesson in not getting comfortable.

Perry looked smaller somehow, diminished by the white sheets and faded gown.

The doctor explained the situation when she arrived.

Perry had experienced a sudden drop in blood pressure due to his dialysis, nothing they hadn't seen before, but concerning given Perry's overall health.

They wanted to keep him overnight for observation.

"You should go home," Giovanni said quietly from the doorway. "Change clothes. Get some things. I'll stay with him."

Paige turned, surprised by the offer. Giovanni leaned against the doorframe, his presence warming the room briefly.

"You don't have to do that," she said automatically, the words coming before she could think.

“I know I don’t have to,” he replied. “That’s not why I’m offering.”

Paige looked between Giovanni and her father, torn.

Leaving Perry, even briefly, made her stomach clench with anxiety.

But here she stood in Giovanni's borrowed clothes, hair disheveled, emotions raw from the scare.

It would only be one hour. She'd be back before her father even missed her.

It would be fine. And she really needed the fresh air and a moment to cry.

“He doesn’t know you,” she said, voice softer now, uncertain. “Are you sure about this?”

Giovanni nodded, “If he wakes up, I’ll call you right away. I’ll tell him you stepped out for coffee.”

“Why would you do this?” Her voice was quiet but clear. “You barely know us.”

“Because.” He stepped further into the room.

She blinked. “Because?”

“Yeah, so tell me what you need, Paige. Not what you think you should need. And then let me see to it that you have it. I don’t want anything from you.”

The words struck her with physical strength. What did she need?

“I need a shower,” she admitted, the truth surprising her. “Clean clothes. My laptop

for work tomorrow. And I need..." She swallowed hard, the words sticking in her throat "I need to know he's not alone when he wakes up."

Giovanni nodded, already moving toward the chair beside Perry's bed and grabbing a magazine from the end table. "Then go. I got him."

Paige blinked. "It's that easy?"

"Paige." He motioned her forward, so he could tell her something privately. "You trusted me with your body last night. Trust me to sit with your father for an hour. Handle yourself. Bye."

Put that way, it seemed absurd to hesitate. She'd let this man see her at her most vulnerable last night. Why was this different? Because this wasn't about her. It was about Perry. And no one, no one, had offered to share that burden with her. Not once.

"My car is still at the fairgrounds," she remembered suddenly.

"Already handled," Giovanni said, pulling his phone from his pocket. "Texted Ro. He's bringing it here. Should be in the lot by now."

Paige blinked, her mouth parting. "When did you...?"

"Told you. Handled."

He stood, nodding toward the hallway. "Now, do I gotta tell you to go again?"

That look in his eyes said yes, he absolutely would, gladly. And she was starting to believe he meant every bit of it. Paige inhaled deep, walked over to the bed, and leaned down to kiss her father's forehead. She lingered, for a second.

“I’ll be back soon, Daddy.” She said it low, just for him.

“Okay, baby,” Giovanni said under his breath, teasing.

She straightened, gave him an amused look over her shoulder.

“Nigga, please. But... thank you.”

His eyes met hers and they smiled at each other. From the outside looking in, you'd think they were a couple. Everything between them just... worked.

“You don’t have to thank me for doing what decent people do.”

“Still,” she said. She needed him to feel what she couldn’t quite say.

Giovanni nodded.

She grabbed her purse and hesitated at the door one last time. He was already settling in, legs stretched out, phone in hand, like he’d been sitting beside Perry for years.

“One hour,” she promised, more to herself than to him.

The drive home felt like floating. She cried, dried her eyes, cried again until she made her way through the motions.

But when she came out of it, her thoughts split.

Half of her was still in that hospital room, watching her father breathe.

She was grateful it wasn’t anything serious.

The other half was trying to make sense of the man sitting beside him and the night they'd shared.

A night that felt perfect from beginning to end and all bullshit aside he'd earned the daddy moniker.

Giovanni had worked her so damn good last night that the visions of his head between her legs caused her a shiver to run down her spine as she made her way to her apartment.

Her apartment greeted her with silent familiarity, everything exactly as she'd left it yesterday.

Before everything changed. The half-empty iced coffee on the counter.

The work folders spread across the dining table with her dead laptop next to them.

Had it only been twenty-four hours?

Paige moved through her routine on autopilot, shower, clothes laid out, hair wrapped.

The hot water washed away the anxiety and worry, but not the memory of Giovanni's hands on her skin.

Something was happening. Something she wasn't prepared for.

Something she'd never expected when she slid into his car yesterday.

But what was she to do now? Giovanni wasn't giving her space to disappear.

She quickly moisturized her skin before throwing on a turquoise workout set. She

wanted to be comfortable for her overnight stay at the hospital. She packed her bag, double-checking to make sure she didn't forget anything.

She was about to head out when her phone rang on the counter, causing her heart to jump to her throat. She relaxed when she realized it was only Brooks.

"You good?" he asked. "I went by to drop off his sugar-free cake at the center, and they told me he was at the hospital."

She hadn't thought of calling anyone yet. She knew her mother wouldn't care. And everyone else was busy. Perry wouldn't want a bunch of people crowding him and personally she wasn't in the mood either, but she would keep them posted.

"Yeah," she confirmed, tucking the phone between her ear and shoulder as she locked up her apartment. "His BP dropped during breakfast. They're keeping him overnight for observation. But he will be okay."

"You need me to come through?"

Paige hesitated going back and forth how much she would say.

"I'm good for now," she said finally. "Got someone with him while I grab some things."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Someone Paige?"

Paige could hear the question in Brooks's voice, the curiosity. He could be so nosey. And he always thought he was someone's dad. "Marriage sure makes you niggas nosey. You bout as bad as your wife and sister. I swear."

"Fuck that don't try and dodge me. JT weak ass got out or something?"

“Giovanni,” she said simply, knowing Brooks would connect the dots. “Giovanni is someone.”

Another pause, longer this time. “G? Emon’s cousin?”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

“Huh,” Brooks said, the single syllable. “So, we all mixing and mingling.”

“He’s... he’s good people, Brooks.”

“I know,” Brooks replied, his tone carefully neutral. “You know I trust your judgment. Most of the time.”

The joke landed as intended, easing some of the tension in her chest. “I’m heading back to the hospital now. I’ll text you with any updates.”

“You’d better,” he warned. “And Paige?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s good you’re not alone,” Brooks said, his voice softening. “Been worried about you carrying all this by yourself.”

“I’m fine,” she said automatically. “Everybody worrying is stressing me even more.”

Brooks’s snort carried clearly through the phone. “Sure you are. Like you were fine when you broke your arm in third grade and didn’t tell nobody for two days. Crazy.”

The memory made her wince. She’d always been this way, swallowing pain, handling things, proving she was strong enough, capable enough, enough.

“I’ll call you later,” she promised, deflecting and ending the call.

As she was about to leave, her eyes caught on the silver-framed photo on her dresser. One of her, Perry, and PJ. Before everything fell apart. Before prison and dialysis, and funeral arrangements.

She picked it up, running her thumb over the glass. They’d been happy then. Not perfect, never that, but happy in their own chaotic way. A family.

Her phone buzzed with a text message.

Giovanni: He’s still sleeping. A nurse came by to check vitals. All good. Take your time.

Paige: On my way back. Need anything?

His response came immediately.

Giovanni: Just you.

Paige tucked the phone into her pocket, gathered her bags, and headed back to the hospital. When she stepped back into the room, Giovanni was still in the chair, watching ESPN, oblivious to him doing the most thoughtful thing a man had ever done for her. She watched as Perry joked.

“She only got one daddy, nigga. Who the hell are you?”

Giovanni laughed and swiped a hand down his face.

“Just a friend, for now. Paige stepped out.”

“Mhmm, friend my ass.”

Paige had heard enough. She cleared her throat and stepped into the room. Both of their faces lit up when they saw her. Giovanni stepped aside to let her sit but he stopped her gently before completely passing.

“You good? How you feeling?”

“I’m good,” she responded before glancing back at Perry with a smirk. “We gon’ talk about you eavesdropping later.”

“I’m not dead shit. Just half.”

“Don’t play like that, Daddy. Look at where you are.”

“You talking to me or him?”

Paige blushed and fought a grin. “You. He’s just a friend.”

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“Bullshit I heard ‘okay baby’ when you kissed me goodbye.”

Giovanni chuckled, shaking his head. Their interaction made him miss his own father.

“Caught that, huh?”

“I got ears, don’t I?” Perry murmured. “I like him. Got jokes. But he stayed. That counts for something, I guess.”

She looked at Giovanni again, the thank you stuck in her throat, but sitting heavy in her rib cage. He met her eyes and nodded, already knowing. She stood and stepped out into the hallway, and Giovanni followed.

“You should go,” Paige said suddenly. “This isn’t... you stayed long enough. Thank you.”

Giovanni looked at her, his expression unreadable. “You want me to go?”

She couldn’t quite meet his eyes to answer him. She was looking anywhere but into those damn eyes.

“I’m saying you don’t have to stay,” she clarified. “This isn’t your problem.”

“Didn’t ask if it was my problem.” He tilted her head up by the chin. “I asked if you wanted me to go.”

Paige swallowed hard. The distinction wasn't lost on her. Want versus should. Desire versus obligation. The exact battleground she'd been fighting on.

"I'm sure you got better shit to do on your day off. You got a week to prepare for. I understand."

"That's not what I asked," Giovanni repeated, leaning forward slightly. "Say the word and I'm gone. But don't push me away 'cause you think that's what you're supposed to do."

Paige's head snapped up, eyes finally meeting his. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Means I've seen this, no done this before," he said, voice gentle but unyielding. "The moment shit gets real, you hit a switch. Shut down, double down on running."

"You don't know me," she said, but the words lacked conviction.

"I know enough," he countered. "Know you spent all morning talking about carrying weight nobody helps you with. And now here I am, offering to help carry it, and you're trying to send me away. Like I ain't been here before, in this very hospital."

"It's not that simple," she said after a moment.

"Actually, it is," Giovanni replied, not moving but letting her have the space. "Tell me what you need. If I ask, know I'm asking for a reason."

"I need..." she started, then faltered. "I need to not be alone right now."

The admission cost her something. And he pulled her close and placed a kiss to her forehead giving her a little of it back to her.

Giovanni stepped back and nodded once, “Then I’m staying.”

“But you have things to do,” she protested weakly. “Your shop, your life.”

“My shop runs fine without me,” he interrupted. “And it’s Sunday. Right now, this is exactly where I want to be.”

He stood then, closing the distance between them. His hands found her shoulders; he massaged them softly loosening the tension in her neck.

“Thank you,” she said, the words feeling insufficient. “I don’t...I’m not good at this. Letting people help.”

“I noticed,” Giovanni said, but there was no judgment in his tone. His tone said he understood, and she appreciated that. “Luckily, I don’t need you to be good at it, in order to do it.”

Giovanni was right. She’d spent so long handling everything alone that she’d forgotten how to let someone else carry part of the load.

The doctor would come soon. There would be decisions to make, forms to sign, worries to shoulder. But for now, in this moment of strange, suspended time, Paige closed her eyes and allowed herself to feel a moment of relief.

Not because her father was okay, though he was, for now.

Not because her problems were solved, they weren’t, not by a long shot.

But today she wasn’t facing them alone. And she’d be glad and rejoice in that.

She still wasn’t sold on Giovanni’s intentions. People on the outside could say what

they wanted, but old habits died hard. Relying on people meant giving them the power to let you down.

Alone, she knew the rules. Alone, she could brace for the fallout. Alone, she controlled the ending. But with Giovanni, that control slipped. And the walls she'd built, although solid, high, and necessary, were starting to crack. And through those very cracks, something unexpected, seeped in.

Trust.

Two hours passed in a blur. Paige had managed to relax for a little while. Giovanni had stayed close but never clinging or crowding her space. But eventually, he did need to go. And he hated that he couldn't stand guard all night to make sure she didn't go without anything.

He stood in the doorway, keys in hand, watching her with an unreadable look she was starting to crave more than she should.

"I'm gonna slide." He stood, gathering his things. "I know how you are about your space."

Paige looked up, biting back the part of her that wanted to ask him to stay. It was too soon for that. Too soft.

Giovanni stepped closer, pressed a kiss to her temple. "Call me when you're ready," he said. "For whatever."

And like that, he was gone.

She sat there a little too long after the door closed, annoyed at how much she already missed his presence.

She prayed this wasn't the kind of thing that demanded more than it gave.

She hoped it was the kind of thing that lingered even after it left.

Still, she couldn't believe she'd let him weasel his way in this easily.

That realization pissed her off. How was he calling shots? How had she listened?

It hadn't even been a full damn day.

He had to be working a root. Had to be. Because no way she was this caught up already. As she was mentally cussing herself out, the door cracked back open. Giovanni stepped in, holding a carryout bag and peach lemonade.

"Almost forgot to feed you," he said, calmly before heading back out. He had dribbled the ball and left it on her side of the court. She was stuck. She hated how much she smiled when he was around. And she loved it even more. What had she gotten herself into?

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Another Saturday rolled around, and things had finally slowed down enough for Paige to breathe.

Her dad was back home, still recovering, but no longer a daily crisis.

Work had been chaotic, with Ashton deep in her nesting era before maternity leave.

Paige was happy for her friend, but it meant her own plate stayed full.

Still, today was for comfort. A cozy night under her throw blanket, something to binge that didn't require brainpower, and the right snacks to carry her through.

"I already watched that one. I need something else. What you watching?" Paige asked Taylor, who was keeping her company while she strolled through the snack aisle.

"I'm watching The Handmaid's Tale, but you're not into that."

"That shit damn near happening in real life. I don't need help prepping to be a bed wench. I might rewatch YOU . I miss Joe and his toxic ass."

"That's how I knew something was off with you and Blake. Ain't no way you're rewatching that man stalk and kill people like it's a romcom. That's not normal, sis. I gotta pray for y'all to be released from the shackles of toxicity."

Paige snorted and said, "It has romance in it, sis. Don't do that. Joe loves them women very much." They laughed until her mood shifted quickly when she reached the middle of the chip aisle. No Lime Hot Cheetos. Her eyes narrowed.

“Damn Gina Damn.”

“Paige, you are so dramatic,” Taylor laughed loudly.

“I know I am. So, I gotta call you back,” Paige said through the phone. “I need to focus on my snacks for real. I’m getting distracted.”

“Bye. Call me back.”

Paige hung up and slid her phone into her bag, jaw tight.

She hated having her mouth set on something and then coming up short.

It was her fault for waiting until the last minute.

She should’ve come earlier, before the crowd hit and before her good mood had a chance to sour.

Now the store was packed, kids crying because they couldn’t get everything their eyes saw, parents fussing, and workers acting like they forgot what customer service looked like.

She shook her head and worked herself out of the funk. It was just chips.

She pressed her lips into a thin line and pivoted to plan B.

She grabbed the Cheddar & Sour Cream Ruffles and French onion dip and tucked them under her arm.

Not what she came for, but it would do. Her reflection caught her eye as she crossed into frozen foods.

Gray two-piece set hugging her in the right places, slides on, fresh face, hair in a ponytail.

Comfortable but still her. That's when she heard it.

"Baby, we gotta stop meeting like this."

The words came from behind her too familiar for her to ignore. Paige turned slowly, chip bag still in hand, and found Giovanni leaning against a shelf. Arms crossed. That crooked smirk working overtime. That smile had her questioning every damn thought she'd had about him all week.

"Why you ain't call me yet?" He stared a hole into her.

She held his stare, lips tugging at the corner. "Maybe I like running into you like this. Keeps the mystery alive."

He pushed off the glass and closed the space between them, enough for his cologne to catch up. "That right? Or maybe you scared?"

"Don't flatter yourself." She turned back to grab the discarded cart, adding extra sway to her hips.

Giovanni's eyes tracked every step. He grumbled as she bent over to grab a pint of ice cream. This woman was going to be the death of him, and she knew it. She was counting on it. She was also still trying to play hard to get. But he didn't press, he took the chips and dip from her cart, looked at the label, and dropped them in his basket, making Paige and the snacks his business.

Then he looked at her again, calm. "You tryna ride with me again?"

She raised a brow. “Where to?”

Giovanni didn’t answer right away, he stared at her. She stepped back, he stepped closer searching her face before asking, “What? You don’t trust me anymore?”

“I don't remember trusting you at all.” The truth was she didn't trust her damn self.

The last time she took a ride with him he had her ass tooted up on a pool table.

She remembered that night all too well. Being abstinent for two and a half years and then getting a taste of Giovanni had her feeling like a can of Pringles...

once you popped, the craving never stopped. But she needed to get it together.

He was too commanding for her liking, the way he could make her forget herself with a look was insane.

If she wasn't careful, she'd be hanging on his every word like some lovesick fool.

Hadn't Auntie Khia already schooled us about not trusting these men?

But deep down, she knew Giovanni wasn't just any man.

“I think you might be confused, baby. But I’d love to clear that up for you... refresh your memory.”

She smirked, knowing damn well he had her number—and he knew it too.

When she looked up at him, lips parted and chin tilted in challenge, Giovanni’s gaze dropped.

He reached out, palm wrapping around her neck with a possession that made her breath hitch.

Then he closed the space between them, kissing her slowly and deep, like he had all the time in the world and planned to use every second of it.

Her body folded into him without hesitation, every barrier she built slipping out from under her.

The way she gave in made his spine light up, toes tingling from the force of it.

Another taste of her and he already knew, he'd throw out the rulebook, torch the blueprint.

If she asked, he'd set the whole world on fire just to warm her feet.

Whatever Paige Bishop wanted, Giovanni Dowlen would move heaven and earth to deliver it, wrapped in a neat bow.

She reached for him out of instinct, which only confirmed what he already knew. She felt it too. There was need, peace, and pressure all at once.

"I need more snacks," she said breathlessly when he let her go. That's the only sentence her mind could string together. She was hot and bothered and ready to be fucked down right between the frozen peas and corn.

He stepped back to look over her and she took off while he followed behind her.

The way her gray two-piece set clung to her frame made it hard to think straight.

Every step she took toward made her round ass bounce like a hot check.

Other dudes were watching, and Giovanni saw them.

One by the juice aisle did a double take.

Another pretended to look at the frozen pizzas to stay close.

Giovanni didn't say shit. He smirked to himself and kept his eyes on her. She was walking ahead, reaching for Calypso's, Oreo's and tossing Milk Duds in the cart. She had no care in the world, she didn't even know she was currently stealing attention left and right.

Paige bent over again to grab something else from a lower shelf, that ass arching in a way that made Giovanni press his tongue to the roof of his mouth.

The first time he played it cool, but she was testing him.

He was so concentrated on her he almost missed the dude standing too still behind them.

Not shopping. Not walking. Just... staring.

Giovanni clocked it and let the first few seconds ride, trying to give the man the benefit of the doubt. Maybe the man was slow to move. Maybe he was reaching for something in the same aisle. But when his eyes lingered too long, chin tilted, lip tucked, Giovanni's whole energy shifted.

"What the fuck you looking at, nigga?" he snapped, voice cutting through the silence on the aisle. "Ain't no muthafuckin peep show over here."

Paige turned so fast she almost broke her neck. Her hand flew to her hip, because he couldn't be serious. "Seriously?"

Giovanni didn't blink, only tucked his shirt behind the butt of his Glock. "Weird ass nigga. About to get stretched in the store staring too hard and too long."

The dude backed off, hands up, mumbling something under his breath. Giovanni tracked him until he turned the corner.

"Yeah, take you disrespectful ass on."

Paige sighed and tilted her head. "Didn't we have the conversation where I reminded you that you ain't my man?"

"Oh, so you wanted the weird muthafucka staring at you?" Giovanni scoffed, lips turned up in confusion. "You probably ain't got no panties on either."

"You in my business again, Vanni."

"You are my business," he said, coming closer. "At least for the night. And I don't need to be your man to let it be known, your attention is mine, and mine is yours. Anybody that wants to challenge that can meet my Nina."

Her neck grew hot.

The bulldog in him was raging.

And behind all that fire? A softness she wasn't ready for but wanted anyway.

She exhaled. "Relax. We not fighting in the Kroger."

"Wasn't gon be a fight, just the sounds of bullets ringing," he said before mimicking the sound of a gun, "fa, fa, fa, fa."

Paige shot him a look, but her smirk gave her away. He was crazy and she liked it. “You gotta relax. You in the company of a bad bitch. People gon stare.”

“Aye, you got a big head girl,” he said grabbing her by the ponytail to pull her back into his chest. “The next time you wear this, whatever this is... don’t.” His hushed tone combined with her hair being pulled forced a hard swallow, but she quickly regained her wits about herself.

“You keep hitching your wagon to me,” she said turning around and pushing him back slightly, “and I keep telling you I’m not falling for it. I promise I will have you either in therapy or church if you play with me.”

“I look like a muthafucka that play a bunch of games?”

“No, you deal dreams and fairytales and again I ain’t buying.”

He ignored her, she’d come around. She couldn’t deny him and he for damn sure wasn’t trying to deny her. He’d be patient, but the more she chose him, the harder he was going to come. She didn’t even know what her yes meant to him.

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They left the store, and Giovanni followed her to her townhouse to drop off her car and she got in with him.

He wasn't in an old school today, but his orange Dodge Challenger.

Whatever she rode in or that he touched was a masterpiece.

And whether she wanted to admit she liked him.

He was nice, kind, but also all the things she didn't need, commitment, complications, someone else to worry about.

They made it to the Coupeville Speedway's midnight drag races in no time, even though it was on the outskirts of town.

The perfect Saturday night distraction. He hadn't let go of her hand.

Not even for a second since she got in the car.

Her hand was soft, tender completely different from his hardened hands.

She shivered when he played with one of her rings.

He just wanted to feel connected to her by any means.

Find out more about her through osmosis, because she had been the only thing he thought about for a week.

They'd lost precious time, and he needed that back.

Paige picked the song as he looked over at her, Give It Up 2 Me by Ojerime, played through his speakers. He'd never heard the song before, but it was a vibe. A vibe he liked.

The speedway parking lot was packed. Custom rides lined up bumper to bumper, hoods popped showing off gleaming engines while speakers thumped so hard they rattled license plates. The smell of burnt rubber, smoke clouds, and racing fuel hung in the air.

Paige had never been one for the racing scene, or into cars much, but now she understood the appeal.

The roar of engines, the adrenaline, the way everybody moved like family.

It was exhilarating. She felt her pulse quicken whenever he'd accelerate and handle the wheel with so much control.

And if she had to bet, he knew she liked it too.

"You race here?" she asked as they walked toward the entrance, her bag of snacks now dangling from her fingertips.

"I've never been into racing. I come to watch them drift and chill after a hectic week. And sometimes I sponsor some of the cats who run here. This is family."

"Always investing in somebody else," she said with a smile.

"Says the woman who takes care of everybody in her world. Takes one to know one, P. Speaking of, how is your pops?"

She paused, her steps slowing as they moved through the crowd.

“He’s good,” she said. “Better. I can breathe again. Thank you for asking.”

Giovanni nodded. “Let me know if y’all need anything. Home dialysis, another doctor, a better setup. Whatever gives you some peace.”

Paige glanced at him. Not surprised by the offer, but by how calm he was about it. Nothing he rattled off was cheap or a quick fix. She wasn’t even calling the man back, and he was still offering to help her and give her a break.

“I mean that,” he added. “I know you handle things. You always will. But handling it all alone will drain you. We don’t need that now, do we?”

“No, we don’t. I’m trying, though.”

“I know. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t. One day at a time,” he said, pulling her behind him, their hands still joined.

People greeted him as they passed, head nods, daps, and a few quick words were shared depending on who he was talking to.

This was how it was anytime she was around him.

He was the people’s champ. And she loved that he wasn’t cocky about it.

It showed the nature of his heart. She smiled to herself, thinking of how rare it was and how she didn’t know if this was a cruel joke or if Giovanni was her twin flame.

They found seats near the front of the risers, close enough to see every move on the strip.

But also giving them privacy. Paige sat sitting between his legs and getting settled.

His arms rested across her thighs; hands busy opening chips she'd handed him.

She cracked open her Calypso and took a slow sip.

It felt natural. Like this was their weekend tradition.

He dipped his head near her ear, close but not crowding her.

Engines roared. Tires screeched. The crowd buzzed with energy, but Paige barely noticed.

Giovanni's presence lingered closely as he pointed out drivers, explained details she never would've cared about on her own.

But his voice, low, patient, a little proud, made her listen.

He loved this, and she loved it for him.

She also appreciated him granting her access to his space... again.

"You know this ain't my scene," she said after a while. "But I'm glad you asked me to come."

Giovanni leaned in, chin almost resting on her shoulder. "I figured, and I'm glad you said yes again."

"Did I say yes?" she asked, glancing at him over her shoulder with a smirk.

He nudged her chin up with his fingers until her eyes met his. "Shh. I'm glad I caught

you. That's all that matters."

She didn't respond. Just popped a Milk Dud into her mouth and turned her attention back to the strip. But her thoughts weren't on the cars. They were on him.

His hand still lingered on her thigh. His weight behind her made her feel safe.

She couldn't figure out how he made her feel this content with him.

Her mother's car show suggestion had brought him into focus, but since then, he kept showing up.

She had half a mind to ask if he was tracking her location, but she didn't.

"I know what you're doing," she murmured.

Giovanni chuckled behind her, eating a Starburst. "Yeah? What's that?"

"Showing up too much. Making it too easy. Trying to make me soft and fall in love with you."

"You already soft," he said into her neck. "You just don't show it. Next."

She turned to catch his expression. "You sure about that?"

"Absolutely. I seen it," he uttered sliding his hand between her thighs resting just before her reached the softest place on earth. "You forget, I was there. That first night. That morning. You let me take care of you. That wasn't a front."

Silence wrapped around them again. She gulped and thought she'd melt. That was starting to happen a lot. He'd leave her breathless and speechless, say the right things.

And then another brick would fall.

“I ain’t gon misuse that softness. Let me in.”

Then a red Mustang launched down the strip, the crowd erupting. Paige leaned back into him without thinking, head resting beneath his chin.

“I’m scared,” she said quietly.

Giovanni didn't flinch. Didn't ask why. Didn't ask what he could do.

He knew what she needed. Consistency was a love language he spoke fluently.

While other men rushed to fix or explain away fear, Giovanni understood that some wounds needed intentional presence more than empty solutions.

So, he simply held her, his silence a sanctuary, his arms a fortress.

Each moment he stayed it became another brick in the foundation he was building beneath her feet, solid ground where she could finally feel safe enough to be still.

Giovanni's hand moved, fingers sliding along her collarbone before coming to rest at the base of her throat.

His thumb traced the arch of her neck, tilting her face upward to meet his gaze.

Time slowed as he closed in, the space between them sizzling like a hot plate.

His lips, still damp from his drink, found hers with perfect precision.

She yielded instantly, her mouth opening to welcome the slow, confident exploration

of his tongue.

When he finally pulled back, the look in his eyes had shifted - something possessive now dwelled there.

He was feeling things he had no business feeling about a woman he barely knew.

Here he was, Giovanni Dowlen, kissing her in public, letting his guard down, abandoning his usual restraint.

This wasn't him, and yet it felt more authentic than anything he'd done in years.

"I got you," he mouthed. "Even if you don't call me tomorrow. Even if you send me to therapy or church."

He laughed softly and shook his head at her.

A lump rose in her throat at his words, that felt like way more than words. When she didn't know what to say back, he reached for her hand and laced their fingers together.

"Twenty one questions?" he suggested, thumb tracing circles on her palm.

What started as simple curiosity evolved into stories neither had shared with many others.

She told him about the time she snuck out with Blake for a college party and Brooks shut the party down.

Like the maniac he was. He confessed how he'd hidden his art sketchbooks under his mattress like other boys hid porn, afraid his father would find out he was still drawing

and dreaming.

“Blue or red?” he asked.

“Purple,” she countered. He made mental notes of everything she said. This information would come in handy one day. Because he could promise he was going to work harder than any man had to see this through with Paige.

“Tasia or J-Hud?”

“Tasia, like Fantasia?”

“Yeah, don’t start stalling again.”

“How could you even ask that question? Whew don't make me choose between queens. That’s unfair.”

“Fine, you lucky I fuck with you. Mustard or mayo?”

“Both, with ham stacked, on Hawaiian bread.”

“A woman after my own heart. Must have pizza topping?”

“Mushrooms.”

“Banana Peppers,” Giovanni answered.

“Favorite hobby? And don’t cheat and say cars,” she asked with a giggle enjoying the back and forth, the adult conversation. His smile would grow, showing all his teeth, and her heart would flutter.

“Playing pool. You?”

“Reading Black romance books but it's more of a lifestyle. A hobby minimizes the love I have for it.”

“Explain,” he encouraged, genuinely interested.

Paige shifted, eyes lighting up with passion.

“It’s about seeing ourselves loved right, you know?”

For so long, we weren’t even in the stories, and when we were.

..” She shook her head. “We were sidekicks, stereotypes, suffering. But these books? They show Black women being cherished, protected, desired, not as some exotic fantasy, but as full human beings worthy of love stories that don’t center around our pain, trauma, cheating although we need a little drama popping off.

Love and representation are the plot. I’m talking to much huh? ”

“No, I could listen to you speak all night. Tell me more.”

She smiled again and pulled her knee to her chest. “And the authors get us. They understand our language, our culture, our hair care routines,” she laughed softly.

“The little details that make us feel seen. When a character wraps her hair at night or has a skincare routine or code-switches at work, that's real life. That’s me.”

Her voice softened, and He inched closer. “Plus, in these stories, there’s always hope. No matter what obstacles come up, love wins. Black joy wins. In a world that constantly reminds us of our struggles, sometimes I need to remember that happy

endings are for us too.”

“That's beautiful,” he said, his voice reflecting genuine understanding. He reached for her hand, studying her face like he was seeing something new there. “You deserve that kind of story, P. We all do.”

“One day.”

“Yeah, one day.”

They spent the rest of the night laughing and getting to know each other through music, snack choices, and passions. With each revelation, the invisible thread between them unraveled loosening the grip they both had on their hearts.

The ride back was different from the one to the track.

Less anticipation, more reflection. The radio played low, some neo-soul that fit the mood perfectly, and Paige found herself humming along, her head resting against the seat as she watched the city lights blur past. She pushed the middle console up and slid over to the middle before resting her head on his shoulder.

This wasn't what she'd planned for tonight.

Not even close. But somehow, it felt exactly right.

When they finally pulled up to her building, neither of them moved right away. The engine idled, filling the silence between them.

“Thank you,” she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper.

“For what?”

“For tonight. For showing me your world. For...” She hesitated, searching for words. “For not pushing but not letting me hide either.”

Giovanni smiled, the kind that reached his eyes and made them crinkle at the corners. “You don’t gotta thank me. I wanted you there. I want you anywhere I am.”

The honesty of it made her head swim. How did he do that? Say exactly what she wanted to hear?

He walked her to her door, his hand in his pockets. When they reached her threshold, he stepped back slightly, giving her space. Giovanni was once again the perfect gentleman. She fought not to ask him inside. Slow down, Paige.

“Ball’s still in your court,” he said, voice low and sure. “I’m ready whenever you are.” Then he pressed a kiss to her forehead—a gesture too soft for the way she made him feel—and turned to head home.

But then he hesitated, his hand lingering on hers for a second longer than necessary. “You know what happens when you hold onto fear too long right?”

She shook her head, keys dangling from her fingers.

“You miss the ride,” he said simply. “And I promise you, Paige Bishop, I’m the kind of ride worth taking.”

With that, he turned and walked back to his car, his silhouette cutting a line through the moonlight. He didn’t look back, didn’t try to steal one more kiss, didn’t try to wheedle his way inside. He left her with a promise and the space to decide what to do with it.

Paige watched until his taillights disappeared around the corner and went inside.

She melted against the door with a smile on her face.

Under no circumstances would she allow herself to fall in love with Giovanni Dowlen.

But as she pressed her fingers to lips still warm from his nearness, she knew it was possibly already too late.

“Shit.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:48 am

Sunday afternoon sun filtered through the park trees where the women had spread their blanket for their weekly check-in.

Between mom life, work, and marriage, they'd promised not to forget each other.

Blake sprawled across the blanket popping grapes like royalty, unbothered and unapologetic, the way she'd always been.

Taylor had her nose in a book while Kennedy was being Kennedy.

Children's laughter drifted from the nearby playground when Paige asked, "What's a girl to do, y'all?"

Her friends all looked up at once, replies tumbling over each other like they'd been waiting for this very question since she told them about Giovanni.

"Call him," Blake urged.

"Jump on that. Immediately," Kennedy added.

The group cracked up like this was all a joke. But Paige wasn't laughing. Her thumb hovered over her phone screen like her thumb was broken. This wasn't light. She didn't need jokes, she needed her girls to talk her off the ledge or push her over it. No in between.

"I feel ganged up on," Paige muttered, sliding her shades down enough to show the war going on behind her eyes.

Everyone was chilling, living their best life, while Paige's romantic hesitation was eating her alive.

"That's because you are doing too much. The man sat with your daddy. That ain't a red flag, that's a husband starter kit. What's not clicking?"

Taylor chimed in from her spot on the edge of the blanket, casually reading on her Kindle, while keeping one eye on Denver, who was attempting to climb the baby slide.

"Girl, it's been a week. He left the ball in your court, and you haven't bounced it once. That's just disrespectful."

Kennedi leaned forward from her camping chair, designer sunglasses pushed up into her hair like she'd been waiting for this moment, and she had. She'd missed her girls and being a part of their daily lives. Now that she was back, she had thoughts.

"Exactly. Stop trying to protect your peace so hard that you miss the party. That man is fine, available, and acting right. What else do you want? A notarized letter? A chariot? Or that little naked baby?"

Paige smirked, adjusting her head scarf. "I'm saying, I don't need a man right now. I just peeled JT off me. I ain't jumping back into anybody's arms. I'm not pressed."

"And again. JT never mattered and never counted."

Two weeks had passed since Giovanni stopped traffic for her and rearranged her priorities, and one week since their spontaneous trip to the drag strip.

She hadn't called, and neither had he. The silence had killed her softly.

She spent her nights wondering if the feeling in her chest was heartburn or a sign from God.

“I guess we had fun, and maybe we should leave it at that.” Paige shrugged, but her friends could see right through her. “He’s got his business and TV show. I got my shit.”

“Mmm,” Blake drawled, tossing a grape in her mouth. “You’re lying.”

“I’m saying,” Paige doubled down, “It’s fast and you know I don’t play the radio with men.”

“Fast is relative,” Blake said, dropping another grape in her mouth. “It’s not fast if it feels right.”

“And how would she know? She hasn’t even picked up the phone,” Taylor added. “I’ve never known you to be a scary hoe.”

“Bitch, please. Ain’t no hoe in me. That’s what got me in this conundrum now,” Paige kissed her teeth with a sly grin, because she had indeed been a hoe. Her thumb still hovered over the unsent message. “What if he was being nice? What if it was a one-time thing?”

“If it was a fifth, we’d all be drunk,” Taylor said, rolling her eyes. “Learn from us, friend. We ran when we should’ve been leaning in.”

“Speak for yourself,” Blake cut in. “I made Emon work for it, but I never ran. There was no way I was letting somebody else have my man.” She locked eyes with Paige.

“If there’s a slim chance you’d be ready to go toe-to-toe with a woman the way you handled Clarisha back in the day, then call the man.”

Paige was full of shit, and she knew it. Giovanni had made it very clear, she'd signed her name to an invisible agreement. It simply hadn't gone into effect yet.

"If he's anything like the men over there, you can run, girl, but you can't hide. He will continue to pursue you. It's a game now, and you're the prey. Enjoy or grow a pair and let the man love you. It's easier that way."

"Because what are we even talking about?" Kennedy threw her hands up, bangles jingling at her wrists. "If you don't call that man and let him know you thinking about him, I will. And I'll say it was from all of us."

They all laughed, but Paige sat with it for a second; her head was starting to ache, mostly because everyone was acting like this was supposed to be simple.

You didn't just hand your heart over. And he hadn't reached out either.

She didn't give a damn about the ball being in her court. She expected him to check in on her.

"Y'all know why I'm hesitating. Why y'all playing?"

"Perry told me himself that he liked Gio. And only a real man would do what he did for you," Blake said. "And who you keep getting ready to text?"

"It's work."

"Girl, it's Sunday. You gotta stop using that line," Taylor added with a giggle.

"Still," Paige said, chin lifted, "Y'all know me. I'm good. I'm focused. I'm booked. I'm--"

“-full of shit,” Blake interrupted. Causing the group to fall out in laughter.

“And you said he still got that kitty purring two weeks later. I would’ve been folded,” Kennedy added.

Paige rolled her eyes so hard it hurt. “I ain’t say all that.”

But the truth was worse. She still felt him, everywhere. She smelled him. The way he said her name lingered. Things had shifted, stupid shit, like her playlist. She’d been on cloud nine since that night. But she couldn’t give in so soon, and with no guarantees. Absolutely not.

Emon approached the blanket, his grin wide as he caught the tail end of their conversation. He had one-year-old EJ on his back.

“Y’all still harassing my dawg about my cousin?” he asked, setting EJ down with a sippy cup.

Paige shot him a warning look. “Don’t join them, please.”

“Too late,” Emon replied, his smile knowing and slightly too smug. “G, told me everything.”

“Everything?” Paige repeated, heat creeping up her neck.

“Enough,” Emon clarified, winking. “Look, he’s out of town until Wednesday. The TV deal is moving, especially after the footage from the car show. You see it?”

“No, I haven’t. I witnessed it.”

“Look at it,” Emon nodded like he knew something she didn’t.

“See?” Kennedy pounced immediately. “That’s even more reason to call him. You got time to get your shit together without him showing up at your door looking all fine and throwing off your concentration.”

“Plus,” Blake added, leaning back on her elbows, “absence makes the heart grow fonder. Or the coochie get lonelier. Either way, it works in your favor.”

“Blake!” Paige laughed despite herself, tossing a cracker at her cousin.

“What? I’m only saying what we’re all thinking,” Blake shrugged, unrepentant.

The park bustled around them, families enjoying the perfect weather, couples walking hand in hand, life happening in all its messy, beautiful chaos.

Two weeks ago, she’d been drowning in responsibility, barely keeping her head above water. Today, she sat among family, feeling lighter somehow, even though nothing about her circumstances had changed. Except for one thing.

Giovanni Dowlen had walked into her life with those knowing eyes and open arms, offering something she didn’t know she was allowed to want, presence without demands, support without strings, space without abandonment. But her favorite of all, consistency.

Maybe her friends were right. Maybe it was time to stop fighting the current. Maybe it was time to make the call. But maybe they were wrong and love didn’t come so easy to others like it did for them.

But first, before she let her doubts take over her mind and stress her even more, she walked to her car and pulled out her phone. She needed to see the video.

She opened Instagram and smiled when his face popped up in her feed.

Scroll after scroll, the car show filled her screen, him shaking hands, laughing with kids, posing in front of his builds, and others.

Her mind wandered to that night. The way he'd handled her body with care each time.

He'd gifted her enough orgasms to hold her over for another year.

The breakfast and the foot rub. Any woman would be beating down his door. So why wasn't she?

Pulling herself from her reminiscing, she found the video and hit play. She was expecting a general recap of pictures of the cars, smiling kids, and the vendors. But halfway through, the clip slowed and rewound, then played in slow motion, the moment he stepped out of his car and saw her.

Her hand flew to her mouth as butterflies filled her belly. She looked around like someone was watching her before pressing play again.

She watched him walk toward her like she was the only thing he saw. Like he'd been waiting to find her in a crowd of noise and movement.

Her friends were right, she did want this.

She'd been praying for someone to look at her like he did.

To handle her with the kind of care that was personal and custom, like his Monte.

She wanted someone to offer something she didn't have to chase, visit, compromise, or survive in order to have.

One day, she'd trust enough. Be shown enough.

Her fear was letting go of her apprehension and then losing herself.

She couldn't gamble with her heart; it was too sensitive, too tender for games and playing around with no regard for other people.

She didn't get that vibe from Giovanni, but a man could say anything to get what he wanted.

And he had for sure said all the right things.

But as she watched the video for the third time, she muttered, "Maybe it is Giovanni."

#

Los Angeles

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:48 am

On the other side of the map, Giovanni adjusted his watch and followed his sister through a set of revolving doors, trying to stay focused.

He was annoyed, and for multiple reasons, but he understood business had to be handled.

He'd worry about his missing lady later.

This was day one of many meetings it would take to get the show up and running.

He couldn't lie, his mind wasn't fully in it. He was irritated, not because the schedule was packed, but because today came with a surprise he hadn't prepared for. It was just like the devil to send a storm when you were trying to get right and enjoy your blessings.

His ex, Sienna, of all the people, was back in his orbit after two years.

Apparently, she had weaseled her way into another foolish man's life.

Now her phone calls made sense. This was a coincidence, but not one she didn't know was coming.

He hadn't seen her in years, and now here she was, hovering at his shoulder, breathing the same air as if she still belonged anywhere near him.

The shit didn't sit right. Because honestly? She was lucky she was still alive after stealing his fucking money and disappearing. Anybody else would've met the barrel

of his gun. But she was slick, slippery, and she knew how close to the line to skate.

“G,” Spirit said, pulling him slightly to the side as they neared security. “I know your mind is scrambled. I overheard you talking to Momma about this Paige girl. Get your head in the game. You’re no good to her if you don’t handle this and lay the foundation for the future.”

“Spirit, what are you going on about? I’m good. You and ma talk too damn much.”

“Giovanni, please. Lie to someone who doesn’t know everything about you.” She raised an eyebrow. “You’re in love. Or something close. And it’s okay. But business first. If she’s the one, she’ll be there when we get back.”

“I hear you.”

But those words you’re in love bounced around in his head.

In love?

Hell nah.

He couldn’t be.

Or could he? He’d been showing signs. Acting off. Sad in her absence, even.

He loved her laugh, loved her smile, loved the way she invaded his space. But was he in love? A man in love wouldn’t be giving Paige space he didn’t want to give. Spirit saw it. She didn’t miss shit. And that’s why she was his number one, his partner, and the highest paid person on his team.

“Do more than hear me. Get it together.”

They'd agreed to take this Sunday meeting because the exec was flying out Monday morning, and Spirit wasn't the type to wait on anyone else's timeline. If they wanted the deal, it was now. Still, the energy felt off the moment they stepped in.

Sienna being around had a lot to do with it.

Her spirit could make a snake shiver. She was cold-blooded and a mooch.

Brokenhearted and broke in the pockets. She clacked now in front of them in sky-high heels, swinging her hips like someone had asked her to perform.

Giovanni wasn't looking. He hadn't looked in years.

Sienna was always about two things, money and a good time.

What made her dangerous wasn't the recklessness; it was the performance .

The illusion. She played the long con. Watched him, studied him, mirrored him.

Said all the right shit, right when he needed to hear it. Back then, he didn't see the trap.

Paige was the complete opposite. She said what she meant. No performance, no pretense. Her energy was real, undeniable, and honest. He felt it in his bones. She wasn't built to break people down. She didn't weaponize love or move with manipulation.

His Paige was a giver. A lover. She moved with care, even when life gave her every reason not to. Where Sienna played power games, Paige offered connection—unfiltered and without ego.

Sienna was part swindler, part actress, and she played her role like she trained at Juilliard. Giovanni hadn't caught it until Cleveland, pockets light, blindsided. She ran off with thirty bands and left a fake apology on the dresser. The moment she got what she wanted; she vanished.

And that was his flaw: he gave too much, too fast. Trusted too easily. Especially when a woman looked like she wanted to stay. This was why Paige had him rattled; she was trying to slip past him but also lean in. She wanted to trust him; the same way he wanted to trust her. Why was she fighting it?

"Hey, Giovanni, long time no see."

He ignored her. No doubt, Sienna was fine as a muthafucka.

Put you in the mind of Karrueche, but thicker.

But her upbringing put you in the mind of the runt in a litter.

Pretty to look at, but not good for a muthafuckin thing.

Back then, he'd chalked it up to lust. To being young and wild.

But seeing her again, all these years later, smiling like she hadn't almost ruined everything he worked for, that had him ready to set it off.

He was healed from it, but he'd never forget and never ever let her get the drop on him again.

"You good?" Spirit asked without looking at him. She clocked her from the start.

She'd knock her ass out if she fumbled this or created an issue for Giovanni. Period.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Giovanni muttered His expression stone-cold. “Let’s eat.”

The conference room looked like all the others: bottled water, glass walls, shiny notepads, and everyone wearing their best poker face. They’d soon learn it didn’t matter. Spirit didn’t bluff, and she didn’t miss.

Darren Reese, the exec, stood and extended his hand. “Giovanni. Spirit. Glad you made it. Sienna said great things about you. Small world, huh?”

Spirit didn’t sit. She placed her folder on the table and gave a smile that wasn’t sweet, it was professional.

“She talks more than she delivers,” Spirit said, eyes cutting to Sienna. “But we’re here for the opportunity. Not the side commentary. Or the reminiscing.”

Sienna flinched, forgetting his sister had a sharp tongue. Darren let out an uneasy laugh and motioned for everyone to sit.

After introductions and a recap of the agenda, Spirit ran point. She spoke like she already owned the show. The concept, growth potential, community reach, merch opportunities, and streaming projections were laid out. She gave them strategy and vision.

Giovanni stayed quiet. Played his position. Spirit didn’t need him; he was the face and the brain behind the builds.

His phone buzzed under the table causing him to sit up straighter.

Paige: I know you’re out of town, but I was thinking about you.

That little text cooled every part of him.

Giovanni: Been carrying this phone everywhere, waiting to see your name pop up. Almost gave in and called you a hundred times.

Paige: Stop. LOL!

Giovanni: I'll be back home Wednesday. Pulling up on you the second I touch down. That's a promise.

He locked his screen and tuned back in.

Darren leaned back in his chair. "I think we've got something here. I'll loop in legal and get the paperwork started."

Spirit stood first. "Great. And make sure the contract reflects equity. We're not interested in exposure. We have that and plenty of it. We're building something. We want ownership or nothing."

Giovanni followed her lead.

Outside, as they hit the hallway, he exhaled.

"You chewed that up."

Spirit smirked. "Always do." She paused, looked over her shoulder. "But next time she shows up like this?"

Giovanni raised an eyebrow.

"I'm putting her through the glass. I owe her ass."

"Giovanni, can I speak to you?" her voice piped up from behind them.

He didn't want to. He preferred they never speak again. But he turned anyway.

"Alone," she added.

Spirit scoffed. "Hoe please. A bitch that steals ain't got shit to say that I can't hear. Bitch lost her morals and marbles."

"I've changed, Spirit. You never liked me to begin with. Giovanni, I owe you an apology. I'm sorry for how I did you."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. He wouldn't call her out her name, that would mean he still cared. But a bitch was gon' be a bitch, and a hoe a hoe. There were two things he'd never seen: a UFO, and a hoe that wouldn't go.

And he could tell she'd already sunk her fangs into Darren.

"No, you owe me thirty fucking thousand dollars. Get that and then holla at me. I ain't interested in your lame ass apologies. What's done is done."

And with that, he turned and kept it moving. Spirit matched his stride, her satisfaction radiating without a word.

Back in the hotel suite, Giovanni paced the length of the balcony, the Los Angeles skyline sprawled before him.

His phone weighed heavily in his hand as he scrolled through his gallery, landing on a candid shot of Paige from that night at the dragstrip.

Her head was thrown back in laughter, gold hoops catching the light, completely unaware of the camera or how beautiful she looked in that moment.

The meeting had gone well despite Sienna's unwelcome appearance, but he couldn't focus on the business win. His mind kept circling back to Coupeville. Back to Paige.

Giovanni pulled up the website for the florist in Coupeville. He chose a bouquet of deep red and white roses with sprigs of lavender, it was elegant but not trying too hard. She loved lavender and she loved red roses. He'd learned that at the drag strip.

In the message field, he kept it brief:

'Thinking about you too. Home soon.' – Vanni

He paid, then stepped to the railing, looking east toward the place where his heart had unexpectedly taken root.

The business was important, the show was his legacy, but for the first time in his life, Giovanni Terrell Dowlen was building something that had nothing to do with engines or chrome.

Something that might be the most important project he'd ever undertaken.

And he couldn't wait to get back to the workbench.

Later, after a long shower that did nothing to wash away his restlessness, Giovanni's phone buzzed on the nightstand.

Paige's name lit up the screen. And a smile graced his face.

"Hey, this is a nice surprise."

"The roses are beautiful. A text wouldn't cut it." her voice came through warmly.

“Hhm that means I did a good job.”

“You nailed it. I love them.”

“Good,” he replied, settling back against the headboard. “I wanted to let you know you’d been on my mind too.”

There was a pause, and he could almost see her smile through the phone.

“The lavender's my favorite; it works so well against the red. How’d you put that together?”

“I don't know. Everything about you is perfectly in contrast. The roses are bold, but the lavenders soft. Like you,” he said simply. It was corny but it was true. Paige was both sugar and spice and he couldn’t get enough.

“Wow,” she croaked out. “Thank you, Vanni. They made my whole day”

Something in her voice—the way she said his name, the genuine appreciation—settled the restless energy that had been eating at him all day.

“That was the point,” he said. “Get some rest, P.”

“You too.” She said it soft, just before the line went still.

Giovanni smiled in the dark, phone still pressed to his ear long after she'd hung up. His boys would be clowning him if they could see him right now. He shook his head and laid back to watch the game. Wednesday couldn’t come fast enough.

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Giovanni had finally made it back to Coupeville, his home, his peace. Her text and call had made the last three days harder than they needed to be. Business had gotten done, deals moved, contracts in motion, networks impressed, but he'd been distracted the whole damn time.

Now that he was back, his body told him to go straight to his house, take a hot shower, and sleep off the jet lag and the exhaustion of the last few days.

He hated traveling, it was such a hassle.

It drained him, and after shaking hands and smiling for multiple days, his social battery was depleted, but he made a promise.

He moved on autopilot, his heart was already twenty minutes down the road, pulling into the parking lot at Coupeville Federal Bank. He'd promised her that the moment he touched down, he'd be on her. No fluff. No delay. And absolutely no broken promises.

The ride was easy for him. The kind of solo drive that gave him, a conflicted man, time to think. Traffic had thickened on the interstate outside the city, but he didn't mind it. It gave him room to breathe. Space to reflect.

A lot had changed in a short time. Business was booming, opportunities flying in faster than he could catch them. What felt like the right time to bring Paige into his world was now starting to feel like good intentions colliding with bad timing.

He'd be flying back and forth. Press tours. Filming schedules. Media training. Would

she understand that kind of chaos? Could she? Did he want that distance? He was jumping the gun, and he knew that. But he knew him, and if he wanted something, he'd stop at nothing to get it.

But damn, he couldn't wait to see her.

Scrolling through her Instagram wasn't cutting it anymore.

Watching her post quotes and thirst trap pictures with her little sarcastic captions was cute, but it wasn't her.

He missed her voice. Missed the way she said his name.

Missed the way she smelled. That warm vanilla and shea butter that clung to her skin was a love note he'd like to read over and over.

His phone buzzed against the console.

"Hey ma, what's up?"

"Hey son. What you doing in town? Shouldn't you be home resting?"

He looked around, trying to figure out where she was hiding to be this deep in his business. He didn't see her, but he could hear that grin in her voice.

"I got business to handle before I duck off for a minute. How do you know I'm in town anyway?"

"I got eyes. I left the grocery store with ViceAnne not too long ago."

He closed his eyes. There it was. This is exactly why he moved to Haven Springs,

this damn town was too small sometimes.

“Going to see Paige?” she sang.

“Ma. For real. Y’all gotta chill. I didn’t tell you she worked in town.”

“Vicey told me. And I don’t know why you actin’ so damn weird. You’re a grown man, Gio. As long as she got some business about herself and ain’t no thief, you’ll get no issues from me.”

She paused, then laughed. “I only wanted to mess with you. Come see me when you reemerge. I’ll cook for you.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. She knew him too well. He was known to duck off from the world when his soul needed quiet. That’s why he respected Paige’s need for space so much, because he understood it .

“Love you, ma.”

“And you know I love you. Tell her I said hi.”

She couldn’t resist. He smiled, ending the call, and eased his car into a parking spot near the side entrance of the bank, the one not everyone used. Not to mention he didn’t like risking his shit getting hit.

He cut the engine, sat still for a second.

He inhaled deeply, then pulled the mirror down. He adjusted the collar on his Polo, made sure his chain was straight, brushed a hand down his beard, and stepped out.

Inside, the bank was cool, clean, and professional.

And then there was her .

Behind the glass wall that framed her office, Paige was on the phone, nodding, jotting notes, flipping tabs on her screen. Handling shit and looking amazing doing it. She wore a powder blue silk pants set. Her hair was straight today with a part down the middle.

Giovanni slowed his steps, for a moment, and watched. She was breathtaking.

This was different. This wasn't Sienna with her fake networking and forced laughter, swinging from man to man, hoping one of them was gullible enough to lift her. This was a woman who ran her world .

She didn't need a seat at the table. She built the damn thing.

She looked up and caught his eye through the glass, her expression shifted. Shock. But soon something in her face brightened, and her cheeks rose. Her lips parted slightly, like she was processing the fact that he did what he said he would.

He gave her a nod and tossed his hands up.

A second later, she buzzed him in.

"I can't believe you pulled up on me at work," Paige said, standing as he stepped in.

"I said the second I touched down." Giovanni closed the door behind him. "And I meant that."

Paige looked him over, and she didn't try to hide it. Giovanni looked good in his purple Polo shirt, his arms bulged and flexed against the fabric. But the limp in the creased up jeans, made her bite her lip. "You look tired, but you look good. How was

your flight? Trip?"

"I am tired, baby real shit." He cracked a small smile. "But not enough to skip laying eyes on you again. Tell me something good."

Paige attempted to look unimpressed but couldn't deny the way her cheeks pulled into a smile.

She stepped around her desk and folded her arms. Like that might keep her from melting too fast. He came closer and wrapped his arms around her, he was happy to see her.

She hugged him back, enjoying the feel of his arms around her. She exhaled while he inhaled.

"Ashton left for maternity leave early," she explained. "So, I've been here solo for the past week."

"And how did you do?"

"Good, no meltdowns so far. Printer getting on my damn nerves but forget that." Paige leaned back against the edge of her desk. "Why are you here?"

"I told you. I wanted to see you." Giovanni stepped closer. "I didn't wanna wait. And I wanted to see you in your element, too. I needed to see if you earned your spot in the paper."

"Boy, please, I most certainly did. I can't believe you saw that," she said blushing. Her jaws were hurting trying to keep her smiles at bay.

He stepped in closer, and that familiar scent wrapped around him, vanilla, shea, and

something floral. He looked around. At the tidy desk, the framed photo of her and Perry, the post-it notes lining the edge of her monitor. All the little signs that this space belonged to her.

“You run this.”

“I do.” She shrugged, but there was pride in her voice.

“You look good doing it. I like work Paige, all dressed up and in charge.”

“You’re just saying that ‘cause you’re tired and delirious.”

“I’m saying it ‘cause it’s true.”

There was a beat of silence between them.

Her aura filled the room. Paige was larger than life in his eyes, and he wanted her to take up as much space as she wanted.

Take up as much of his time as physically possible.

The call was coming from inside the house.

He’d do whatever it took to make Paige his woman.

“Have you eaten?” he asked, finally checking his watch. It was about one in the afternoon, and he spotted two empty Red Bulls on her desk.

“Not yet.”

“Come with me. Let me feed you.”

Paige arched an eyebrow. “I can’t dip out. Lunch will have to be at my desk until Ashton is back. But I wish.”

“You’re the boss, right?”

“I am,” she said, biting her lip to keep from smiling. “But I should finish up a few things first.”

“I get it.” Giovanni nodded. “I need to decompress anyway. Shower. Lay flat for a second.”

She nodded, too, like that was expected. But he didn’t move to leave yet.

He stepped a little closer and shrugged, voice dipping lower. “But if you’re free later, I want you to come through. Nothing crazy. Just food, some music, maybe some silence if you need it. Or something a little louder if that’s where you at.”

Time stretched between them as Paige twiddled her thumbs.

“Only if you want to, though,” he added. “I ain’t here to throw your day off. I want a little more of your time. If you got it.”

Paige didn’t answer right away. He caught the flicker in her eyes. Quick, small, but it was there, the hesitation said she still wasn’t sure what his showing up meant.

“Giovanni, I can’t.” The words came out automatically, her default self-protection.

“Why not? You know you want to.” His eyes held hers, refusing to let her hide from him.

She swallowed, shoulders dropping slightly. “I have to come in early tomorrow. And

I should check on my dad after work. And...”

“Excuses. Bullshit. Deny yourself but don’t deny me,” he cut in, his words gentle but leaving no room for argument. “I want your time. And I’d like to not have to beg for it, but I’m not above that.”

Something in his directness broke through her resistance. No games, no manipulation, honest want. It was refreshing. Disarming. Her lips quirked into a smile despite herself.

“Fine, but are you cooking?” she teased, folding her arms.

“I got a chef on standby,” he said with a smirk. “Name’s DoorDash. Michelin star, depending on how fast they get there.”

She shook her head, a smile blooming wide and bright enough to fill the room. She didn’t bother hiding it anymore.

“I’ll let you know when I wrap up.”

“No rush. I’ll be at the crib.”

He moved toward the door, then turned back with one last offer, “Text me what you want to eat tonight. I’ll make sure it’s waiting.”

When Giovanni made it outside, he jogged across the street, eyes scanning the row of small lunch spots and food trucks until he landed on the obvious option: Mexican Soul food.

He wasn’t leaving without feeding her. Not after seeing how hard, she worked.

Not when he could make her day a little easier.

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“Hello sir, I’m Glenda, Welcome to Lulu’s. what can I get for you?” Glenda asked when he got to the window.

“You know Paige at the bank?” he nodded in that direction before turning back.

“Yeah, of course. Everyone knows Paige. She helped us get the loan for this food truck.”

“That’s what’s up, I need to feed her today. Can you help me with that?”

“Ouu, ok.” She purred, hyping him up. Giovanni shrugged as she yelled toward the back of the food truck. “She’s a uhm... Bobby, Paige at the bank, what’s her order?”

Giovanni could hear a man running off the order.

“Steak quesadilla. Extra sour cream and cilantro. And she likes the fresh cucumbers on the side. I always give her extra.”

“That’s what I need, then. She like anything else? Any other trucks or spots she fuck with?”

“I mean, she practically helped all the food trucks on the strip get a loan. We love Paige. What’s up?”

“I’m a busy man, but I need to ensure Paige eats every day of the week. Until further notice. How much to do that for me? And get the others involved.”

“Young man, that is the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard. I’d love to help. I’m a hopeless romantic,” she swooned, but her face contorted before she yelled back to Bobby again. “Bobby, you never did this for me. Damn shame, I had all your big head babies and all I get in return is a damn headache.”

“Shut up, Glenda.”

“Look, we got it. I’ll get in our group chat, and we will take turns.”

“I’m forever grateful. What do I owe you?”

” Glenda bit her lip. She loved Paige and would do it for free, but this man before her didn’t look like the type to go for that.

“Ok, I see you’re conflicted, that means she’s special.

I respect that. I’ll give each truck \$500 a week to feed her and feed others, too, until the money runs out.

I don’t care, make sure she eats that’s the job. ”

“Deal.”

“Now, Bobby, this is effort. You used to do this for me.” Finally, Bobby came to the front and grabbed Glenda by the waist.

“So our Sunday ice cream dates chopped liver now? Young man, get on from here making it hard for us.” Bobby winked and extended his hand.

Giovanni shook Bobby’s hand, nodding once before sliding his business card across the counter. “Anything y’all need, hit me.”

“We gotchu,” Bobby said. “And tell Paige her lunch crew said she’s deeply loved out here.”

Glenda smirked. “And tell her I said if she don’t lock you down, I’m sending my daughter Tamara after you.” Giovanni laughed.

“Nah, I’m off the market,” he said with a wink. Glenda slapped her towel down with a laugh as he walked off. He pulled his phone from his pocket and snapped a picture of the food trucks lined up.

Giovanni: Heard you put the whole block on. My type of lady.

Paige: How do you know that? And what are you doing?

Giovanni: Streets talking. And I had to feed you.

Paige: Thank you. OMG, I didn’t know what I was going to do for lunch today.

He smiled.

Giovanni: I got lunch every day until Ashton is back. No back talk either.

Paige: Are you serious?

Paige set the phone down, smiling so hard her cheeks hurt. She knew she might be in trouble, good trouble.

Giovanni: Enjoy the rest of your shift.

With that handled, Giovanni headed toward his car. He slid in, and her vanilla scent filled his nostrils. He shook his head as he slipped the keys into the ignition and

started the engine. His mind was already on her smile. Already on what the night might do.

But first?

He needed a nap. Tonight, might require more energy than he thought.

#

Paige

Paige couldn't help but giggle at herself as she sat in her office, halfway through the quesadilla that had appeared like magic on her desk.

The steak was perfectly seasoned, the cheese stretched into those satisfying strings with each bite, and the container of extra sour cream on the side was exactly what she would have asked for.

She shook her head, muttering, "Damn," into the stillness.

It was lunch, nothing to write home about, but the thoughtfulness of it made her feel important in a way she wasn't used to.

But when she thought back to the flowers, he sent her, there was nothing about his actions that was just anything .

The man was consistent and a man of his word, she'd give him that much.

Now she was in her car, the bank finally locked behind her, the sky dimming and the streetlights starting to flicker to life.

Her mind kept drifting back to Giovanni's visit and offer from earlier, wondering what exactly he had planned for tonight.

Whatever it was, she found herself looking forward to it.

She drummed her nails against the steering wheel, Giovanni's address glowing on her phone's GPS. His casual "just come on in if I'm knocked out. Code is 8732" text made her smile, refreshing honesty from a man who didn't need to posture.

Her father could learn a thing or two. He was always acting like tiredness was something only the weak experience. Now he had no choice but to acknowledge his limitations, and there was a strange beauty in that surrender.

The thought of her father reminded her she should call and check in before she got to Giovanni's. Making sure Perry took his evening meds was still part of her routine, even on nights like this when her mind was elsewhere.

"Call Daddy," she instructed the car's system.

The phone rang a few times before he answered.

"Daddy, you feeling okay? How was today?"

She'd finally gotten his Medicaid and Disability approvals pushed through.

Perry now had income, his own little place, and access to healthcare benefits that would take some weight off her shoulders.

Assisted living communities weren't cheap, and she was grateful for the help.

There was no way she could keep dishing out two grand a month and stay sane.

“Yeah, today was a good day. I told you things would work out.”

“You did.” She smiled softly. “Okay, I wanted to check on you before I headed home. Call if you need me.”

“Uh huh. You ain’t never rushed me off the phone. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Daddy. Work was work, and now I’m calling it a night with some food and silence.” She lied smoothly, well, not entirely. Food and silence would be involved, but she wouldn’t be alone.

He had asked about Giovanni a few times, but she’d been dodging the questions. Not because she was hiding anything, but because she honestly didn’t know what this was yet. And she wasn’t about to start explaining something she hadn’t even figured out herself.

“Ok, well, whatever you do, enjoy yourself and know that you deserve it.”

She wasn’t used to this kind of freedom, not from him, not from herself. Part of her wanted to embrace it fully. The other part kept waiting for the sky to fall. Letting go too much had always come with consequences.

She blew a raspberry and tapped her nails against the steering wheel, again something she did when she was nervous.

The light was green now, and she took off.

As she drove, the butterflies in her stomach multiplied.

It wasn’t fear exactly. It was that delicious anticipation that came from actually liking somebody.

Liking the rhythm they were building. Liking the thought of pulling up somewhere and knowing someone was waiting, not because they needed something, but because they genuinely wanted her presence.

She wasn't used to this, looking forward to someone instead of calculating what they might take from her.

And damn if it didn't feel good to just... be wanted.

She made the turn slowly, headlights sweeping across the gate Giovanni had described. It opened for her in one long, unhurried sweep, like it had been expecting her.

The driveway curved longer than she anticipated, lined with subtle lighting and meticulously trimmed hedges that spoke of attention to detail.

When the house came into view, Paige eased off the gas allowing her mind to catch up.

She hadn't realized Giovanni was living quite like this.

She wondered if he'd deliberately downplayed his success, and if so, why.

Paige's grip tightened slightly on the steering wheel as she took in the full view of the estate.

The house sprawled confidently against the sky.

The dark gray stone screamed elegance. She swallowed hard.

It wasn't that she felt out of place. Paige didn't do insecurity.

She'd been around men with money before; none of this impressed her to the point of thirst. But Giovanni had earned her respect, this was his hard work manifested on two acres of prime real estate.

This wasn't a house, it was an assertion about how he moved through the world. How he thought. What he valued.

She stepped out, locked the car, and made her way up the stone path to the front door. Her heels tapped quietly, but her thoughts were screaming. This wasn't just a dinner invite. It was him giving her access to his sanctuary.

Why was she here? Had she changed her mind? They needed to talk. But Lord help her, she kinda wanted to ride his dick and then talk. She was caught between deep conversations and deep strokes.

"Snap out of it," she said, coaching herself. She couldn't keep standing outside debating with herself. She typed in the code with a hand that betrayed her nerves, heart thumping, but face composed. The door beeped once, then clicked open.

Inside, it was quiet, cool air, open space, marble floors. Her heel tapped once and echoed. She stopped mid-step, not wanting to wake him. Carefully, she slid her shoes off and held them in one hand as she padded barefoot into the house.

There was a note stuck to a bottle of Calypso, near the entryway in his neat, handwriting.

Downstairs. Second door on the left.

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A grin appeared on her face, as she grabbed the drink and followed the direction past a sleek staircase and down a wide hallway, every detail around her clean, masculine, and lived-in. Like him. The basement stairs were lit by wall sconces that gave off a soft, golden hue.

“Second door on the left,” she murmured as she approached it.

She eased it open and paused.

Giovanni's man cave was everything she'd expected and more.

Dark hardwood floors stretched beneath a massive sectional that looked ready to swallow visitors whole, all facing a wall-mounted TV the size of a small billboard.

Framed photos of celebrity clients mixed with vintage street signs hung like trophies along the walls.

In the corner, a black gun safe sat slightly open, a quiet reminder of the man he used to be and could still be if the situation called for it. And there he was.

Knocked out. Sweats slung low on his hips, a white ribbed tank clinging to his chest, durag tied tightly, one arm flung over the back of the couch like he'd started watching something and never made it past the intro. He looked peaceful in a way men like him rarely did, unguarded, vulnerable.

Paige stood in the doorway for a second longer than she meant to, her heart slowing from watching him. She stepped in quietly and sat beside him on the edge of the

couch. The smell of him, soap, skin, and wave grease.

She reached out gently, her fingers brushing his arm.

He stirred but didn't wake up.

Paige smirked, leaning back on her heels for a second. She looked at him. Drank him in like he did her all the time. The way his eyes relaxed. The way his chest rose and fell. Peace was attractive on him. Even in sleep, he looked like the kind of man you could fall for if you weren't careful.

She wasn't careful.

Quietly, she slipped one knee over his lap, easing her weight down onto him slowly. His body responded to the contact, even unconscious, his hands found her waist, his breathing became ragged, but he still didn't wake.

She moved forward, her mouth inches from his.

Then she ran the tip of her tongue across his top lip at a snail's pace.

"Vanni," she whispered.

His eyes fluttered open immediately, brows pinching, breath catching like he couldn't tell if this was a dream or not. But it was because his dick was up and ready to slide up in something.

Paige giggled, right in his face. "That was payback."

Giovanni blinked once, then again, his voice still thick with sleep. "Paige? Why you playing? Shoulda pulled this monster out."

“Mhmm.” She gave him one more slow kiss to the corner of his mouth before pulling back to look him in the eye. “Get up, nasty.”

He let out a soft groan, hands finding her hips like instinct. “This what we doin’ now? Wakin’ me up with tongue and attitude?”

She grinned, shifting in his lap slightly, to make her point. “Don’t act brand new. I owed you that.”

Paige braced her hands against his chest, feeling the heat of him under her palms. Her nails dragged lightly over the fabric of his tank, teasing, grounding herself. His hips were already moving under her, begging her to give into him.

“What else you owe me?” he asked again, voice rough, lip caught between his teeth.

She pressed closer, her lips brushing his chin as she playfully said, “A real kiss... but not yet.” Then she kissed the spot below his ear instead.

Giovanni let out a sharp breath, his fingers tightening on her hips like he was fighting the urge to flip her and take it right there.

“Stall me out, P,” he murmured, nipping at her jaw.

The sensation caused her back to arch forcing her breasts to press against his chest.

His hands slid down to her thighs, slow and heavy, gripping and massaging her lower back. She gasped and moaned when he rocked up again, the thick imprint of his dick hitting right where she was aching for relief.

“You tryna ride this dick or what?” he asked, voice barely above a growl. She answered by grinding down slow and deep until he hissed through his teeth while

gripping her waist tightly.

“Don’t do that unless you ready to pay the price,” he warned.

Paige smiled, “I’m good for it.”

And that was it. Giovanni sat up in one smooth motion, grabbing her under the thighs and pulling her even closer. Mouth on her neck, tongue hot, hands sliding up under her shirt. She panted, softening against him, every inch of her on fire.

The teasing was gone. So were the jokes.

All that was left was a silence so heavy it made her squirm.

Heat, hands, lips, and two people who had waited long enough.

She unbuttoned her shirt slowly, revealing perfect, perky breasts tucked into a powder blue lace bra to match her shirt.

Giovanni let out a low whistle, hands skimming her shoulders, guiding the fabric down and off like he was unwrapping a precious gift.

When she reached to pull off his tank, he let her, watching her eyes as the shirt cleared his chest. He grabbed her by the neck and stole a kiss, hungry, deep, full of everything he’d been holding back. Her lips still tasted like cherry gloss, and damn if that wasn’t becoming his favorite.

She stood and slid out of her pants, semi bald pussy all in his face glistening, slick, and most definitely warm.

“No panties again?” he muttered, eyes tracking every step she took. “Paige, baby, we

gotta talk about that. You out here with ass movin' like thunder rollin' in the deep.”

She smirked, heat glinting in her eyes. No words needed.

Giovanni maintained eye contact as he stripped down, pants and boxers dropping to the floor in one fluid motion.

His arousal stood proud between them, thick and imposing even in the dim glow from the TV behind them.

He sat back down with a mischievous grin on his face while he flexed, making his dick jump slightly.

Paige stepped toward him, pulled by something she couldn't deny anymore.

He moved like he'd been waiting—one strong arm wrapping around her waist, the other lifting her leg with surprising gentleness until her foot rested on his chest. He kissed her ankle and shook his head.

The position opened her completely. He traced a path of soft kisses upward, each one hotter than the last, until he sank lower, eyes locked on her as his mouth claimed the spot that had been calling to him all damn night.

There, he paused. Inhaled deeply, eyes fluttering closed for a moment as he savored her scent. Then, a taste, quick, electric, that made her lean closer, she was so thankful for that free Pilates class at Burn Central.

His tongue sampling what was to come had her leg trembling against his shoulder, a small betrayal of her need.

He caught her gaze, the corner of his mouth lifting in knowing satisfaction.

“Later,” he murmured, recognizing she was already beyond the point of patience. Foreplay could wait for another time, right now, she needed him inside her, and the feeling was entirely mutual. “Next time just say that.”

She nodded.

Giovanni grabbed a condom and slid it on as Paige watched through hooded eyes.

She was covered, but she could never be too careful.

With care and gentle strength, he guided her down, one hand settled on her neck as he eased her into place.

The pressure of his grip was both comforting and commanding, making sure she took him slow—deep, but never rushed.

She hissed, lip caught between her teeth. Took a second to adjust, to settle, to feel him.

And then she moved.

Slow at first, giving herself time to stretch around him. He filled her to the edge of pain, but it was the kind of ache she didn’t want to end. The kind that made her press her palm to his chest and ride it out, inch by inch.

Giovanni’s head fell back against the couch, lips parted, breath punching out of him. “Fuck, Paige...” She rolled her hips, clenched down just to feel him lose it. He cursed and grabbed her ass with both hands, holding her still for a second.

“You tryna kill me.” His voice came low, ragged, eyes locked on her like she was his only mission.

“Shut up and take it,” she whispered, leaning in, chest pressing against his.

She found a pace that made his thighs flex under her—slow grinds with just enough bounce to make his eyes shut tight.

He met her halfway, hips snapping up with more power than he probably meant to.

She moaned into his neck, nails dragging over his shoulders as sensation crept up her spine, hot and dizzying.

The couch creaked beneath them, a rhythmic beat in sync with the slick sound of skin meeting skin, and every time he shifted deeper, her breath hitched.

“Say you missed me,” he groaned, mouth at her collarbone now, kissing, biting.

“I did.”

“Say it like you mean it.”

She grabbed his face with both hands and kissed him hard, tongue and teeth and all the things.

“I missed you, Giovanni. A lot.”

He growled into her mouth, stood with her still clinging to him, and turned, laying her out across the massive sectional. Her legs locked around his waist before he could even settle.

Now it was him in control. He drove into her deep and fast, hands braced beside her head, eyes locked on her love face as he fucked her changing both his mind and hers.

Paige was gone.

Writhing under him, mouth open in a silent cry, hands squeezing his side. She needed something to hold onto before she came undone completely.

“Don’t hold that shit back from me,” he said, voice low and ragged with heat.

She nodded, biting her lip so hard it was almost bleeding. He slid a hand between them, thumb finding her clit, pressure just right. He slowed down, knowing that’s how she liked it when she was close.

“Come on, baby.” His tone left no room for hesitation.

And she did.

“Shit, shit.” she screamed. Legs shaking, body locking up, eyes rolling as her orgasm crashed through her and ripped the air from her lungs.

Giovanni followed a second later, burying his face in her neck with a deep groan as he emptied inside her, hips still grinding slow like he couldn’t stand the thought of pulling away.

When they finally stilled, breathless and heavy-limbed, he asked, “You still want to talk?”

Paige chuckled, voice hoarse. “Give me five minutes and some water. Then we can figure out how we make this work.”

And she meant it. They would have to figure it out.

She wanted more of Giovanni—and it wasn’t just the sex, though she had no problem

becoming a lifetime member of his club.

It was the way it all clicked . She couldn't explain it, and she didn't need to.

Her soul had already chosen him. It was her heart and mind finally catching up that sealed the deal.

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Pedro was back on his usual bullshit, leaning against the porch post, broom in hand, pretending to sweep but not even trying. She'd told him she was going on a date, and he was making it his mission to confirm his favorite neighbor was making smart choices. His words.

Paige adjusted her earrings in the mirror by the door and glanced out the front window. Sure enough, there he was, clocking everything.

It had been almost a week since she spent the night with Giovanni.

Since she slid into his lap, rode him into silence, and then curled up on his chest. They'd talked late into the night about what they wanted, what they needed, and how they'd navigate this thing between them.

She'd been amazed at how easy it was to say what she meant and wanted with and to him.

He'd built a safe space around them where her usual guardedness wasn't necessary.

He told her flat out he'd always be an ally.

They'd been stuck like glue since. Giovanni texted, called, sent her food like he'd promised. And he'd promised her one other thing, 'Next time I see you, it's not just in my house. I'm taking you out, somewhere nice.'

And now here he was. Right on time. Ready to take her out on the town. She'd checked in on her dad, talked to her momma, cleaned her house, and had an overall

dope day. She was doing her part in finding balance. Not overthinking. Handling what only she could and praying about the rest.

Paige stepped out onto her porch as Giovanni's car slowed to a stop at the curb. She didn't have to wonder if Pedro saw him; the man could clock the sound of the foreign car before it even turned the corner.

"Damn, girl," Pedro called out, eyebrows raised, "this the leftovers from the other night?"

She smirked, not missing a beat. "Hell no. You lookin' at a full course meal, fine, smart, and paid. And he's good with his hands. We STAN!"

"That's what I like to hear. We don't let just anyone eat off the plate."

She shook her head but smiled. "Trust me. He licked the plate clean."

The car door opened, and Giovanni stepped out, in a fitted short-sleeve button-down, fresh beard, gold chain catching the light from the sun setting. Everything about him said grown and sexy.

He glanced over at Pedro, gave a slight nod. Pedro pretended to faint, and Paige looked at him sideways, he was so dramatic.

She met Giovanni halfway, the click of her heels soft and even against the pavement, dress hugging her perfectly.

"You look amazing," he said, eyes dragging from her face to her hips and back. "These are for you."

He'd grabbed her some flowers, red roses that looked good against the black dress

she wore. She looked so sophisticated and sexy. The black strappy heel sandals completed her outfit and he couldn't help but get excited about eventually removing all this shit later on.

“Thank you, bae. Where are we headed?”

Giovanni's hand found her lower back, as he guided her to the passenger side. “You'll see. We got reservations and privacy.”

The ride downtown took twenty minutes. Giovanni's hand rested on her thigh whenever he wasn't shifting gears, his cologne mixed with the night air that flowed through the cracked windows.

Paige shifted closer, letting her hand cover his, savoring the warmth of his palm touching her skin.

They talked about everything and nothing, his trip to Los Angeles, her promotion progress, a funny story about his sister, and how her dad had been asking about him.

By the time they pulled up to Vincetto's Italian Bistro, she knew Blake must've had something to do with this.

The restaurant was their favorite place when they wanted to get fancy and spend some money.

And her cousin couldn't mind her business if she tried.

They loved the restaurant because it was low-key, upscale, but the food was to die for, and she loved pasta.

Giovanni handed his keys to the valet with a generous tip and offered Paige his arm.

“You ready?” he asked, eyes only for her despite the crowd milling around the entrance.

Paige smiled, sliding her arm through his, the weight of the week’s stress melting away under his unchanging gaze.

“Been ready,” she replied, and meant it in more ways than one.

They were seated on the balcony of Vincetto’s dim lighting, white tablecloth, and candles flickering. It was the perfect night for dinner outside. Giovanni had requested the balcony, low traffic, high intimacy. He didn’t want any interruptions.

Paige sat back, chin up, legs crossed, and sipped slowly.

She could feel him watching because he wasn’t trying to be subtle about it.

He wasn’t saying much either, but he didn’t have to.

Didn’t want too. He simply wanted to watch her, appreciate the curve of her lips, stare into her brown eyes and get lost in them.

“You good?” she asked, catching him staring.

“I’m great,” he said, not even pretending. “You make it easy to forget everything else.”

“What do you need to forget?”

“I don’t know if I wanna go that far into it with you tonight. I don’t want to run you off.”

“Don’t tell me you have a crazy number of kids and baby mommas to match.”

“Hell nah, my seed is reserved for my future wife. No bullshit.”

“I think we are past worrying about each other running off. If anything, life is going to come testing us. So, I’d rather you keep it one hundred with me now. Let me decide what I want to deal with.”

The waitress approached to take their order. Paige chose the seafood linguine while Giovanni opted for the lamb ragu. Once she left, he leaned in, forearms resting on the table.

“You’re right,” he said in agreement.

“I know.” She took a sip of her wine, eyes never leaving his. “Let’s talk.”

He took a breath. “I know the night at the house came out of nowhere. And I don’t regret anything about it, but I need you to know. I didn’t bring you there thinking that was it.”

Paige tilted her head. “Okay...”

“I got a lot happening,” he continued. “The show is moving. They greenlit the pilot. So for a little minute I’ll be back and forth out of town.”

“That’s big,” Paige said, and she meant it. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you.” His eyes dropped for a second, then lifted again, serious now. “But I’m not tryna be one of those men that disappear and then pop back up when it’s convenient. I want this to work. Us. Even if it means we gotta be intentional with how we move.”

She nodded slowly, the sincerity in his voice disarming. “Okay. That’s fair. But you know I’m here. My schedule is hectic at times, so it’ll give us some space. That’s not a bad thing.”

“I’m not saying I’ll always get it right,” he said, “but I’m not half-steppin’ with you, Paige. I’m all in if you are too.”

Paige took another sip of wine, “Ok, so what’s going to run me off. Because I’m going to be your biggest supporter and hopefully your peace through this process. I support what you are doing, Vanni.”

“Really? I remember you saying you weren’t what I was looking for. You remember that?”

“No need to bring up old shit. I wasn’t speaking from an informed place. Playa’s fuck up.”

Giovanni laughed softly and shook his head, “You funny. But speaking of old shit. My ex has somehow snuck her way back into my life. I’m not ever fucking with her again, but I ain’t want no bullshit coming to you and you be caught off guard.”

“Is she on bullshit?” Paige asked.

“Most likely, I’m not going to lie to you. Sienna is a ... Scamela Anderson type female, a swindler. Got me for 30k. I don’t know what the fuck she on.”

“Ohhh she’s that ex. Midwest. Are you still in love with her?”

“No.”

“Well... if she’s bold enough to act out in front of me, I hope she stretches first.”

Giovanni blinked, then broke into a deep laugh.

“I’m serious,” Paige said, shrugging like it wasn’t a threat, it was a fact. “I’m not worried about an ex. I’m not for the games. So don’t have me out here lookin’ stupid. If she’s in the room, that’s cool. Make sure she knows her place in it.”

He reached across the table, thumb brushing over her knuckles, his eyes fixed on hers with that intensity that always made her breath catch.

“She is so irrelevant, she doesn’t have a place in the room.” His voice carried a finality that closed the door on that topic. “But tell me what’s up with you? I don’t think I like going days without seeing you.”

“My dad made it onto the transplant list,” she said, surprising even herself by how fast the shift came. “He’s officially eligible. There’s still a wait, but... it’s progress. I won’t get my hopes up.”

Giovanni reached for her hand without hesitation, cradling it between both of his. “That’s big. I need to go see him. We should celebrate that.”

She squeezed his fingers, grateful for how he didn’t minimize the significance. “It is. But it’s also a reminder. I can’t waste time on things that don’t serve me. I’ve done the hiding, the settling, and ignoring my own needs for everybody else. I can’t do that anymore.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” he said, his thumb tracing patterns on her palm. “Not with me.”

“I want this too,” she admitted, her voice dropping to match the intimacy of the moment, “but I need to know that you don’t want me to solely focus all my life on you. Don’t get me wrong, I’m here, but I still need to be here for me and my dreams

too.”

Giovanni looked at her, no blink, no hesitation. “I respect that. I’ll be here to support you and those dreams. They matter to me, the same way you do. A woman with goals is exactly what I want. I’ll never make you choose between me and them.”

She nodded, eyes softer now, something inside her easing.

“So,” he said, sitting back as their plates were placed in front of them, the aroma of fresh herbs and seafood rising between them, “now that we know what it is... what’s next?”

Paige smiled, spearing a shrimp with her fork. “Next? You keep feeding me like this. And we keep being honest.”

“Food and honesty, huh?” He grinned. “That’s it?”

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“And one little other thing too. That’s it for now.” Her eyes sparkled.

Giovanni raised his glass. “Then here’s to for now.”

Paige clinked hers against his. “And making it beautiful as we go.”

They finished the night with more wine, more conversation, and a shared piece of cheesecake that had them fighting playfully over the last bite.

Of course, he let her have it. Giovanni was a lost cause.

He’d never been one to get distracted by the way someone ate food, but watching Paige lick her spoon, slurp up her noodles, and moan softly when the lemon sauce hit her tongue had him shifting in his seat.

Every little sound she made drove him crazy, had him thinking about their night at his place and how soon he could hear those sounds again.

They didn’t say much on the ride back. Only thing passing between them was shared small looks, soft smiles, the easy kind of quiet that only came when two people knew they’d cleared a hurdle and found themselves on the same side.

When they finally pulled up to her place, Paige unlocked her door, heels dangling from his hand as they made their way inside.

Giovanni followed her into her home, her scent enveloping him immediately - vanilla, coconut oil, it was uniquely her.

She didn't offer a grand tour. He didn't ask.

Instead, she tossed her purse on the entry table and led him straight to the balcony.

"Give me a sec," she said, slipping out the sliding glass door. "I need some air."

Giovanni followed behind her, hands in his pockets, leaning against the rail.

"I saw the video," Paige said finally, voice softer now. "The car show clip. That moment when you stopped traffic... when you stepped out of the car... that's why I reached out."

Giovanni turned to her, interest piqued. "Yeah?"

She nodded. "I knew you had eyes on me, but when I saw it from that angle... I felt like you were lookin' for me and maybe you didn't even notice."

He laughed. "I was. Earlier my folks were on my ass and I don't know when I left I felt like something big was going to happen."

Paige smirked.

"You were one of the best parts of that whole night."

They locked eyes again. Giovanni pulled her out of the chair by her hand, closing the space between them as they swayed.

No music was playing, none needed. He knew she liked to slow dance, and he'd be cheesier than all of Wisconsin for her.

He was going to win her heart, marry her, give her babies, happiness, help, safety,

and peace.

After their impromptu dance ended, they settled back into the balcony chairs.

Paige lit a blunt, the smoke curling into the night air between them.

Giovanni sat low in the chair beside her, arm draped casually over the back of her seat.

He wasn't smoking, but he didn't flinch when she did.

He sat there with that same calm stillness he always brought, being around her was its own kind of peace.

"This is crazy, you know? We did everything backwards. Now we talking about 'what's next.' That's some backwards shit."

He laughed low. "Way backwards. I don't even know your favorite color. You could be a serial killer or have a mean left hook, and I wouldn't know until it was too late."

She side-eyed him, lips curved. "It's cinnamon, by the way. My favorite color."

"Girl what? That ain't even a color. That's a spice."

"It's both," she shot back, flicking ash over the railing. "It's the color of the spice. Deep brown. Rich. Warm. Like me."

He turned to look at her then, "Yeah... yeah, that tracks. I'm calling you, Cinny from here on out."

"That's kinda cute." She laughed. "But seriously you don't care about us starting in

the middle?” she asked.

“Not at all.”

He angled his body toward her, fingers grazing hers. “I don’t care how it started, as long as it keeps going.”

Paige turned her head, resting her cheek on the top of the chair. “You ever think about what you’d be doing if it weren’t cars?”

He didn’t answer right away. Giovanni looked out over the parking lot, then down at his hands. A thoughtful silence settled between them as he considered her question.

“I wanted to be an artist,” he said eventually, voice quiet. “Like, pencil and ink. Sketching, painting. I used to draw all the time. But my pops... he was old school and a hard ass. Made it crystal clear that Black boys didn’t have the luxury of chasing dreams that didn’t pay bills.”

Paige shifted in her seat. “Damn. I’m sorry to hear that. Parents can be so shortsighted.”

“Yeah,” he affirmed with a nod. “Told me straight up, ‘Art don’t feed families. Ain’t no pension in paint.’ I got mad at first, rebelled. Then I understood. He was trying to protect me in his own way. He didn’t want me living off hope or becoming a struggling artist or bum.”

She stared at him, chest tight. “But you still found a way. That’s amazing and it takes fortitude.”

“And always will. Remember that.” Giovanni looked over at her, eyes tired but proud.

“But yeah. That’s what the cars became. My art, just..

. metal and movement instead of brush and canvas.

Every build I touch is a version of what I never got to do.

It’s why I’m picky about the projects. It’s why I take my time.

I obsess over every detail. Cars have history, story, and nostalgia attached to them, and it’s my job to tell that. ”

Her voice dropped low. “And you tell it beautifully.”

His expression stilled. Her words had reached a part of him he kept locked behind steel doors. He didn’t smile. He didn’t speak right away. He stared at her, the recognition clear in his eyes; he’d needed someone to say exactly that.

She settled back into the moment. “I always thought I’d be working with numbers. I’ve always been good with them. My dad would let me count his money, and he’d be so impressed how fast and accurate I was he’d pay me for it.”

“Damn, my baby a mathematician?”

“Something like that,” she said with a smile. “Nothing’s left hanging in math. It’s always solvable. Predictable but unpredictable.”

Giovanni turned to her slowly. “It’s the journey. That explains a lot about you. The way you analyze everything, how you see patterns where most people see chaos.” His eyes held genuine admiration. “That’s a gift, you know. Being able to make sense of numbers when the rest of us are guessing.”

The appreciation in his voice warmed her. It wasn't that he understood her passion, but that he saw how it shaped who she was. It was different than men who only valued what she could do for them.

"You always say the right things. Always. You got a get-the-panties manual over there?"

"Paige, you don't even wear the shit and I ain't gotta feed you lines. My own momma don't have the code to my crib."

"So, I'm special?"

"Very, so special a thought to put you over my finances came to mind. I on even play like that."

That caught her and him off guard. He didn't play with or about his wealth or future. And he didn't let anybody have access, but he felt he could trust her. He felt that anything she touched, she could and would make better.

"You know," she said under her breath, "this shit ain't normal. It feels like something I should be scared of, its that big, that life changing."

"I know," he said, voice low. "But you ain't gotta be. I'm not here to make you prove anything. I want to be wherever you are, simple."

She studied the curve of his jaw, the way his eyes never wavered from hers. Her voice softened. "Then let's see where it goes."

Giovanni reached for her hand, their fingers locked together without hesitation, like they'd done it a hundred times before.

Paige didn't flinch or second guess. She let his warmth settle into her, let the steadiness of his breath quiet the noise in her head.

Time with Giovanni was a pause from the chaos —a full-body exhale.

When he finally stood to leave, it wasn't with urgency or expectation. He reached for her hand and guided her to her feet, then kissed her. It wasn't hungry like their first night; it was deeper, patient. A kiss that said he'd be there tomorrow, and the day after that.

"Call you tomorrow?" he asked, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

"You better," she replied with a smile that reached her eyes.

As she watched him walk to his car, Paige leaned in the doorway, watching him go. Giovanni glanced back once, caught her eyes, and the smile they shared felt like crossing a threshold. They'd gone from attraction to something with roots, something that might last.

Paige grinned; she wasn't waiting for the other shoe to drop.

She was waiting for tomorrow, another day they'd share in their own way.

This was not what she expected when she showed up at the car show, and she knew damn well this wasn't what her mom had in mind when she offered those tickets.

But here she was, enjoying Giovanni's hands, his attention, him spoiling her, him becoming part of her world, as she became a part of his.

The food truck gang loved him and thought what he was doing was sweet, but it was more than that. Anything he did he made an impact. His mind was constantly on

others. On his community. She loved that.

There had been moments in Paige's life when she felt like she didn't have a tribe or community. She had her friends and family, yes, but that rallying of people who genuinely cared was different. He was reminding her that the devil was a liar - she had people, and people had her. What a man.

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Giovanni – Los Angeles

Giovanni had been in L.A. three days and couldn't tell you what he'd eaten or where he slept last night.

He should've been focused on sponsors, deliverables, and the launch of his merch line, Idle Hands.

Instead, his brain was stuck back home, wrapped in her voice and the way his name slid off her tongue like honey, slow, sweet, and sticky.

All he could do was draw the curve of her hips. Over and over.

Their first morning together and every other moment they'd shared played on an endless loop behind his eyelids.

It was always something. The way sunlight had filtered through his blinds.

How she'd slept with her lips slightly parted, like peace had finally found her after years of searching.

He remembered the electric tingle he felt when she woke him up with a lick of his lips.

He settled at the drafting table, music playing low and mournful while tools and pencils lay scattered in creative chaos around him.

The pencil moved with a will of its own, translating memory to paper with devoted precision.

Each stroke captured something essential: the sharp line of her jawline when she'd turned to look back at him, the slow arc of her back where his hand had rested while they danced, that subtle, dangerous curve between her waist and hip that seemed carved specifically for his grip.

“Damn.” He slammed his fist down, frustrated that he couldn’t get what he was creating perfect or was it that he couldn’t get to her?

Possibly both. He’d rented an Airbnb, it was ducked off quiet and dark.

But the home had a place where he could think, sketch, and be reminded of his first love.

The initial discovery of what you wanted to build.

The art of it. The bones already there, just upgraded, respected, and accentuated.

It wasn’t any car he was designing. It was her. Sleek. Unexpected. Powerful. Underestimated.

He pushed the sketch pad away and leaned back in the chair, palms dragging down his face. His phone buzzed, but it wasn’t her. It was Spirit again.

Spirit: You alive or you in a mood?

He didn’t answer. A minute later, she walked in anyway, arms crossed, expression loaded.

“You ghosting your own blood now?” she asked, plopping onto a nearby stool.

“I’m working,” he muttered.

“Boy, please. You’ve been redrawing the same damn car all morning. I peeked.” She cocked her head. “I haven’t seen you with a sketch pad in a long time.”

“Yeah, well, I’m inspired.”

“Is that your interpretation of Paige?”

He cut his eyes at her but said nothing. Spirit kicked her feet, grinning. She was so happy for her brother. Giovanni had lived a life of solitude long enough.

“It’s her, ain’t it? Lord, I can’t wait to meet the woman who has my brother gasping for air in her absence.”

Giovanni sighed, picking up a pencil to have something to fidget with. “It ain’t like that.”

“It’s exactly like that. Look at you, three days in LA with executives falling over themselves to sign you, and you hiding in here drawing curves that definitely don’t belong to any vehicle I’ve ever seen.

” She came forward, snatching the sketch pad before he could stop her. “Mmm-hmm. Just as I thought.”

“Give that back,” he growled, reaching for it. But as they fight like little kids, he let out a laugh.

Spirit held it away, studying the drawing with expert eyes. “This is good, G. Really

good. You haven't drawn like this since before..." She let the sentence hang, both of them knowing she meant before their father passed.

Giovanni's chest tightened, old grief rising. "Don't."

"I'm not." She handed the pad back, her face softening. "I'm just saying, I like seeing this side of you again. The artist. The one who feels something so deep he's gotta get it out on paper." She nudged his knee with her foot. "She must be special."

"She is," he admitted finally, the words feeling both too big and not enough. She was more than special, she was it.

Spirit's teasing grin transformed into something gentler. "Well, I wanted to check in on you. One more week and then we are home for a few months. Call her if you need to."

He nodded, grateful for the permission he didn't need but somehow wanted. As Spirit headed toward the door, he called after her.

"Aye Spirit?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

She winked. "That's what sisters are for. To point out when their hardheaded brothers are in love."

"I didn't say all that."

"You didn't have to." She tapped the side of her head. "I got eyes."

When Spirit left, Giovanni stared at the page again.

The lines were right, but something was missing.

The soul, maybe. The essence that made Paige more than curves and angles.

How could he capture that fire in her eyes?

The stubborn set of her jaw? The way she softened when she thought no one was looking?

He smiled slowly, caught off-guard by how quickly she'd become essential to him.

A month ago, she was a beautiful woman that caught his attention at a car show.

Now she was the measuring stick for everything else in his life.

The obsession had snuck up on him - quiet, persistent, impossible to ignore.

She was warmth and realness in a city that manufactured both, and there was nothing genuine about LA, at least not to him.

LA appeared larger than life but felt hollow compared to what he craved: southern comfort and his southern woman who never pretended to be anything other than exactly who she was.

His fingers itched toward his phone. It sat face-up on the table, screen dark.

She hadn't texted yet, but she wasn't ignoring him either.

They were good. At least, he thought they were.

Still, the silence gnawed at him. He didn't want to be the needy dude calling for validation, but damn, he wanted to hear her voice.

He picked up the phone, stared at it for a long moment, then tapped her name.

It rang twice.

"Hey," Paige answered, voice warm, already working on him.

He exhaled a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. "You busy?"

"Nope." Her face lit up the screen, hair in a sleek ponytail, lip gloss worn off, looking like home. "Just got in from work."

He didn't bother pretending. "This shit out here got me in a mood."

She leaned in closer, face softening. He didn't have to explain. Not to her.

"L.A. feels fake," he muttered. "Big for no reason. Like I walked into a room I ain't ask to be in."

She didn't rush to fill the space. Just watched him.

"You built for rooms bigger than this," she said finally. "Don't matter if they flashy or not."

He nodded slowly, but the weight didn't lift. "Maybe. But tonight? I feel off. Tired. I don't even know if this is really me, Cinny."

Silence stretched, but not the kind that made him second-guess himself. This was her listening, like she always did. And also, lowkey? Squeezing her thighs together

because that nickname did something to her.

“There’s nothing too big for you,” she said, voice softer now, but still solid. “You deserve to pop your shit.”

Then quieter, more thoughtful... “But I get why it feels like that.”

“I miss you,” he admitted, dragging a hand down his beard. He’d completely ditched the conversation about his fears to tell her how he felt. Paige had the ability to pull the softest parts of him to the forefront, and she didn’t even know it.

“I miss you too,” she replied, covering the smile on her face, easing some of the tension from his shoulders. “My granny used to say L.A. is the devil’s town. I shoulda put that oil on you before you left.”

He chuckled, the laugh catching in his throat. “You always gotta say something to make me laugh.”

“That’s my job,” she said. “But seriously, you’re tired. You’re workin’. Your team needs things. And you’re trying to juggle it all while wondering if I’m still gonna be here when you’re done with all of it. Aren’t you?”

He said nothing.

“Gio... I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. Not unless you give me a reason to.”

Her words settled over him like a heated blanket. “I needed to hear that.”

“I know you did,” she said gently. “Now tell me what you’re avoiding for real. There’s something else, so don’t bullshit me.”

He laughed. “You do know me.”

“Duh.”

He blew out a breath, posture sinking a little.

“Gotta sit down with Darren later. Sienna’s supposed to be there. I swear, bruh, I’m tired of her always popping up.”

“Mmm,” Paige hummed, a little too knowingly. “Spirit going too?”

“Nah, it’s just me. And what’s that ‘mm’ for? Ain’t nobody thinking about Sienna. My focus is you.”

“I know that, G,” she said, smirking. “I just meant maybe Spirit could fix it. Because if I gotta show up, I’m knocking that hoe back to the exact moment she had you fucked up. Maybe then she’ll rethink her life.”

“My nigga,” he muttered, laughing. They cracked up for a second before the line settled into silence again. He didn’t say it, but he couldn’t wait for his time off. He already knew where he was going. Where the vibe was soft, solid, where he didn’t have to explain himself.

Then Paige added, quieter this time, “Or maybe... maybe I wouldn’t know you if she hadn’t broken your heart.”

Giovanni blinked, caught off guard for a second before his smile returned.

“Oh, so you dun caught feelings?”

“Shut up,” she said, laughing but very aware that she had. “Talk soon?”

“Soon,” he promised. “Real soon.”

He set the phone down, the sketch still wasn’t perfect, the city still felt too damn big, and Sienna was still going to be in the room. But the one thing that made sense right now?

Paige.

Her voice lingered while he showered and got dressed.

Dark slacks. Open collar. No tie. He looked in the mirror, adjusted his cuffs, and set his jaw.

Minimal jewelry. He was in a city that wasn’t his, he wasn’t doing too much for protection.

This was business. Strictly. But just in case—he was ready for whatever.

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The restaurant screamed Los Angeles excess.

Giovanni scanned the room until he spotted Darren waving from a corner table.

And there, sliding in beside him with ease, was Sienna.

Designer dress, hair styled in perfect waves, smile calculated to disarm.

But the sight of her did nothing to him now.

Not anger, not desire, not even resentment.

Just a dull recognition of someone he used to know.

“G!” Darren called, standing to shake his hand. “Man of the hour. We’re getting started on appetizers.”

Giovanni nodded, sliding into the only available seat, directly across from Sienna. Her smile widened as their eyes met.

“Giovanni,” she purred. “You look good. LA agrees with you.”

He didn’t acknowledge her, instead he turned to Darren. “Spirit said you had some adjustments to the show you wanted to talk about?”

Darren launched into the details, and Giovanni let himself focus on the business at hand.

The network wanted more episodes, more personal content, more access to his life and process.

On paper, it was a good deal. In reality, it lended less privacy and less of what made his work meaningful in the first place.

Under the table, he felt something brush against his calf. Sienna's foot, tracing a slow line up his leg. He shifted, moving out of her reach without breaking his conversation with Darren.

"I'm not interested in turning my shop into a reality TV circus," Giovanni said firmly. "The show needs to focus on the builds, the community work, the craftsmanship. That's non-negotiable."

Darren hesitated. "The audience wants connection, G. They want to feel like they know the man behind the machines."

"They can know my work," Giovanni countered. "That tells them everything they need to know about me."

Sienna leaned forward, cleavage strategically positioned. "What G means," she interjected smoothly, "is that we need to find the right balance. I've known him for years, he's a private person, but there are ways to showcase his personality without compromising his vision."

A muscle flickered angrily at his jaw. "You don't speak for me, Sienna. Never have, never will."

The table went quiet. Darren looked between them, confusion evident on his face.

Sienna recovered quickly, her laugh too bright, too practiced. "See what I mean?"

Raw, authentic, that's what makes him compelling. We need to capture that energy on camera."

Giovanni leaned back in his chair, a cold smile playing at his lips. "Darren, can I keep it a buck with you?"

"Always," Darren nodded.

"Sienna and I have history. Bad history. She stole from me, disappeared, and now she's trying to leverage our past to get herself something.

I don't know what her angle is this time and truthfully, I don't care.

If she's part of this project, I'm out. I ain't ever in life giving anybody passes to play with me twice. "

Sienna's face froze, the calculated charm evaporating. "You can't be serious. Darren, he's exaggerating. I was young and dumb."

"Fuck outta here with that. Thirty bands," Giovanni cut in, his voice level. "That's what she took. So, unless you finna run me my money ain't no passes. She can't be a part of my vision for this show."

Darren looked uncomfortable, glancing between them. "I, uh, didn't realize there was history here."

"There isn't," Giovanni said, standing. "Not anymore. Call me when you're ready to talk about the show I actually want to make."

He dropped his napkin on the table and walked out, not looking back to see either of their reaction. Outside, the evening air hit his face, cooling the anger that had been

simmering under his skin.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

Paige: You're always on my mind... (me singing) I hope things go well tonight.

Giovanni: Always thinking about you too and let me hear it later.

Back at his Airbnb, Giovanni found a package on the doorstep. No return address, just his name scrawled in unfamiliar handwriting.

Inside, nestled in tissue paper, was a die-cast model of a cherry red Cutlass. A note card fell out:

Something to remind you of home - Cinny.

He turned the model over in his hands, a slow smile spreading across his face.

Only Paige and Spirit knew where he was staying.

And only Paige would understand what this meant to him, his first build, the car that started it all.

She'd gotten lucky that there was a vintage toy car store near the area.

Technology earned her some brownie points.

Back in his makeshift studio, the sketch pad waited.

Giovanni sat down, the model car perched beside him and began to draw again.

This time, the lines flowed easier, his hands moved with ease, sounds of his skin scraping the paper made music.

Finally, the curves took shape, completing his masterpiece.

Something worthy of the woman who'd sent him this reminder.

When he finished, he sat back and studied what he'd created.

It wasn't perfect. But it was special. Exactly like what was growing between them.

He took a photo of the sketch and sent it to Paige with no caption.

No explanation needed. She'd understand what he was trying to say.

That she was his muse.

That she was art.

That whatever they built together would be unlike anything either of them had created before.

The response came minutes later:

I've never been anyone's muse before.

He traced his finger over the lines of his drawing one more time. One week. One more week, and he'd be back where he belonged. Back with the woman who'd somehow become his true north without even trying.

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Paige checked her watch for the third time in fifteen minutes, convinced the second hand was moving backward to spite her.

Each customer who smiled across her desk received her professional attention, but inside, she was counting down the hours.

Giovanni would be back tomorrow. The thought alone sent electricity through her fingertips.

She'd already prepped for his return, fresh wax, nails, and toes done to perfection.

The anticipation was both delicious and maddening.

Who was this woman who missed someone so much it physically ached?

Certainly not the Paige Bishop who valued her independence above all else.

Yet here she was, checking her phone between appointments, smiling at his morning text for the fourth time.

She liked her space, had always guarded it fiercely, but his absence had hollowed out corners of her day she hadn't known could feel empty.

“Paige, it's doing it again. The printer is possessed, I swear.” Carol's voice broke through her thoughts, the woman's face pinched with the particular brand of irritation only office equipment could inspire.

Paige drew in a trembling breath. “Carol, unplug it. I’ll call them and put in a work order when I get a minute. For now, we use the old printer in the supply room. Apologize to the customers for the delay and-” she glanced at the clock again “call it a day. We’re almost done anyway.”

She’d already rescheduled two calls, skimmed a half-finished report without absorbing a word, and closed her office door twice to breathe without someone needing a piece of her.

That printer wasn’t getting a single additional neuron of her attention today.

It could go to hell with everything else she didn’t give a damn about.

She wasn’t for it today, not when her mind was already halfway to tomorrow, already imagining Giovanni’s arms wrapped around her, his cologne filling her lungs, his voice rumbling low in her ear.

“Fuck that printer,” she mumbled to herself.

A familiar knock pulled her from her daydream. The door opened before she could answer, and Paige realized she’d been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn’t noticed Ashton approaching her office.

“Ashton!” Paige stood, practically jogging across the office. “Girl, what are you doing here?”

“I needed to get out of the house. Figured y’all were missing me.” Ashton grinned and bounced a sleepy baby girl on her hip. “Plus, I’ve heard good things, and I wanted to tell you that in person.”

They hugged, careful around the baby. She smelled like lotion and Dreft, signs of

motherhood in its softest, simplest form.

“She’s so tiny,” Paige said, eyes wide.

Ashton laughed. “Don’t let miss things size fool you, she’s loud as hell at night. Shake the whole house, girl.”

Paige gestured to the chair in front of her desk. “Sit down. How are you feeling?”

“Still healing, still tired, but I’m good. Really good.”

Ashton’s gaze shifted, assessing her with that quiet, knowing look. “And you? You look... good as hell. Girl, you are radiating something, and I like it.”

“Am I?”

Ashton said, adjusting the baby in her lap, “Yes. And I’m so happy for you.”

Paige smiled, pressing her fingers together in her lap. “It’s a combination of things. I’ve run this bank for almost a month and killed it. I’m seeing someone, and I don’t know... I’ve found balance.”

“You trust it?”

“I want to,” Paige admitted. “It’s a choice I have to keep making every day, but he reminds me why I should each day.”

“Then keep making it,” Ashton said simply. “Don’t forget that you deserve soft things too, Paige. You always did. You got good at surviving without them.”

That landed.

Right then, her phone buzzed on the desk.

Giovanni: Go to the house when you get off. Same code. I need a favor.

Paige's brows lifted slightly, but she smiled.

"That must be one of the things. I'm glad you are making time for yourself. Don't let me hold you up."

After work, Paige made a stop she never skipped: her dad's house. She was either showing up before work or after. But she hadn't gone a day without seeing him and checking in on him.

Perry was in his recliner, game show on low, a cup of applesauce half-eaten on the tray next to him when she walked in.

"You good, Daddy? You didn't like that applesauce?" she asked, walking in with her usual bag of groceries, mail, and vitamins.

"Always," he said, not even looking away from the screen. "You the one got that sugar-free organic crap. It got a bite to it. Hell, it's just plain ole nasty."

She choked back a laugh because he was probably right. "Well, it's this or no applesauce. You can't have a bunch of sugar, health is wealth."

"Ain't that a bitch? I'm the parent and being bossed around. Told what I can and can't have. Where that boy at to get you out of my hair?" He turned to her then, eyes sharp, clear.

Paige kept her gaze down, not daring to meet her father's eyes, she knew he'd see the grin she couldn't hide.

Just thinking about Giovanni had her smiling like a fool.

He'd gotten under her skin in the best way, turning idle moments into daydreams and making her body respond with a heat she wasn't used to.

He was her favorite kind of distraction, the kind she didn't want to end.

"Imagine trying to get rid of the only person who takes care of you. But he's in Los Angeles finalizing his TV show. You're stuck with me," she said snapping out of it.

"He told me about that. I like him. Are you happy?"

Her smile softened. "Getting there."

Perry leaned back, reclining in his seat. Paige came around to pass him his meds and he asked, "The boy make you laugh?"

"Yes, Daddy. That man makes me smile, laugh, and feel... it was like a miracle, wasn't it?," Paige replied, recalling her father's words from that day. Her heart fluttered thinking of how Giovanni never missed a chance to show her she mattered.

"Then stop coming over here every day. I'm fine, Paige. You need to focus on yourself. I got a phone. I got what I need. Just call me to check in."

She snapped out of her reminiscence and bent down to kiss her dad on the forehead; a lump formed in her throat.

Each day spent with him wove another thread of forgiveness into the frayed DNA of their relationship.

The man who'd once been a stranger with her father's face was becoming someone

she genuinely cared for, and that transformation scared her as much as it healed her.

Eventually she would lose him and that weighed on her. Time wasn't on their side.

"Okay," was all she could manage with her voice cracking slightly. Paige hugged her father and headed out with goodbyes and promises of talking tomorrow.

When she reached her car, the emotions she'd held in check spilled over. Tears ran hot down her cheeks, part joy at the second chance they'd been given, part fear that it might still slip away. She gripped the steering wheel, letting herself feel it all.

She'd gotten lucky in ways she never expected. With her father. With Giovanni. None of it had been planned, none of it was sought after. She'd built her life around independence, around needing no one, and now here she was, vulnerable, connected, sought out and showing up.

The hardest realization was that she'd been complicit in her own isolation all this time.

Building walls so high that even she couldn't climb them.

Making herself so strong that she couldn't remember how to bend.

The weight of that understanding felt like an elephant on her chest, but she drew in a deep breath and released it slowly.

By the time she turned into Giovanni's driveway, she'd wiped away the tears and reapplied her lip gloss.

He never said what the favor was and that made her nerves prickly as she approached his home.

He was still something of a mystery, layers she was only beginning to uncover, but she trusted him.

Not blindly, not foolishly, but deliberately, again a choice she was making.

Like normal, she kicked her shoes off. And proceeded into the house. She loved his place, it was spacious, elegantly designed, and off the beaten path. Haven Springs wasn't cheap to live in. The whole community had a gate, and then the houses had gates. It was insane.

The house smelled like lemon, cedar, and fresh polish. His housekeeper had been through. She went into the kitchen and found a note. That looked like the one he left her before.

Downstairs. Second door.

She grabbed the piece of paper and headed down. She didn't know what to expect, but when she made it into his man cave, she stopped dead in her tracks. On the far wall was a brand-new, floor-to-ceiling bookshelf, deep mahogany wood, built into the wall full of books.

Her hand flew to her chest as she took a step closer, then another. Urban fiction, Black romance, classics she'd loved and dog-eared, newer titles still on her Tbr list. Every row was carefully stacked, curated with intention.

He did this. For me.

Tears pricked her eyes as she ran her fingers along the spines.

This wasn't just thoughtful - this was honoring her.

Really seeing who she was beneath all the armor she wore.

No one had ever paid attention to what she loved like this.

No one had ever cared enough to build her a sanctuary in their sanctuary.

On the middle shelf was a handwritten note, propped up like a title card:

Me and your fictional men want you to ourselves this weekend.

A giggle escaped her lips through her watering eyes. She was going to learn not to leave shit around him. She'd left her Kindle by accident, and it had turned out to be the best thing ever.

Behind her, she heard the door open. She whipped around, tears still in her eyes, to find Giovanni standing in a plain white tee and black joggers. "What we starting with first?"

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Before she could even answer she took big steps and jumped into his arms, and murmured, “Maybe I do believe in dreams.”

“Is that right, baby?” he chuckled putting her back down on her feet.

“I missed you.” The words slipped out, soft and unfiltered, before she stepped back slightly, heat rushing over her skin.

Just seeing him—home early, safe, waiting—sent a ripple through her.

Her senses lit up before her mind could catch up.

She was already aching in the places only he touched, already softening at the thought of his hands, his mouth, his everything.

“That’s how you feel?” he asked, knowing why she backed up; he knew her cues.

He reached for her, drawing her into his arms, needing to feel that closeness again. It was how he knew he was on the right path. He placed a slow kiss on her lips. “I missed you, too. You gotta come with me next time. You may be the only thing to make that place better.”

He kissed her again, tilting her chin up with his thumb, his eyes searching hers with an intensity that made her close her eyes and swallow.

“You mine for the weekend or what?” The possessiveness in his voice sent heat spiraling through her. Dare she say she was ready to crown him ruler of her heart.

“All yours. Can I cook for you?”

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “My little thug misses wanna cook for me now?”

“Shut up, Vanni.” She pushed his chest playfully. “But yes, I do. You just got in off the road. I wanna thank you for my books and thought and work. I love it. So yes, let me do that for you.” Her hands slid up his arms, feeling the tension still held in his muscles. “But first, a shower.”

“I’d love that,” he said, his voice dropping to that tone that always made her stomach flip. “And I can’t wait to watch you move around my kitchen.”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him upstairs, both of them taking the steps two at a time.

Inside his massive bathroom, with its marble countertops and rainfall shower, she stood before him and began to undress him with tender, maybe love, and care.

First , his shirt, her fingers skimming his skin as she lifted it over his head.

Then his joggers, her knuckles brushing against his hips as she pushed them down.

He allowed her to care for him this way, standing still beneath her touch, vulnerable in a way he rarely allowed himself to be.

The realization hit him suddenly, powerfully, no woman who wasn’t related to him had ever loved him like this.

Not with this kind of tenderness that asked for nothing in return.

Not with this unguarded care that existed outside of desire, though desire was certainly there too.

“This makes me feel some type of way, Paige,” he admitted, his voice rough with emotion.

“Why?”

He didn’t answer at first. Just looked at her. In awe that she was here, doing this. Choosing him.

She glanced up at him, water running down his chest, her hands still on his waist. She knew the answer, but she wanted to hear it from him.

She knew much like her; he hadn’t experienced unconditional love.

Those with the biggest hearts sometimes took the most losses.

She understood and it was exactly why she wanted to do it.

“This is the first time anyone ever cared for me like this, and it not be a lie or a scheme. Sometimes I wonder if you’re real.”

His voice was low, he was saying something he hadn’t said out loud before.

“It’s okay. This is a first for me also. I’m here with you, too.”

She kissed his chest, right over his heart. His chest rose and fell as he fought his own emotions.

“I don’t want anything from you, Giovanni. I want you to feel safe, wanted, and

appreciated too. You deserve that, especially after this week.”

“I know, that’s why I fuck with you. You solid.”

“Thank you for allowing me in your space. You should be at ease in your home. You’ve allowed me in, so I plan to honor that.”

He wrapped his arms around her again, tight.

He was afraid she might disappear if he didn’t hold on.

They stood there like that for a long minute, steam rising, skin flushed, the sound of the shower the only thing between them and the rest of the world.

She reached for the soap, carefully washing his body, her touch both practical and reverent.

He did the same for her, his hands gentle across her shoulders, down her back.

This wasn’t about sex. It was about care.

She’d had a day too, but seeing him made her stress melt away. He wasn’t even due back until tomorrow; his early return was the best surprise she’d gotten in ages.

He reeled her back in with a smirk, bare chest pressed to her back. “Aye, hold up. Where you running off to?”

“To cook, remember.” She smiled against his chest, looking up at him.

“Oh yeah, but I ain’t hungry for that.”

She pulled back giving him a side eye and grinned. “You got all weekend to wear me out, but tonight I want you fed and relaxed.”

He kissed her again, this time slower. When he finished, he looked at her through hooded eyes, the eyes she couldn’t resist and said, “Let me eat you first.”

“Vanni,” she whined ready to give in.

“Vanni what?” he smirked, invading her space some more. His voice giving Barry White and his brown eyes had voice her weak in the knees. “You could be screaming my name right now. Quit stallin’.”

She opened her mouth to say something slick, but he lifted her by the waist up on the sink and dropped to his knees, stealing her breath and words.

His hands slid up the backs of her thighs, slow and unhurried.

“You take care of me,” he murmured, kissing the inside of her knee, “I take care of you. We can do this shit all weekend.”

Her hands found the edge of the sink, knuckles tight as she tried to steady herself. He stepped in, closing the space between them, his breath tickling her skin. And when his mouth finally found her other set of lips, Paige saw stars. She missed him so much.

She missed how there was never a rush with him. No ego. Only love delivered through every stroke of his tongue, focused, and insistent. His hands gripped her thighs, saying he needed her to stay right here .

She moaned his name, soft at first. Then louder when his pace changed and picked up. “Giovanni... ouuu, baby.”

“Cum for me, Paige,” he hummed, his voice rumbling against her skin, sending a shiver straight through her core. Her legs shook, nerves firing, breath short. Euphoria washed over her as she thought about how she’d been tripping, denying herself this type of life.

He lifted up, eyes locked on hers as he nipped at her chin.

“I’m on your ass all weekend, you hear me? Ain’t no breaks.”

She nodded and slammed his mouth into hers.

He could tell by her heartbeat that she was close to tipping over the edge.

His fingers worked softly forcing her to combust. He stood back and admired his handiwork, shaking and gasping, lip between her teeth.

He could watch her unravel all day; it was his pleasure.

He grinned, kissed her shoulder, and let his mouth brush her skin.

“Now I’m ready to eat.”

Neither of them bothered with clothes afterward.

What was the point? They’d only be coming off again.

Giovanni pulled on a pair of boxers just long enough for her to cook.

Periodically, they’d make eye contact while he watched the game, and she cooked.

She had the muthafuckin house smelling like food made with love.

He was in heaven. He loved a homecooked meal.

“Stop.”

“Stop what?” she asked, confused.

“Tryna figure out how you can have my babies. I can feel you staring. You gotta marry me first, not finna turn me into a baby daddy.”

“Boy please.” A laugh bubbled up as she threw a rag at him. But she also said a small prayer for God’s will. The thought of becoming his wife, the mother of his children, and closest confidante, was heavy on her heart.

Within an hour, they sat in his man cave, moisturized, hair wrapped, durag managing waves, and naked again. Tangled up, they fed each other fried pork chops, green beans, and mashed potatoes. Lo-fi played in the background while she read *Fate of our Future* by Briann Danae to him out loud.

“Nah, hang on. Amira on bullshit. Ain’t it?”

The novel followed Amira and Saleem, lovers reunited after years apart.

When Paige read the line where Saleem basically told Amira, she saved her heart in order to break his.

She couldn’t help glancing over at Giovanni, who was watching her with an intensity that made her freeze in time.

With no words, they both silently vowed to drop their guard.

“Shh, let me keep reading,” she said, pulling him back into her chest. He reclined

back and let her keep reading. She smiled behind him. He was tuned in, and she was happy she could share something with him like he shared his passion. She could get used to this.

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Sunday morning brought the scent of shea butter and incense, birds chirping outside as Paige stirred against Giovanni's chest. They'd been inseparable for nearly forty-eight hours now, the room quiet except for the ceiling fan's gentle whir and the faint hum of the TV they'd forgotten to turn off.

They hadn't left the house since Friday night, no phones, no visitors unless they were delivering takeout. Only soft kisses, long talks, full plates, and the kind of lovemaking that untangled things and had a girl making promises she hoped she could keep. A shiver worked its way down her spine, remembering the moments that had her agreeing to all kinds of shit—from five big head kids to possibly moving in. She hadn't smiled this much in years, nor slept this peacefully either. She'd agree to it all over again.

Giovanni's voice broke through, vibrating through her where they touched. "How you feeling baby?"

"I'm amazing."

He stretched, pulled her tighter, and placed kisses all over the side of her face. It was wild, this peace. Unfamiliar but not unwelcome. She'd spent years dodging anything that looked like forever — and here she was, building one.

"Thank you for this weekend. I don't want it to end."

"Please. I should be thanking you. I'm a homebody these days, so this? It was perfect. Thoughtful. Food for my soul. And it let me give back to you what you've been giving me."

Paige meant she had an amazing weekend from the bottom of her heart and didn't want it to end either. If she wasn't a purse first, ass last type of woman, she'd call out sick tomorrow.

"You better quit being sweet to me before I kidnap you. I'll get you new books and tacos, Milk Duds every day, hell, I'll bring the authors too, if that's what I gotta do."

"You think that's a threat?" she laughed, already rolling over to get out of bed.

He grabbed her by the wrist and stopped her, eyes serious now, "Two things."

"Okay, thing 1," she replied with a bounce on the bed, hair all over the place.

"There's a safe in my man cave and in that closet behind you. There's money, jewelry, bonds, and deeds. If you ever need anything and I'm not here the code is 0328. Thing 2."

"Oh no you don't just drop that on me and move on. Are you sure? Why? Vanni..." Words spilled out of her as her mind went a mile a minute. She knew this was big for him. She wanted to make sure she heard him correctly.

"I'm positive. I told you, you solid. I trust you. I see that. Your dad is sick, and things happen outside of that. I'm not always going to be here and if you need to say yes, I don't want you counting pennies to do it."

Paige turned her head to hide the tears on the brink of falling. She took a second to get herself together before she closed the distance and pressed her lips to his, morning breath be damned.

"Thing 2?" she asked.

“We should check on your pops before we slide to the shop. I wanna holla at him.”

“Mmhmm,” she murmured, rubbing her eyes. “You makin’ ribs and...?”

“And chicken. Spirit said she’s comin’ through, and I gotta show off a little. It’s time for y’all to meet if you’re cool with that.”

Paige chuckled, finally peeling herself from the bed. “Yeah, I’m cool with that. I’m ready to go ahead and meet your momma, too.”

“That’s a big step now, be careful. You meet my momma, I’m going to assume you tryna be Paige Simone Dowlen and stuck with me forever.”

“I got the code to your safe, so I guess we both taking big steps.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you about to be kidnapped.”

“You’re always threatening me with a good time. I need to get dressed and hide these hand prints and faint hickies so my daddy doesn’t know I’ve been laid up over here being fast. So let me be.”

Giovanni smirked. “But you were laid up bein’ fast, though.”

She tossed a pillow at his head and disappeared into the bathroom. Giovanni wasn’t far behind her. They showered, dressed, and ate a little bit before heading out.

“We need to grab some stuff for the cookout,” Giovanni said as he grabbed his keys. “My fridge is looking desperate after this weekend.”

“That’s what happens when you let a woman in your house,” Paige laughed, sliding her feet into her sandals.

Without even trying, they ended up matching. He was doing it on purpose, anything she had at his house, he provided. It was cute to her. She was in a white sundress, and him in a white tee and ripped jeans, and fresh forces. She didn't even fuss or ask. She was learning to accept. The end.

The PDA had gotten out of control in the best way, like it was a game they both loved to win.

They walked through the store like they were the only ones there, giggling, bumping hips, singing along to the old-school song playing overhead like they were backup vocalists.

Paige felt like a teenager again, except this time, it was different.

This time, it was puppy love with a big dawg .

Real affection. Real security. Real silly.

Giovanni pulled her into him, arm draped lazy around her neck, mouth at her ear.

"Me, you, chocolate syrup...magic," he murmured, voice full of sin. She squealed, smacked his chest, and kept walking, still grinning.

That laughter followed them all the way to the car, through the ride, and up the steps of her father's place. But the second Paige stepped inside her father's house, everything in her shifted. She stopped abruptly.

Giovanni automatically stepped closer to her, one arm extending slightly to shield her and the other on his waistband.

"Relax. My mom is here." She hadn't expected his reaction, but she smiled at his

protective instinct, the way he was ready to handle whatever threat might have been waiting. It was both comforting and amusing, given the circumstances.

“Oh my bad,” he muttered, straightening his shirt.

They rounded the corner, and sure enough, her mother sat on the edge of the couch, stirring a cup of tea.

“Hey, baby,” her mother said, standing with a half-smile. “Didn’t mean to spook you.”

Paige blinked, surprised but not mad. “You did. A little. Because what is this, and why am I just now hearing about it?”

Perry grunted from his recliner. “She popped up like a ghost from the past to be a pain in my ass.”

Her mom folded her arms and replied, “I called first. You just don’t check your damn messages or answer the damn phone.”

“Shit all of them damn spam calls make me wanna toss this phone in the street.”

“Please don’t do that. I’ll put you on the do-not-call registry tomorrow while I’m at work.”

Giovanni chuckled under his breath and gave Paige a reassuring touch on the back.

“Perry, how you feeling bruh?”

“I’d be a helluva lot better if I had some cognac and a new body. Hell, maybe a Black & Mild.”

“Dad, get over it. You are never going back to those days. And a Black & Mild nigga be for real right now.” Paige shook her head before turning her attention back to her mother, who had some explaining to do. Her parents were hellbent on driving her crazy today.

“I was going to be on this side of town,” her mother admitted, before Paige could ask feeling eyes on her, “and figured it was time I stopped making a fuss over the past. You’ve got a lot on your plate, and I’m proud of you.” Her voice gained strength.

“I don't want to be just your mother anymore, baby. I want to be part of your team. That's what real love does, it evolves from obligation into choice.”

This was it, Paige realized. The village she'd been building without even knowing it, her mother stepping up, Blake and Brooks when she called, Giovanni making space for everyone she loved. Community wasn't blood or obligation. It was choice.

She swallowed down the emotion before it turned to tears. She was tired of crying, but something had unlocked or perhaps clicked. The pieces on the board were lining up to give her a win.

“She a gah’damn lie. She heard I got Social Security, and she wants that check. I’ll give it to you, Myra, but you gon work for it. And I mean work hard for it.”

Perry might not have been around to see the details, but he recognized the result. The woman standing between him and Myra, strong, carrying weight that should’ve been shared, she’d learned that independence out of necessity. And both her parents had played a part in that lesson.

Her mom stepped closer, “Don’t think this changes things between us,” Myra said to Perry, but her tone was lighter now. “Plus, you owe me nigga, even if that was what I wanted.”

“I’ll handle Sunday and Monday meals,” she told Paige popping Perry upside the head.

Paige felt her throat tighten with gratitude. She hugged her mother without a word.

Her mom nodded into her shoulder. “Just say you’ll live your life. That’s enough.” Her mother looked over at Giovanni, and Paige turned around to look at him also.

“You can thank me by giving me some grandbabies.”

“Ma, too soon.”

Her laughter came first. “You’re out here living, huh?” she said, low and grinning. “You walking funny.”

Myra’s grin was a reminiscent one.

“Ok, Eww. No.”

“We grown, Paige. You got here somehow. I didn’t get you from Amazon or a damn stork.”

Giovanni was cracking up while Paige felt mortified. For a second, she didn't know what to say. Perry mumbled something smart under his breath, and Paige pulled back, wiping her eyes.

“I still don’t like him,” her mom said with a smirk, glancing at Perry. “I love you therefore your problems and struggles are mine too.”

Giovanni stepped forward with that quiet, respectful presence he possessed so naturally. “Nice to meet you, ma’am. I’m Giovanni.”

“Oh, I forgot to do that. Shit. It’s too much going on. Momma, this is my boyfriend, Giovanni Dowlen.”

“Boyfriend, hot diggity dog. We did it,” Perry chuckled, slapping the arm of his chair and cheering like a mad man. Paige scoffed softly at her dad and smiled.

“Moving on. Giovanni, this is my mom, Myra Saint.”

Her mother shook his hand, eyes sharp but warm. “She doesn’t need my approval, and neither do you. Take care of my daughter, and we’ll be alright.”

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“Yes, ma’am. That’s the plan.”

Myra gave him one more appraising look before turning to Paige. “Let me show you what I brought for your father’s meals this week. Everything’s prepped, just needs heating.”

As Paige followed her mother to the kitchen, Giovanni found himself alone with Perry. The older man adjusted himself in his recliner, eyeing Giovanni with that same sharp gaze his daughter had inherited.

“So,” Perry said, keeping his voice low enough that the women wouldn’t hear from the kitchen. “You got her outta my hair this time.”

“She loves you and you know that’s why she’s doing this and whatever else she can.”

“I know and I love that child too death but she gotta live a little. Promise you’ll do that.”

Giovanni settled into the chair across from him, leaning forward slightly. “Yes, sir I got her. I wanted to holla at you because your daughter is stubborn. How can I help my baby out by helping you out?”

“You serious?”

“Very,” Giovanni replied without hesitation. “Paige is... special. Anything she needs, I want to make sure she has it.”

Perry studied him for a moment longer, then nodded slowly. “She is. Too good for most. Including me. Probably, you too.”

Giovanni laughed but got serious, “Sir, how can I help you?”

“Well, you know I need a donor and I ain’t asking for you to do that, but maybe you can put my transplant information on one of your cars or something. I’ve lived a long life, I don’t need fancy home dialysis. I like my friends there. It’s my time to be with people that understand.”

“Preciate that. I got you.”

He gestured toward the TV remote. “You watch the game yesterday?”

The conversation shifted, but Giovanni recognized this for what it was. Perry’s way of taking his measure while giving them space to connect man-to-man. From the kitchen, he could hear Paige and her mother’s voices, sometimes rising with laughter, sometimes dropping to serious tones.

Family dynamics were complicated, but Giovanni found himself surprisingly comfortable in the middle of the Bishop family drama. It felt like a place he could belong.

The two held hands as they left her father's house. The visit had been good, surprisingly good. They'd sat and laughed, but now, Paige was ready for fresh air and a change of scenery.

Giovanni helped her into the truck but didn't rush to the driver's seat. Instead, he rested against the doorframe, eyes scanning her face like he was trying to read between the lines.

“You okay? Like for real, don't feed me bullshit.”

Paige didn't answer right away. She stared through the windshield, swallowing hard.

For a moment, she was ten again, running cold water in the sink, pretending not to hear her parents fighting down the hall about what her father had done and what it would do to their family.

Now her mother was offering help and forgiveness.

“I think so. That was...a lot. In a good way. But still a lot.”

Giovanni reached in, brushing his fingers over her cheekbone.

“You held that moment with grace, P. I saw it hit you. I'm proud of you for lettin' it.”

That made her eyes sting all over again.

“You gotta quit talking like that before I get used to it.”

“You should do that. I want you to. What you see in everyone else, I see in you.”

“Vanni, I'm still getting used to that, letting things settle in. Not having to act like it didn't matter. Thank you for being patient.”

“Let it matter.”

“Okay.”

“And if you crash from it later, I'm right here.”

He stole a kiss before closing her door. When he got inside, he turned to her and asked, “My turn, you sure you ready for this?”

“You mean meeting your momma and sister?” Paige teased. “I’ve been ready.”

He grinned and kissed her knuckles. “You’ll charm ’em. You already got me.”

#

The smell of barbecue hit them before they even parked.

Smoke billowed from behind the garage, and music thumped low from a speaker playing The Ohio Players.

A folding table sat under a canopy, stacked with foil pans and Tupperware.

Lawn chairs formed loose circles, and kids ran wild between setups, juice boxes, and hot dogs in hand.

“You do this every year?”

“Yeah, they work hard and a lot of them sacrifice time with family to ensure this shit run the way it should. I’d be nothing without them.”

Giovanni pulled up to the curb, hopped out, and opened Paige’s door. She stepped out in her sandals and white off-shoulder sundress, eyes scanning the scene. It brought back flashbacks from their first night. The same vibe was before her.

“You nervous?” he asked, grabbing the bags of drinks and chips they’d picked up.

“Nope.” She popped her sunglasses on. “I’m tryna decide who I want to impress

first.”

Giovanni chuckled. “Betsy, my mom is over there in the striped sundress. Spirit got the braids and the iced tea. They’re cool people and you ain’t gotta impress anybody. Be you.”

“Always.”

They made their way toward the grill, where a couple of his guys from the shop were flipping meat and nodding along to the beat.

Paige felt the eyes on her as they moved through the crowd.

Not shady or hostile, that small-town curiosity that came whenever someone new stepped into an established circle.

These were Giovanni’s people, folks who’d watched him grind for years, who’d celebrated his wins and probably helped him through the losses.

She couldn’t blame them for wondering who this woman was that had their boy looking so damn happy.

Giovanni didn’t flinch at the attention. His hand stayed firm at the small of her back, guiding her through the room like she belonged—because to him, she did. He wasn’t parading her like a prize. He was bringing her in. Introducing her to people who mattered.

Because he’d brought women around before, sure. But not like this. This time, he felt it in his chest. This time, he was nervous—not because he questioned her, but because he didn’t want her to question them . Ever.

And that? That meant something to Paige. She'd been someone's secret, someone's "we'll see." But this—like everything else between them—was honest. Present. Real.

"Ma! Spirit! Come meet my lady, Paige."

His mother turned first, face lighting up. Giovanni got his color from her. She was beautiful, sure, but it was more than that, there was a calmness in her that made everything make sense. Paige could tell: the softness her man carried came from this woman right here.

"Ohhh, so this is the one." Arms wide, grin wider. "I was starting to think you were a myth."

Paige laughed and leaned into the hug. "Nice to finally meet you."

"Don't be nice," Spirit said, approaching with her cup in hand and a grin that matched her brother's. "Oh brother, you got a fine wine here. And I recognize you. It all makes sense now."

Giovanni groaned, but Paige grinned. "Well, I'm flattered... I think."

Spirit sipped her drink. "You should be. I saw the video. I'll be in the wedding, but I'm not wearing heels."

The four of them laughed, and the ice broke.

Giovanni's mom looped her arm through Paige's without warning, firm but affectionate. "Come sit with me, baby. I wanna know everything."

Before Paige could even glance back for backup, Giovanni was already being pulled away by Rolani, calling him over with some drama at the grill. Smoke was rising, and

voices were getting louder.

Giovanni squeezed her hand. "I'll be right back, baby. You good?"

"I'll be fine," Paige said, even though she felt like she'd been handed over like a baton in a relay. "Go on."

He gave her that look, double-checking.

"Go." She shooed him away.

He jogged off, leaving his woman in the care of his mother, knowing she would be fine.

Betsy settled into the lawn chair next to Paige, a knowing smile playing on her lips. She handed Paige a fresh cup of sweet tea, the ice cubes clinking against the plastic.

"That boy ain't looked this relaxed after...well, ever," Betsy said, her eyes following her son across the yard. "But especially back from L.A. Usually, he's all wound up tight, full of ideas but tense about execution. He's different."

Paige sipped her tea, feeling the weight of Betsy's assessment. "I don't think he likes it that much. Something about it being too big for him."

"Mmm," Betsy nodded. "He's a small-town man with big dreams. Sometimes those two things don't sit easily together." She adjusted her white shawl around her shoulders despite the warmth of the afternoon. "But seems like he might've found something worth coming back to."

The knowing look she gave Paige wasn't subtle, but it wasn't judgmental either. It was appreciation. Recognition. Betsy was simply a mother who could read her son

better than anyone. And liked what he liked.

Betsy had lived a long life at 62, she was far from a spring chicken. She knew what love looked like. But more than that she loved how it looked on her son. However, she wouldn't be her if she didn't check the temperature.

"I don't do this with everybody. But something tells me you ain't passing through. And I don't believe in letting good women walk into love blind."

Paige raised an eyebrow, a soft smile tugging at her lips. "Is that what I've done?"

Betsy leaned in, not unkind, honest. "You've walked into a man who don't play about his peace.

A man who's quiet until it matters and locked in until you give him a reason not to be.

Giovanni is a good man. But he's had to be his own anchor for a long time.

I need to know he can trust you if he finally let's go. "

"I need that man like I need my next breath, and I don't even get down like that. I'm going to keep it straightwith you."

Paige felt her cheeks warm thinking about what came out of her mouth, but she meant every damn word. If she had misread the writing on the wall that Giovanni was her person, she'd enjoy it until otherwise.

"Is that right?" his mother asked.

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“I wouldn’t start our relationship with a lie. I love your son, and you’ve raised a good man.” Paige turned to face her. “Thank you.”

A comfortable silence stretched between them, punctuated by laughter from across the yard.

“His daddy, Lord rest his soul, taught that boy everything he knows about cars,” she said, voice softening with memory. “Had a chop shop over on Jefferson back in the day. Not strictly legal, you understand, but necessary at the time.”

Paige’s eyebrows rose, and Betsy chuckled at her expression.

“Oh yes, honey. We weren’t always this respectable. Times were hard, and Vanni’s daddy, Gerald, did what he had to do. Giovanni used to hang around there after school, watching everything. By thirteen, he could take apart an engine blindfolded.”

She touched the gold band still circling her ring finger, twisting it absently.

“When Gerald got sick, Giovanni transformed that shop and gave up the illegal shit. Said he couldn’t do it anymore.”

“Giovanni, chopped cars?” she asked with wide eyes.

Paige had wondered about his past, but she didn’t care enough to ask about it.

She knew that life too, and she recognized the signs and vibes.

Sometimes you just know. No need to play police games asking a bunch of shit that was in a person's past.

"Yep, and I'm proud of him. Extremely proud of him for doing the right thing."

Betsy leaned in slightly, her voice lowering. "He taking good care of you though?"

"Yes, ma'am. Better than I'm used to, if I'm being honest."

Betsy nodded with satisfaction. "That's my boy. Giovanni's always taken care of the people he loves. It's in his blood. Sometimes to his own detriment." She gave Paige a pointed look. "You know about that girl Sienna?"

"He told me," Paige said rolling her eyes causing Betsy to laugh.

"Good. No secrets. That little bald headed skank took advantage of a good heart. Had him thinking love meant emptying your pockets and sacrificing your peace. Took me a long time to rebuild that boy's trust in his own judgment."

Paige swallowed, suddenly remembering his act of love this morning and probably for whatever he wanted to speak to her dad about.

Paige was the catch, but she couldn't deny or downplay that Giovanni was too.

And she'd treat him as such. Him trusting her meant so much to her. She'd never do anything to hurt him.

"I'm not here to take from him," Paige said firmly. "I've been that person for other people too long, always giving, always fixing. With Giovanni, it feels more like... balance."

Betsy's face broke into a wide smile. "That's exactly what I was hoping to hear. A relationship ain't about who gives and who takes. It's about who stands steady when the other one needs to lean."

Across the yard, Giovanni had resolved whatever crisis had erupted. He looked back at them, eyes questioning when he saw their heads bent close in conversation. Betsy waved him off with a "we're fine" gesture.

"We do lunch every Sunday at Choosy Eats," Betsy said, turning back to Paige. "The three of us, me, him, and Spirit. Been our tradition since his daddy passed." She patted Paige's hand. "You're welcome to join us anytime. Any woman who's got my son smiling like that deserves a seat at our table."

Paige recognized the significance of the invitation. It was more than a meal, it was access to their inner circle, to the sacred space they'd preserved for family.

"Thank you. I'd like that very much."

"Good." Betsy nodded decisively. "Because that boy's already gone on you, whether he's said it out loud yet or not. I can read my children like books, and that one," she said with a nod toward Giovanni, who was making his way back to them, "is going to hell or jail about you."

"Remember something, Paige," Betsy said, leaning in for one final piece of wisdom. "Giovanni builds beautiful things, but the most important thing he's ever built is his sense of peace. Guard that for him and you'll have him for life."

Giovanni approached from across the yard before Paige could respond. Betsy smoothed down her dress and greeted her son with a playful swat. "You leave this poor girl alone with your momma too long, and I might talk her out of dealing with your stubborn behind."

Giovanni laughed, sliding his arm around Paige's waist. "Too late, Ma. She already in too deep."

The look he gave Paige made her heart stutter, and from the knowing smile on Betsy's face, she hadn't missed it either.

"That's what I'm counting on," Betsy said, winking at Paige before moving off to check on the dessert table.

With his mother gone, Giovanni bent down and kissed Paige's temple, his hand resting gently on her shoulder. Something about him felt different now, like all the pieces of him were falling into place. Paige couldn't stop the little smile pulling at her lips.

She caught Spirit watching them from across the yard, her grin wide, mouthing "Finally."

The cookout continued around them, conversations flowing, plates being filled and refilled. Paige felt herself relaxing into the warmth of Giovanni's community, who'd welcomed her without question, when Rolani appeared beside her chair with two plates of food.

"What she asked?" as she watched him settle into the seat next to her.

"You know, I ain't seen that man smile this much since... shit, maybe ever," he said, nodding toward Giovanni at the grill.

Paige accepted the plate gratefully. "So glad no one snatched him up. He's good man."

"Something in the water around here. First Emon and now G. I need the tea ain't that

what y'all say?"

Paige laughed and rolled her eyes. Anytime she heard about Rolani he was joking around.

"Yes, that's what we say but there's a reason your single. What is it?" she asked with a squint trying to read him while he weaved his head to get out of her eyesight.

"Aye, hell nah," he joked. "I'm just tryna get my groove back too."

"Mmhmm, I hear you. You probably need to get out your own way."

"Yeah, probably. Seeing y'all... I don't know maybe it's time I stopped making excuses." He grinned. "You got any friends?"

This was about to be a big friend group because only one person came to mind. And she didn't like to meddle.

"Maybe, let me think on it," she replied. Paige wasn't crazy there was probably a reason he was single and she needed to make sure her girl was going to get top of the line treatment, not trauma.

"Damn, it's like that. After I brought you a plate?"

"Bros before hoes, ain't that what y'all say?" she joked.

"Touché."

Rolani hit her with a nod before he headed off to go bother Spirit.

Paige reclined in a lawn chair nearby, belly full and heart even fuller. She caught his

eye from across the gathering. He gave her a subtle nod, then turned and tapped a metal serving spoon against a glass.

“Yo, let me holla at y’all for a minute.”

The crowd quieted. Heads turned.

“I know this wasn’t supposed to be anything formal,” Giovanni began, “but I wanna say thank y’all. For real.”

He looked out over the familiar faces. Mechanics, office staff, friends, and neighborhood kids posted because they were always safe with him and on his property.

“We’ve built somethin’ solid here. From scratch.

More than a shop, more than just a team, but a family.

And it means somethin’ to me that y’all hold it down every day like it’s your own.

My daddy would be so proud to see what we created and what we are still creating. ”

He took a breath.

“Things are changing. The TV deal is moving. Merch is comin’. More spotlight, more opportunities... but more pressure, too. I want y’all to know I ain’t forget where I came from. And I damn sure ain’t leavin’ anybody behind.”

There were a few nods. A couple claps.

“So yeah. Shit’s movin’ fast. But we built for it. And whatever this next season looks

like, we going into it together. That's the only way I want it."

"The network cut the check so bonuses will be in your accounts tomorrow. I can't thank y'all enough."

He raised a bottle of water, the closest thing he had to a toast. "To hard work, to fresh starts, to elevation."

"To elevation!" several voices echoed back with loud claps and roars.

As the cheers died down and folks returned to their ribs and red cups, Giovanni appeared and sat down beside her. Paige rested one hand on the back of Giovanni's chair, her eyes lingering on him for a minute.

Watching him move through his world, confident but never arrogant, Paige understood why she'd fallen so quickly. This wasn't attraction or good timing. This was recognition, to the tenth power. Her soul finally seeing something it had been searching for without even knowing.

She'd dated before. But this was the first time she'd dated a man through and through.

There was something undeniably masculine about him, not in a chauvinistic way.

It was strength tempered with tenderness.

Vision paired with responsibility. The rare balance of ambition and presence that meant he could build an empire without losing sight of what truly mattered.

What struck her most wasn't how he commanded respect, but how he created space for her dreams, her independence, her voice.

He didn't try to absorb her. Instead, he seemed to understand that they were two complete people choosing to build something together, not two halves desperately seeking completion.

And that, more than his touch or his words or his promises, was what made her certain she wasn't going anywhere.

Paige pulled her phone from her bag, thumbs flying as she sent a quick message to the group chat with Blake, Taylor, and Kennedy.

Paige: Start planning now, bitches. I'm telling y'all, he's the one. Deadass.

Taylor: Oh, baby, welcome to the club.

Blake: I owe Emon \$100. He bet me that Gio would wear you down before summer ended. Stand up heffa... JK.

Kennedi: Y'all, what's the prayer again? I must be saying something wrong.

Blake: You gotta say it three times and mean that shit.

Paige : I can't stand y'all, but pay the man, sis. I'm a goner.

She laughed so hard she almost spit her drink out. It was wild how her friends could read her better than she read herself sometimes. She slid her phone away and leaned in close, whispering in Giovanni's ear.

"I love watching you lead."

He didn't say anything right away, he took her hand and kissed each of her knuckles.

“P, I’m convinced you want me in your guts all day, every day. The way you affirm me makes my dick stand at attention. You play too much.”

“You nasty as hell.”

“Never hid that from you. I’m finna take you home. I don’t have much time before we gotta step out of our bubble. What you tryna do?”

“Let’s get out of here.”

Giovanni broke every traffic law known to man, getting Paige back to the house.

He barely cut the engine before they were inside, doors locked, shoes kicked off, mouths pressed to skin, fearful the world might end in the next hour.

She’d been his since the moment she stepped into his life with those smart-ass jokes, guarded heart, and eyes that said don’t play with me unless you mean it.

Clothes dropped like breadcrumbs down the hallway.

Her back hit the wall, his lips found the curve of her neck, and everything else was lost to moans, gasps, breathless yeses, and unspoken needs.

She gave herself to him completely, matching every kiss, every thrust. Paige loved this man.

And he loved her. He made damn sure she felt that every time he slid in her walls.

Afterward, they bathed each other in silence, soft music playing low, his fingers gently detangling her curls while her legs rested over his lap. They didn’t need to talk about what it was; they felt it.

Tomorrow, it was back to work. Back to emails, clients, and contracts. But neither thought about that. They vowed to stay in the moment until they couldn't anymore.

Giovanni kissed her behind her ear once they slid beneath the covers.

"You already know," he murmured.

Paige nodded, curled into his chest with a steady heartbeat and sank into the mattress.

"I know."

It came out soft, like a secret she was finally ready to admit.

And with the moon high and their skin still warm, they fell asleep, full, fed, and all in.

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Two Weeks Later

Giovanni slammed the shop door behind him, jaw clenched so tight it popped.

He'd been on the phone for three hours straight with the network, listening to them ramble off ideas that they wanted to change.

Which was damn near everything about the show, his vision, his approach, even the damn name.

Now that the check cleared, they wanted him to act like he was some reality TV character.

And Sienna was still inserting herself into production meetings, suggesting "improvements" to his builds that would turn authentic craftsmanship into reality TV bullshit.

He tossed his keys onto the counter hard enough to make them skid across the granite and fall onto the floor.

"Fuck," he muttered, not bothering to pick them up.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Again. He ignored it.

Again. He needed five minutes without someone demanding a piece of him, asking for decisions, needing his approval, trying to shape him into whatever would get the most views.

It had never been about that, and he was about to resort to different measures if his words weren't getting through.

He was wondering if he'd gone soft. Why was he having to repeat himself?

The tension had been building for days now.

Too many plates spinning, too many people pulling him in different directions.

Spirit had noticed it and told him to go home before he snapped at somebody who didn't deserve it.

He left his home office and drove aimlessly until he ended up at his sanctuary, the shop.

The show was his vision. It wasn't some damn circus. And he damn sure didn't want to become the clown. Giovanni grabbed a beer from the fridge. and slammed the door. He rolled his shoulders and took a swig.

He didn't hear the door at first. But he felt the shift in the air, her presence was unmistakable.

He turned to find Paige standing in the doorway of his apartment above the shop, still in her work clothes, a simple black dress, and heels that made his mouth salivate even though he was mad at the world.

"Bad day?" she asked, her voice so calm it almost made him angrier. Because now he was going to have to take from her instead of give. "Don't go there. Answer me."

He needed her and she wasn't counting how many times.

She was showing up because that's what you do when your person's peace is under attack.

Paige had gotten a text from Spirit twenty minutes ago that simply said: He's not good.

If you can pull up, do it. She didn't ask questions. She didn't need to.

Giovanni wasn't a man who cracked easily. He didn't throw tantrums or sulk. He carried things quietly, stoically, until the weight started showing up in the way he moved, the way he shut down.

"You could say that," he replied, sharper than he meant to. He turned away, not wanting her to see the frown on his face. Paige didn't flinch. Didn't retreat. She closed the distance between them, set her purse on the counter.

"You want to talk about it?" she asked, sitting beside him, looping her arm around his. Her chin rested on his bicep.

"Nah, not really." He shook his head. "All I've been doing is talking. I'm sick of my own voice at this point."

She nodded, understanding without pressing. "You eat yet?"

He hadn't. Hadn't even thought about it. Giovanni looked over at her. His tired eyes told her all she needed to know.

"I figured. Can I feed you?" she asked, kicking off her heels and moving to the fridge. She began to pull out ingredients. He didn't have much in here, but she worked with what she had and decided on club sandwiches and French fries.

Giovanni watched her move; thankful she didn't try to fill the silence with false reassurances or solutions. Because he wasn't trying to hear it. And if she were in his shoes, she wouldn't want too either. They understood the solace-seeking parts of each other. Silence was never personal.

"The network wants to change everything." The words spilled out despite himself. "They want to make it flashy. Gimmicky. Like every other bullshit car show on TV. All the shit I specifically said I wouldn't do."

Paige didn't look up from the vegetables she was chopping, but he knew she was listening. Her rhythm never faltered.

"And Sienna's back on her bullshit, trying to get her fingerprints all over the project. Making 'creative suggestions' through Darren, like I don't know exactly what she's doing."

The knife paused momentarily at the mention of Sienna, then resumed.

He scoffed. "Had the nerve to say the main build was 'too sentimental.' The expensive build would sell more. That car's the centerpiece. Ain't no cutting it from the pilot."

"I can't wait to see this messy ass bitch," Paige said under her breath. "Imma show her a thing or two."

Finally, they made eye contact. He smirked before continuing.

"Spirit says I should walk away if they can't respect my shit. But this is the biggest opportunity I've ever had. A platform to show kids who look like me that they can build something from nothing."

Paige set the knife down and turned to face him. “Well then, you fight to keep it that way,” she said simply. “Because there’s no show without you. You haven’t had a good feeling about them from the start.”

She moved to him then, took his face in her hands. Her palms were cool against his skin.

“You built your name without them,” she continued. “You’ll keep building with or without them. What’s for you is for you. Maybe this is not the route for you.”

Giovanni exhaled, some of the tension seeping out of his shoulders.

“I’m irritated as fuck,” he admitted.

“I know.”

She guided him to the couch, gestured for him to sit, and then positioned herself behind him. Her fingers found the knotted muscles at the base of his neck as she massaged his shoulders.

“You don’t have to fix it tonight,” she said as her thumbs slid up his spine. “But you also can’t give up or give in. You earned this.”

Giovanni let his head fall forward, surrendering to her touch. And she was right; he couldn’t give this up and he’d been mad promises and muthafuckas were going to keep their word.

“Turn around.” He did, and she settled onto his lap, straddling him, still working her way down his shoulders and arms.

With her this close, he could smell the coconut oil in her hair, the faint trace of

perfume at her throat. Could feel the warmth of her through the thin fabric of her dress.

“I don’t deserve you.” The words slipped out before he could catch them.

Paige stopped, tilted his chin up so he had to look at her.

“Yes, you do. And I deserve you, too. That’s how this works.”

“I ain’t never had a woman I could fall apart around,” he confessed, his voice barely above a whisper. “Never wanted to. Until now.”

Her eyes softened at his words, but she didn’t look away. She held his gaze, letting him know he was safe with her.

“You don’t have to be the strong one with me. That’s the point.”

“I hear you, P. But it doesn’t feel that easy.”

“Ok, I’ll be vulnerable with you too. Every time something good happens, I brace myself. Like I know it’s gonna cost me, and it usually does. I spiral. I work myself up. Figure out the solution and execute. I don’t even give people a chance to disappoint me.”

Without a word, he stepped in and folded her into his chest, burying his face in the curve of her neck.

Her arms followed, and together they stood, breathing in sync, letting silence speak for them.

Her words still echoed in his head; I don’t even give people a chance to disappoint

me. And she'd given him one.

He didn't take that lightly.

Giovanni pressed a kiss to the skin beneath her ear. "Thank you for telling me that," he murmured. "I won't make you regret it."

Her stomach growled, loud and undeniable.

"My bad, baby. Let's eat."

Later, after they'd eaten and the dishes were done, after she'd made him laugh with stories about how she could never take a nigga with his toes hanging over his slides seriously.

"Yo, you funny ass shit. I know you gave these lame ass niggas a run for their money as a young tender."

"And DID, but I'm still a young tender."

"Thank you." Shifting the conversation again. He ain't wanna hear or even think about her being with someone else.

She pressed a kiss to his sternum, right over his heart. "Always."

And as sleep began to pull at him, Giovanni felt something click into place. Something that had been sitting on the tip of his tongue, waiting for the right moment to make itself known.

His phone buzzed on the nightstand. Spirit's name lit up the screen. He almost let it go to voicemail, but something told him to answer.

“What's good?” he mumbled, voice thick with approaching sleep.

“I wanted to let you know Sienna's done,” Spirit said, cutting straight to it. “I told Darren, that he can shove this show up his ass if I even think she’s in your way or in his ear. We done repeating ourselves. I also made it clear that when you say no changes that’s what you mean. No more going back and forth.”

Giovanni sat up slightly. “Good, because I was about to get violent. I was beginning to feel like I was being punked.”

“For real. Darren's problem and nightmare are her only titles now.” The satisfaction in Spirit's voice was unmistakable. A weight lifted from his shoulders. One less battle to fight.

“Good looking out, sis.”

“No problem, I don’t know what you saw in her? She has the personality of wet funky mop. Stank and useless.”

“Yoo, you may have taken it too far.”

“Never. But did your girl make it over?” Spirit asked, switching gears.

“Yeah, she did. Thanks for hitting her up.”

“That's what I'm here for. Someone's gotta look out for you hard-headed ass.” He could hear her smile through the phone. “I like her, Gio. Don't mess this up.”

“Working on it,” he said, glancing at Paige beside him.

They said their goodbyes and he ended the call.

A small smile played on his lips as he settled back down and felt Paige scoot closer against him.

For tonight, it was enough to know that when the world got too loud, she was the quiet he could come home to.

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A Month Later

Something was in the air. Paige felt it.

The way her coworkers smiled at her. The way Ashton kept peeking out of her office but also avoiding her.

Paige held it together, but her nerves were buzzing.

After years of grinding, of staying late and coming in early, of making herself indispensable, she could feel the shift.

But by mid-morning, Paige started to second-guess herself.

Maybe she was in a good mood. Maybe Giovanni's texts from last night had her walking around grinning like a fool and not about the promotion.

But before lunch, Ashton stepped into her office holding a crisp manila folder and a bottle of peach lemonade Calypso, her favorite. That's when she knew. Paige straightened in her chair, professional mask firmly in place even as her pulse quickened.

"I'm not pregnant again, if that's what you're wondering," Ashton teased, plopping down in the chair across from Paige and passing her the folder.

Paige opened it slowly, hands steady but heart racing. Her eyes caught the letterhead, the congratulations, and then the words:

Loan Manager - Offer of Promotion.

“Oh shit.” She breathed it out as her frame stiffened. The words hit her chest before her brain caught up. “This is real?”

“Very real. You earned this. Not just because of how you handled everything while I was out, but because you’ve been showing up like a boss since the day you walked in here. I told them you were the future. They finally caught up.”

Paige blinked back tears, lips parting in disbelief.

A raise. A title. A team. A new chapter.

It couldn’t have come at a better time. She was floating on cloud nine.

Things had turned around for her completely.

Her dad was getting the help he needed, not stressing her so much by not doing his part, and even her mother’s help eased things off her plate.

“I don’t even know what to say,” Paige admitted, her voice trembling.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Ashton said, standing and grabbing her hand.

“You accept the offer. Oh, and take the rest of the week.”

“What?”

Ashton raised her brows. “You heard me. Plus, it’s the policy. They need to change over clearances and access. Which means yours will be cancelled temporarily.”

“I have to leave, is that what you are saying. It’s the middle of the day, hell the

middle of the week.”

“Friend, clock out, pack up, and go celebrate. Your new office will be ready on Monday.”

“Ugh, what the hell am I going to do for the rest of the week?”

“I don’t know, but there is cake in the breakroom. You deserve it, Paige, and not for what you do, but for who you are.”

Paige nodded slowly, emotion thick in her throat. As soon as Ashton left, she sat in her chair, staring at the offer again, then grabbed her phone.

Paige: Guess who’s the newest Loan Manager with a raise to match?

Giovanni: Good shit, baby. We’re celebrating tonight . I’ll handle everything.

Paige: I knew you’d say that. I’m off for the rest of the week too.

Giovanni: Spa. New dress. Good food. Good dick. You won’t lift a finger. I got you.

She laughed out loud, texted him back something slick, and leaned back in her chair, stunned and soft and full of joy.

Within thirty minutes, she got a text that her ride was outside.

A luxury SUV pulled up with her name on the passenger card.

The driver opened her door like she was somebody and helped her in.

She snapped a few pictures and sent one to Giovanni.

They pulled off, and her day started. She rode in silence and sipped her champagne.

They got to the spa first, and it was a dream. Eucalyptus towels. Hot stone massage. Deep exfoliating facial. More Champagne. She hadn't felt this pampered in years. As she finished up, glowing and fresh, the spa attendant handed her a sleek black box with a handwritten card on top.

I'm so proud of you. Beauty and Brains - G

Inside was a fitted burgundy dress, soft to the touch, with a pair of gold heels that matched the jewelry already tucked inside a smaller box. He hadn't missed a detail. She carefully placed everything back in the box to take with her.

“This is for you also,” she said handing Paige a bag. She grinned and shook her head. He was so good at paying attention. The Fancy Homebody set he got her fit perfectly as she slipped into it.

Paige: You are so good and sneaky. I love my outfit.

Giovanni: I'm just getting started.

Paige exhaled as the SUV pulled away from the curb and headed to the next destination.

Paige didn't even realize she'd been holding her breath until the city started to move around her again.

She sat in the plush leather, the heaviness of the day finally catching up to her.

Champagne flutes clinked in a silver holder by her side, and Boney James played through the speakers.

Giovanni knew she loved him. He was so perfect.

Her phone was in her lap, but she didn't even reach for it.

Not yet. She stared out the window, soaking it all in.

She wasn't used to someone thinking through what she might need before she could even ask.

Giovanni didn't play about her. He would be rewarded for that.

Her fingers brushed the edge of the black box again, smoothing over the card he'd written.

Giovanni was building a life with the woman beneath all that armor.

He wanted to love the Paige who needed a day like this, the one who needed someone to see her win and clap the loudest. But also, Paige who didn't need anything.

He loved her independence just as much as her vulnerability.

The SUV didn't pull up to her apartment like she expected; it rerouted, gliding down a familiar street until they stopped in front of Blake's.

The driver stepped out and opened the door before she could ask questions.

But when she saw Blake standing at the top of her steps, hair pulled up in a bun, smirking, she knew what was up.

Blake was a sap, and they could only blame Emon.

She loved doing this. She wished and prayed for love on all her loved ones.

And some days she prayed it for her enemies, too.

Love was that powerful to her. It had changed her life, given her the things she desired after it had taken so much. Each of them understood that sentiment.

“Girl, what is this?” Paige called as she stepped out, eyes narrowing but smile widening.

“This is me being your hairstylist for the day,” Blake said, tugging her inside. “He told me not to let you touch not one strand. So come on.”

Inside, Blake’s setup was already prepped, oils lined up, edge control waiting, curling iron plugged in. Paige slid into the chair, as Blake slid the smock on her shoulders. She relaxed as the champagne was replaced with ginger tea and the playlist switched from jazz to a soft R&B mix.

“The last time I was doing your hair, it was you cheering me on from the back of my one-bedroom apartment.”

“Yeah, with a missing couch. Hoodie hoodrat.”

“Whatever, I knew Gio was going to be the one. I called that shit.”

“You did,” Paige mumbled through a grin. “It’s like the softest, healthiest obsession.”

Paige closed her eyes, thinking of him.

“It’s scary. But it’s...good scary.”

“See what happens when you stop tryin’ to be everybody’s everything and let somebody be something to you?” Blake teased.

Paige opened her eyes, emotion bubbling behind her lashes. “I feel like I’m in a fairytale. Floating.”

Blake got to work on Paige’s hair first. She wanted to do something soft, since the dress was already bold.

They talked of course like girl cousins did throughout their time together.

Paige gushed about the last few months with Giovanni, in how even with the distance sometimes she felt closer to him than she ever felt with anyone else.

They understood each other on another level.

Blake finished her hair in no time, giving her soft, cascading curls to one side.

Paige reached for her phone and snapped a quick pic of herself. She looked the fuck good.

“Come on you can use the guest room to get ready.”

She helped her slip into the burgundy dress, and when Paige stepped in front of the mirror, she nearly gasped.

The woman staring back was the Paige who’d survived some shit, made peace with herself, and stepped into her soft era without apology.

Power and femininity lived in the curve of her smile and the way her hips filled out her dress.

Gold accents sparkled on her skin, and her glow was unmatched.

“I’m proud of you,” Blake said softly from behind her. “Not for this promotion. But for choosing this version of yourself and trusting yourself.”

“Me too,” Paige whispered. “I didn’t even know she was still in here.”

Blake handed her the matching gold heels and waved her toward the door. “Now go. He’s waiting.”

The driver reappeared like magic, and this time, when Paige stepped back into the SUV, she did so like a woman who knew her worth. She sat back, legs crossed, hand resting on her knee. She didn’t know what Giovanni had planned next, but she was walking into it with no hesitation.

#

Paige had no idea how she changed the beat of Giovanni’s heart.

What she had given him mentally. She hadn’t asked for anything, hadn’t demanded he prove a thing, and that only made him want to give her more.

All she did was show up, be herself, and still, she made him want to build something he’d never had before.

That’s why today mattered.

That’s why he rented out the space, cleared the bay, and worked his fingers to the bone to get this surprise done for her.

Not because he needed to flex, but because he needed her to see herself through his

eyes.

This was more than a gift. It was proof of what he could create when he was centered, focused, and loved correctly.

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The warehouse was quiet when he arrived.

Big, industrial doors were drawn shut, and the lights were already low except for the spots above the covered car in the middle of the floor.

She had no clue what she was walking into.

He made sure of that. The final touches had been completed hours ago.

The custom paint job dried to perfection, gold Forgiato rims mounted, and every stitch of the crushed velvet interior hand-selected for the Monte Carlo.

No detail was missed. The car was sleek, deep purple, with gold metallic flakes that caught the light like cinnamon dust. He thought she was crazy for that color combo, but he got it.

The curves were exactly what she'd inspired him to sketch.

This would be his first major build for the show, and it was hers in every way that mattered.

It was why the network had him fucked up wanting to scrap it.

He checked his phone, they were five minutes out, then took a breath and adjusted his shirt, nerves buzzed low in his stomach as he wondered if she would like it.

Truthfully, it wasn't that. He knew she would love it.

His nerves came from the feeling underneath.

The need for her to see how serious he was.

He needed her to feel the same. Because if she uttered the words, those three small but powerful words, he would move heaven and earth to build a life for her that encompassed nothing but love, support, and commitment.

There'd be nothing that got to her that didn't come through him.

The sound of tires crunching gravel made him turn.

A sleek black Escalade rolled up to the bay.

He didn't move right away, he let his heart catch up.

He saw the door open, then a flash of oiled legs.

When she stepped around the door, that burgundy dress hugged curves he'd memorized in the early mornings and the latest of late nights.

She stepped into the light, hair cascading to one side, with a walk that made him clear his throat and adjust himself.

He knew, just like the first night she walked across the lot, that this was it.

There wasn't another soul on this earth for him.

He was gone. And he'd be that way for the foreseeable future.

Paige smiled, stepping toward him slowly, unsure, her eyes scanning the warehouse.

She wanted to run to him, he'd given her a perfect day, but her heart was beating rapidly from excitement, this was the best she could give him in fear of passing out.

“What is all of this? You’ve been cutting up all day. ”

Giovanni paused before answering. He took her hand, pulled her in close, and kissed her temple, then her forehead. That was his thing, and she loved it.

“I wanted to show you what you did. What you inspired. But first we eat, slow dance, and celebrate you doing big shit. Us doing big shit. But especially you.”

“That sounds perfect.”

He led her over to the small candlelit table, pulled out her seat.

She took a seat and looked up at him with so much love that he couldn't help but grab the sides of her face and kiss her perfectly painted lips.

She was gorgeous. A light that couldn't be dimmed.

He'd put anyone six feet under who tried to snuff it out.

“I'm in love with you. Paige. And I was trying to hold on to that until later, but you looking at me like that, it... I needed to say it.”

Tears pooled in Paige's eyes as she looked away. This day had been a lot; she'd got the job she wanted, had the man, a what a man he was. And he was in love with her. Her emotions couldn't handle much more, or she'd be bawling over dinner.

“You did it baby. How does it feel?” he asked, sitting down across from her. He needed to put some distance between them before the agenda got scrapped. She

smelled good enough to eat.

“It feels a little unreal. But I worked hard for my promotion. I deserved it, and I did while dealing with my dad. I earned that shit.”

He inched closer, eyes locked on hers, “And what else? Tell me everything.”

“And things have been up since the day I met you. I don’t know what we did to deserve this. But I’m happy.”

“I gotta say I agree. I had to take my chance, and it paid off.”

“I’m in love with you, too,” she finally said, the words feeling both terrifying and like the most natural thing she’d ever spoken. “I think I have been since you stopped traffic for me. I’ve been scared to say it out loud.”

Giovanni reached across the table, taking her hand in his. “I didn’t need you to say it. I felt it, and that was enough. But it feels good to hear it. I know that was hard for my Thug Misses.”

“So that’s going to stick huh? Your little joke.”

“Yeah, that’s what you are, and I like that about you.”

“You make me want to be.”

Their plates arrived plated perfectly, with filet mignon, asparagus over rice. Giovanni nodded at the server, then poured her wine.

“You earned every bit of this,” he said, eyes on her. “You survived the shit life threw at you. You alchemized it. You got promoted. You got your daddy straight. You got

me straight. You are a blessing, and you need to know that.”

He stood, circled the table, and pulled her gently to her feet.

The music turned up a little, it was Forever Mine, the song they slow danced to on the first night. He held her close, her head resting on his chest, and they moved together in slow steps.

“You made me eat all of my words.” A laugh escaped as they continued to sway. He was singing in her ear, it was off-key, but she sounded the same the minute she joined him.

“I did, didn’t I? I wasn’t going for the shit. When you looked me in my eyes and said you weren’t gon fall in love with me, you shook something. I said, ‘Okay bet.’”

“That’s so crazy. I said I’d never turn in my player card.”

He laughed, “Yeah, I need that, before you leave today.”

Now it was her turn to laugh.

“You said you wanted to show me something,” she murmured against his chest.

“I do.” He kissed her forehead and stepped back, keeping one arm around her waist as he guided her toward the center of the warehouse. “Remember that sketch I sent you?”

He moved the cover back with one clean motion.

The car glinted under the lights. A sparkling purple, bold and unmissable. Custom gold wheels. The hood curved like her hips, the front grill sharp and commanding. On

the headrest, embroidered in gold thread, were two initials: P.B.

“I built this for you,” Giovanni said behind her. “If you ever begin to wonder about where you stand in my life, I want you to look at this, drive this, and feel me here.” He touched her heart and then her stomach.

“I’m firing on all cylinders about you. I want that to be clear.”

She turned to him slowly, overwhelmed.

“Gio...”

“I love you.” He’d never been clearer about anything in life. “You made me want to move differently. Build differently. Be different. I’m not saying I’m perfect. I got a past. I got habits. But I’ve got room for us. For you.”

“You built this for me?” she asked, voice shuddering.

Paige stepped back from the car, overwhelmed.

Not just by the gift, but by what it stood for.

This wasn’t just custom paint and wheels - this was Giovanni seeing her completely, understanding her in ways she was still learning to understand herself.

She pressed her palm to her chest, feeling her heartbeat quicken.

She’d anticipated needs, solved problems, and carried weight. But here was a man who’d spent months creating something just for her joy. No strings. No expectations. Just... love in action.

“You like it?”

She turned to look at him—really look at him. This man who'd stopped traffic for her, who'd sat with her father during dialysis, who'd built her a library in his man cave. Who saw her independence as strength, not a wall to tear down.

“I love it. This color is so rich. Look at the curves. Baby.”

“Baby what?” he questioned with his hand behind his ear.

“You're the fucking best. Keys, please?”

Giovanni leaned in and kissed her and put the keys in her hand. Her back hit the side of the car. And with the scent of vanilla and paint still fresh in the air, as she leaned close and let her lips graze his ear. “Next time you build a car for me, make sure there's room in the backseat.”

He didn't pull away. Just let the heat simmer between them. “Mmm. My baby always ready for daddy.”

She tossed her head back in laughter. But he didn't find shit funny. He knew she didn't have any panties on; she never did. She could read his mind, “No. No. Not until I get to test drive my new ride.”

“Ok, I'll chill. Look at the front.”

She walked to the front, her finger trailing the car as she made it around. ‘HERS’ was on the license plate and the grill that looked like hers made her squeal in delight. “Let's go, I gotta drive it.”

They slid into the car, and he roared as it came to life. “Paige don't be driving this

shit all fast. It's got a big block in it. You know y'all women can't drive as is."

"Hush and sit back because I don't know what that means.

"Paige kicked off her heels. Giovanni leaned back in the seat and let her take them on a ride around town.

The windows were down, he was relaxed, she sang, he sang.

When they got to a red light, he came in close, kissing her ear and neck, distracting her.

"Pull in over here," he said. Paige carefully pulled into an all-night dirty soda food truck. And they hopped out. His baby loved treats and snacks. There was no way he could end this night without satisfying her sweet tooth.

"This is what I love about you. We just do this. Spontaneous. On the cuff. I don't know. You're perfect."

"What I tell you about that?" he asked, pulling her close, whispering in her ear. "You feel that?"

"Nah, you always ready for big momma. Get me a treat first, and then we can go. I'm tired too, I've had a full day."

"Damn right. I'll be back."

Giovanni came back with two drinks ten minutes later. They leaned against the car; the warm night was perfect for a cool drink on the hood of a classic car. She took a sip, cold fizz popping on her tongue, and watched him the way she always did, like she couldn't believe he was real.

“What?” He couldn’t even look at her, afraid of what he’d do if he did. His best bet was to continue admiring the moonlight bouncing off her new baby.

“Nothing,” she said, timidly. “Appreciating the small things. The moments you create. You do that without even trying.”

He nodded, slowly, because he felt it too.

She slid closer, resting her head on his shoulder, her voice a hum against his skin.

She didn’t know what tomorrow would bring. But with the keys in one hand, and Giovanni’s fingers laced in the other, she finally felt like she was in the driver’s seat of her own life.

She had her man, her Monte, and her momentum.

And she wasn’t letting go of any of it.

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Paige cracked her neck, nervous to make this call.

Two weeks into her new position with a team depending on her, she couldn't up and leave work like before.

Her thumb hovered over Giovanni's name, trembling slightly.

Why was this still so hard? After everything they'd shared, her body, her home, her fears, asking for help shouldn't feel like jumping off a cliff.

But old habits died with their boots on, kicking and screaming.

"Just ask," she coached. Since meeting Giovanni, she hadn't needed to ask for anything; he was always steps ahead of her needs.

But this wasn't that. This felt like a pivotal moment, one she was making bigger than necessary; she knew that.

She was rolling her eyes at herself. Ten deep breaths later, she finally decided to trust herself and Giovanni by hitting the green button.

"What's good, baby?" His voice came through, warm and easy, like he'd been waiting for her call.

"Uh... I need a favor." The words came out smaller than intended.

"Ok, tell me what you need. You hungry? What?"

“No, I’m not hungry.” She twisted the end of her blouse around her finger, hating how weird she sounded.

“Ok, baby, tell me what it is you need.” His voice was encouraging, a soft laugh underneath.

He was trying to figure out why she was hesitating. “P, you know I don’t like being forceful with you, but we done with that ‘scared to ask me for shit’ phase.”

She swallowed hard. He was right.

“It’s my daddy.” The words tumbled out in a rush. “He missed his medical transport van. I don’t know how, but now he’s stuck needing a ride to dialysis, and I can’t leave work. Ashton’s in back-to-back meetings all day, and I have two loan closings that I can’t reschedule and-”

“Cinny, chill and breathe. I got it.”

Seven words, and the knot in her throat relaxed.

“You sure?” she asked, still not used to this. “His appointment’s at eleven. I know it’s your morning at the shop, and I wouldn’t ask if...”

“Paige.” His voice was gentle but firm. “I said I got it. Text me his phone number. I’ll swing by and scoop him.”

She exhaled, her shoulders dropping for the first time all morning. “Thank you.”

“You don’t need thank me. This is what we do.”

We . That word still caught her off guard sometimes. It made her heart flip in the best

way.

“I love you.” The words, still new enough on her tongue to give her butterflies.

There was a pause.

“I know,” he replied.

It wasn't cockiness or dismissal. It was certainty. He knew his woman sighs, they'd been the cheat code to her heart from the jump.

“I'll hit you when we're done.”

“You don't have to wait with him. You can drop him off. The van can take him back.”

“Nah, Imma keep him company. Don't worry about us. Go do great things. And Paige, don't ever hesitate to call or ask me anything ever again.”

“Okay, thank you a million and one times.”

When she hung up, she sat there for a long moment, phone clutched to her chest. For someone who'd always been the fixer, having someone be the fix was still new.

But she was learning to receive it. Paige smiled to herself, tucked her phone away, and turned her attention back to the loan applications waiting on her desk.

Knowing her father was in good hands gave her the space to focus on being the manager she'd worked so hard to become.

Across town, Giovanni slid his phone back in his pocket and headed to his car.

His mind drifted between the day's work schedule and Paige's voice, how it had softened when she finally asked for help.

He was lost in his thoughts, so lost he didn't realize he'd made it to pick up Perry until he was pulling into his driveway.

"Preciate you doing this."

"No problem, I ain't mind."

The ride to the dialysis center had been quiet, but comfortable.

Now, with Perry hooked up to the machine that would clean his blood, Giovanni sat two chairs down, giving the man space while staying present.

He didn't need to say much. The rhythmic hum of the dialysis machine created a strange sort of peace as nurses moved efficiently around the room.

Giovanni watched the routine unfold, realizing this was Paige's normal, this sterile room, these same chairs, this waiting.

It made him see her differently, understanding the strength she carried.

The woman he loved had been holding space for a father who'd missed so much of her life, and it spoke volumes about her heart and character.

Perry shifted in the recliner, cords connected, the machine doing what it did best, pulling and giving back. His eyes flicked toward Giovanni, then away.

"You ain't have to wait," he said, voice dry.

Giovanni shrugged, elbows on his knees. “I know.”

A beat passed.

“She call you, or you volunteer?”

“She called. She didn’t want to, though.” Giovanni offered a small laugh. “But I’d have come either way.”

He didn’t say it out loud, but her hesitation stuck in his chest. Not because it hurt, but because he wanted her to know she could call him.

That she should. He wasn’t trying to be just some soft place to land—he was trying to be her damn foundation .

And part of him worried she hadn’t figured that out yet.

Perry studied him now, longer this time. Paige didn’t need him testing or threatening anybody, she was grown. But he knew his absence had something to do with her hesitancy, and he needed Giovanni to be patient with her.

“She don’t ask for help often,” Perry said, voice a little softer. “So be patient with her.”

“I know that, too.”

More silence.

Perry nodded. “She’s had to carry more than most. For a long time. She won’t say it, but I know I’m part of that weight.”

“She’s not bitter about it,” Giovanni replied.

Another pause. Then Perry asked, “You love her?”

Giovanni didn’t flinch. Didn’t look away. “Yeah. I do.”

He reclined back then, hands folded over his stomach. “One day, I’m gonna ask her if I can do this for life.”

“You’d better, if you know what you’ve got.”

They didn’t say anything after that. They didn’t need to. They were two men with no time for posturing. Giovanni would be around, period. And Perry had just given him his blessing.

Perry dozed off shortly after, and Giovanni sat still, keeping watch. His thoughts never left Paige.

A couple hours later, once Perry had finished dialysis and gathered his strength, he made it clear—he wasn’t ready to be alone. Giovanni didn’t argue. He took him to get something to eat, then brought him by the shop for a change of scenery.

They’d been hanging out and talking shit until Paige pulled up. She stepped out, heart tugging at the scene. Her father hadn’t looked this relaxed in weeks.

“You good, Daddy?”

“I’m alright,” Perry said, with a genuine smile. “Wasn’t ready to go home just yet.”

“That’s fine,” she said, scanning him. “Y’all been out here all day?”

“We stopped for burgers after dialysis,” Giovanni said, coming over to her. “He said he didn’t feel like sittin’ in the house, so we pulled up here. I figured he could chill, talk cars and shit.”

Perry gave a soft grunt. “Boy knows his way around an engine, I’ll give him that. That’s rare. Doing something more with his hands than destruction.”

Paige looked between the two of them, “So y’all best friends now?”

“Basically,” they said in unison, causing her to laugh.

“You ready for me to take you home?”

“Yeah, I wanted a change of pace. I appreciate him for doing that.”

She nodded, touched her dad’s shoulder, then turned to Giovanni.

“Thank you,” she said low.

He placed a kiss on her hairline, voice low. “Say the word, and I’m there.”

She pressed into him and grabbed the back of his head to bring him down to her level.

“Imma swallow that pretty muthafucka whole tonight. I’ll meet you at your house.”

Giovanni bit his lip before slapping her on the ass. She took off with a giggle.

When Paige made it to the car, her father looked at her.

“What?” she asked with a twisted face. “Do I have something on my face?”

Her face grew flushed thinking that maybe her dad saw that exchange.

“That’s my son-in-law. I can tell.”

“Relax. Oh my god,” Paige muttered, cheeks burning. “You like him for real?”

“Yeah.” Perry didn’t hesitate to answer. Giovanni was the man he always hoped she’d find. Somebody with more self-control and brains than he had. “That’s a solid man right there. Gotta be, to deal with you and get you to soften up. Watching y’all, it’s like... it makes me think of ya momma.”

“Daddy,” she groaned, rolling her eyes and laughing at the same time. “Don’t make me start crying out here in this parking lot.”

“You’d be alright if you did. Happy tears are a good thing.”

“What’s gotten into you, old man?” Paige hadn’t expected this when she picked him up. But she should have known that Giovanni would win her heart over even more through her daddy. Giovanna was cut from a different cloth and good people.

“I left you to carry weight I should’ve held,” he said quietly. “And for that... I’m sorry.”

Paige stiffened, the words catching her off guard. Her fingers gripped the steering wheel as she tried to keep the tears at bay.

“No, we’re not doing this,” she said quickly. “Not today.”

“Yes, we are.” His voice was firmer now, but not unkind. “I fucked up in more ways than I can count. I left you. Not only physically, but emotionally. And you stepped up. You didn’t have a choice.”

He looked over at her then, eyes softer than she’d seen in years.

“It’s okay to be mad at me. To be conflicted.

I know I earned that. But I need you to know something, I am proud of you.

Proud of the woman you became in spite of me.

I see how you move now, Paige. I see you living.

And it humbles me. It makes me grateful for the time I do have with you, even if it ain’t long. ”

She didn’t speak, just reached across the console and grabbed his hand. Squeezing them once.

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She didn't have to raise her voice. "That's enough." And it was.

In that simple touch lay forgiveness for two decades of absence, understanding for choices made in grief, and acceptance of the broken, beautiful bond between them.

Neither of them was perfect, but they were family.

And today, somehow, in a parking lot outside Giovanni's shop, she felt blessed that her family was growing.

She started the car, letting her father's words settle over her.

"Seatbelt," she murmured, putting the car into drive.

Old folks always acted brand new about seatbelts; this was her small way of still taking care of him.

As they pulled away, Paige glanced in the rearview mirror, catching Giovanni watching them leave.

The man who'd helped make this moment possible without even knowing it.

Giovanni watched them pull away, smiling to himself.

His phone buzzed with a text:

Paige: Thank you for today. For everything. You keep showing me what love looks

like in action.

Giovanni: That's the only way I know how to love, Cinny. See you tonight.

He tucked his phone away and turned back to the shop. There was still work to do, cars to fix, and a business to run. But his mind was already at home, waiting for Paige to walk through the door.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. By the time Giovanni showered and locked up the shop, stars had already claimed the sky. He moved through the evening traffic with ease, mind already settled into that quiet space that only came when he was heading to her.

Giovanni's code could be heard from the front a little after six thirty. The scent of vanilla and jasmine greeted him as he stepped inside. Her candles were lit, which meant she was still in a soft mood. He rubbed his hands together. He loved her all warm and tender.

"In here," Paige called from the kitchen like a siren.

He found her stirring something on the stove, barefoot in one of his t-shirts, hair wrapped in a silk scarf. The sight of her made him grow bashful. No matter what the day brought, coming home to this, to her, made everything worth it.

"Hey, bae."

"I don't know why you won't move in. How you beat me here?"

"I dropped Perry off, got him settled, and burned rubber. And you know why I won't move in. I don't condone live in boyfriends. No shade. But buy the whole muthafuckin cow or get out of the auction," She finished giving him a wink.

“Heard. What you cooking?” he asked, moving behind her to wrap his arms around her waist. He pressed a kiss to the spot where her neck met her shoulder. And he had heard her loud and clear, which would make the next conversation a lot easier.

“Just some Dirty rice. Nothing fancy.” She rested back into his chest. “How was the rest of your day?”

“Good. Got that Camaro sold. I was sick of looking at it. But the whole time I kept thinking about your daddy.”

She turned in his arms, wooden spoon still in hand. “Yeah? And speaking of, thank you again for today. I appreciate you for picking him up, hanging with him, and making his day.”

Giovanni took the spoon, set it down, and pulled her closer. “He reminds me of my pops in some ways. It was my pleasure.”

“That’s high praise, coming from you.” She gave him a small smile.

“He said something that stuck with me, though.”

Paige raised an eyebrow, waiting.

“He asked if I loved you. Straight up no chaser.”

“And what’d you say?” She tried to keep her voice light, but her eyes gave her away. She knew he loved her he’d made that more than clear but hearing what he told her father mattered.

“What do you think I said?” Giovanni’s thumb traced the outline of her jaw. “I told him the truth. That I do.”

She nodded, swallowing. “And?”

“And he told me he could tell I’d be his son-in-law.”

Paige’s cheeks flushed. “He mentioned that to me, too. Sorry. He was being extra today. He had me crying in the car.”

Giovanni’s laugh was low. “You think that bothered me? I like how he thinks.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” He didn’t elaborate, kissed her forehead and reached around her to turn down the heat on the stove. “Food’s about to burn.”

As she turned back to the pot, he rested his weight against the counter, watching her move with the ease of someone who belonged there. Her mailing address hadn’t caught up yet—but her energy had. This was their home now.

“How would you feel about that?” he asked finally, voice casual but eyes saying what his intent was. “Being my wife someday?”

Paige peeked over her shoulder, a small smile playing at her lips. “I’d feel like the luckiest woman alive. Why?”

Giovanni nodded once, satisfaction settling in his bones. He didn’t need to say more. The seed was planted. When the time came, and it would come, she’d be ready to make him the happiest man alive. They both would.

“Let me set the table.” He kissed her temple as he passed, reaching for the plates.

“No, not so fast. I owe you something, remember.” Paige turned the stove off and

dropped to her knees, her movements natural.

This wasn't for show; this was them. She never had to be perfect in front of him.

She never had to try hard. He was easy to love and take care of.

His line of questioning wasn't off. She'd thought about it after her father mentioned it.

But she left it there, when the moment was right, they'd know. They were tethered like that.

"What did I say I was going to do?"

Giovanni stilled. Plate in one hand, napkins in the other, but his body went stiff. No matter how many times they'd been together, she still hit him like the first time. Every damn time.

"You don't ow-"

"Shh, I know I don't." She looked up at him with those eyes that never lied. "But I want to. That's the difference."

He set the plates down carefully, knowing damn well dinner was about to get cold. Some things were worth the wait.

"Do your thing, baby."

She tugged at his waistband. Paige wasn't about second-guessing, not anymore. Not with him. "You always take care of me. Today, my daddy. Yesterday, my heart. Let me take care of you."

Giovanni didn't say a word. This was Paige speaking her love language, and he wasn't about to interrupt. She was on her knees, but he was the one humbled. Because this wasn't about sex. It was about trust. About a woman who'd carried the world finally choosing to let him hold a piece of it.

Her hands worked his belt, unzipped his pants with the familiarity of a woman who knew what was hers. His dick was already thick and ready; it had been that way since he watched her lips form the word "love" through the phone earlier.

She looked up again and kissed the skin above his waist.

She pressed her lips to his skin. "Thank you. For my dad. For showing up. For loving me."

She freed him from his briefs, her warm palm circling him, stroking twice before her mouth replaced her hand. The heat of her tongue against him made him release a slow hiss. His muscles tightened across his abdomen. Her lips slid over him, taking him in deeper with each pass.

Giovanni's hand found the back of her head, not pushing, resting there, feeling the gentle bob as she worked him.

The silk of her scarf was smooth under his palm, a contrast to the wet heat of her mouth enveloping him.

He watched, mesmerized, as she hollowed her cheeks, creating a suction that had him seeing stars.

He almost broke then, almost pulled her up to tell her that she didn't need to thank him for loving her right. That she deserved this and more. But the lump in his throat and the look in her eyes told him to let her have this moment.

“Paige, I ain’t gon make it. You wildin,” he managed to voice through gritted teeth.

Her eyes met his again, mischievous now, and she deliberately ignored his warning.

Instead, she took him deeper, humming around him, the vibration sending shockwaves through his body.

Her hands weren’t idle, one gripped his thigh for balance, nails pressing into his balls enough to remind him who was in control right now.

For a woman who'd spent years guarding her heart, this was surrender. She was choosing him, trusting him, showing in every touch that the walls she'd built now had a door, and he held the only key.

“Paige,” he groaned, the simplicity of her name carrying everything he felt.

She took him to the edge, reading his body with the same precision and calculation she brought to everything else in her life.

When his breathing shifted, when his muscles tensed beneath her hands, she knew.

She didn’t break rhythm, didn’t hesitate, she stayed with him as he coated her tongue with his children.

His legs nearly buckled as release washed over him, but he stayed upright, one hand braced on the counter, the other still cradling her face.

She looked up, wiped her mouth with her thumb, that satisfied smile he loved already curling on her lips.

“I don’t know what the fuck you just did to me...” He laughed, soft and shaky,

dragging a hand over his face. “But I ain’t ever had it like that.”

“I can’t believe you almost turned that down.”

He drew in a breath, still pressed to her. Then he lifted her with ease, his voice brushing her ear tickling her skin in the process.

“Come here.”

Dinner? Forgotten.

Now it was his turn to kneel, his turn to worship. Because that’s what they did, they gave each other exactly what they needed, when they needed it, no questions asked.

She was his match. His mirror. His. Point. Blank. Period.

They finally made it to eating hours later, plates warmed and rewarmed, talking about nothing and everything as their legs tangled beneath the table.

Paige laughed at something ridiculous he said, head thrown back, throat exposed, and Giovanni caught himself staring.

Mesmerized. This moment. This woman. The way her eyes crinkled when she was truly happy.

The universe had been preparing him for Paige his entire life, and now that he’d found her, he recognized that this was more than passion, more than compatibility, maybe more than love.

This was his future. His peace. His whole damn heart and soul walking around outside his body. And as she looked over at him, making him feel things he couldn’t

name, Giovanni knew without a doubt, this woman would wear his last name, bear his children, and grow old laughing at his jokes.

This was the foundation. The blueprint. The cornerstone of everything he would ever build from this day forward.

Two Months Later

The sun had barely cleared the hills of L.A.

when Paige cracked her hotel window, letting the breeze cut through the stillness of the morning.

The city sounded different than Coupeville.

She was surprised she got any sleep with the horns, choppers overhead, and sirens threading between early risers and dream chasers.

But somehow, she felt at home. Maybe it wasn't the city that brought her ease.

Maybe it was waking up in a bed that still held Giovanni's warmth from the night before.

He'd left early, whining but understanding that the show had to go on.

Said he'd rather lay up in bed with her all day, and she believed him.

He loved to complain about it, but she could see it in his eyes, the quiet thrill that came from knowing the world was about to see his art.

It hadn't been easy, but he was doing it.

And she was right there beside him, making sure he didn't forget exactly who the hell

he was.

That nigga. Through and through.

She'd been stuck on Tyla's "ART" for days. It had been living on her lips, the melody tangled in every part of her life lately. She was in love, and every day, she was still processing that truth.

She hummed the lyrics to the song as she stretched, faint and sweet - "I'll be your piece."

Wrapped in her plush robe, she rolled her neck and padded barefoot into the suite's kitchen.

The damn room was nearly the size of an apartment.

And she wanted to be intimidated by it, but she wasn't.

She belonged here. She belonged with him.

And whenever he was ready to do it forever, she'd officially belong to him too.

The girls were meeting her in an hour, Blake, Taylor, Spirit, and his mother, of course.

She already knew they'd be on one. But she was excited for them to all link and mingle.

Together, they had a story full of Black love.

Blake had threatened to cry, drink, or both, and Spirit had been hyping the event since

Giovanni got the green light for a full season.

It was big. And Paige didn't want to pretend like it wasn't.

Hell, she'd been on the verge of tears since she landed.

She poured coffee with one hand and scrolled through her phone with the other, reading texts from her mother, Perry fussing that he should be there, and a simple message from Giovanni: "See you tonight, P. We did it."

Her fingers hovered over the screen before she replied:

"You did it. I just watched. But I'm proud of you more than I know how to say."

An hour later, Paige stepped into the sun in a yellow two-piece bathing suit, sarong, and sandals. The rooftop pool glinted with different hues, the water shimmering almost blinding, but designer sunglasses were in abundance as she got closer.

The vibey playlist coming from a hidden speaker somewhere near the cabanas set the mood.

They'd rented the top of the hotel for brunch without blinking, something that would have seemed ridiculous to them a year ago.

They constantly joked about becoming the rich housewives they used to side-eye on TV, but the joke was hitting different now.

All of them still had their own careers, their own money, their own ambitions, but they'd also discovered what it meant to be with men who matched their hustle and then some.

Paige never understood until Giovanni showed her what it felt like to be treasured, not with words alone, but with thoughtfulness, action.

It wasn't about the money, though he had plenty.

It was about the care behind every gesture, every surprise, every moment he chose to make easier for her because he could. And even more than that... he desired to.

She waved, spotting Giovanni's momma reclined like this was her second home, legs crossed, sipping something fruity, and looking like she had zero tolerance for nonsense but all the time in the world for her tribe.

Then she saw Blake in an oversized sun hat, already two drinks in and talking with her hands; Taylor with her shades on and a towel draped across her lap, she was still a church girl; Spirit in a tube top dress and sandals, dancing in her seat.

The familiar West Coast beat hit her ears before she even reached the table. Of course, Blake had the playlist on their favorites. Paige grinned, dropping into character as she approached.

“Just hit the Eastside of the LBC

On a mission, tryin' to find Mr. Warren G

Seen a car full of girls, ain't no need to tweak

All you skirts know what's up with 213,” she rapped, adding a little bounce to her step.

Blake howled with laughter but wasn't about to be outdone.

“So I hooks a left on 21 and Lewis

Some brothers shootin' dice, so I said, “Let's do this.”

I jumped out the ride and said, “What's up?”

Some brothers pulled some gats, so I said, “I'm stuck.”

“There she goes!” Blake called out, still cracking up. “Bout time, Hollywood.”

Paige laughed and eased into the energy. She was hugged, teased, and offered a drink before she could even sit down. The table was already lined with small plates, shrimp skewers, sliders, fruit bowls, and too many sauces.

“Okay,” Paige said, lifting her shades. “Before anybody says anything slick, because y'all know how y'all do. Yes, I'm glowing. Yes, I'm in love. Yes, I'm still processing it. And no, I will not be taking any questions. Proceed.”

“Oh, we knew that already,” Taylor said with a smirk and a roll of her eyes. They weren't confused or entertained by her announcement. It was evident in her walk.

“That was cute, nose y heffa.”

“I made an observation, that's all. I recall you doing the same for each of us,” Taylor said, sipping her mimosa.

She'd read Paige for filth because she was both an advocate and a hater when it came to them finding love.

She had always been happy for them because both of her cousins had kicked off the family healing by getting married and starting families.

“Yeah, and you’re welcome,” Paige said, looking around at them. “Both of y’all skanks.”

Blake clinked her glass against hers. “And now you’re the one in love, lips all swollen and skin all dewy. You moisturized in a way only di...”

“Don’t finish that sentence, Blake,” Betsy cut in, not even looking up from her drink. “That’s still my son. And her walking differently is already enough,” she laughed, shaking her head. “I don’t need visuals.”

The whole table broke into laughter.

Kennedi arrived last, with her digital recorder in one hand and phone in the other, sliding into her seat. “Sorry I’m late. I had to finish an interview for the premiere and the show. I appreciate Giovanni insisting I got the exclusive. It might be the lead piece for the outlet launch.”

She set her equipment down, eyes bright with the thrill of the chase that had taken her around the world and back. “What did I miss? Y’all look like you’ve been gossiping. Who pregnant?”

“1,2,3, not it,” Blake joked.

“No, they said I’m walking differently. Just be making sh- stuff up, I swear. I walked over here perfectly fine.”

The group looked at each other and broke into more laughter. This was the Destiny’s Child ‘Girl’ moment they’d been waiting for - Paige, the last to know she was changed by love.

“Paige, do the math. Like, please.”

Paige narrowed her eyes and sipped her drink slowly. “Y’all get on my damn nerves.”

Blake leaned in, lowering her voice. “Cousin, we’ve been waiting for this. My husband has been plotting since Giovanni first asked about you. So, we love this for you.”

Paige waved them off dismissively but gave them a small smile. “I feel like I’m finally breathing air that’s mine. Not borrowed. Not shared. All mine.”

Taylor nodded slowly, setting her glass down. “That’s called alignment, baby.”

“And you’re in it,” Betsy added. “I can’t wait to see what you and my son create together.”

“Whew,” Blake said, fanning herself. “It’ll be beautiful whatever it is.”

Spirit smiled at Paige, truly appreciating her being in her brother’s life. “I love y’all together. He’s always been quiet, laid back, but you make him sit up in the best ways.”

“Can y’all believe I told him flat out I wasn’t what he was looking for and he said BET!” They howled because she had her nerve. But it was the best decision she ever made, and that was just a fact.

“Now you’ve got him wrapped around your finger, growing, and glowing too. I like my brother happy. We all do,” Spirit laughed. He’d been hell on wheels about the show, the after party, and the future. But Paige came around and calmed him down, soothing him by simply stepping into the room.

“Vanni this, Paige that,” Spirit teased, gagging, “Y’all make me sick.”

“Anyway, y’all enjoying yourselves?”

“Oh yes, kid free in a hotel room with my man. I might not go home.”

“Good, I want y’all to enjoy yourselves, too. This is a trip for all of us. We earned it.”
They all raised their glass and tapped them gently.

Paige leaned back in her chair, warmth radiating from the sun, the drinks, and the love circling this table.

This felt sacred. Like sisterhood and softness had finally decided she could sit with them.

She watched them all, her friends, a mirror of what could be when you chose peace over performance, when you let yourself be poured into without apology.

She blinked slowly, letting her lashes shield the emotion threatening to show up uninvited.

Spirit leaned over and nudged her knee. “You good?”

“I’m more than good,” Paige said, swallowing the lump in her throat. “I’m... grateful. Blessed.”

Paige exhaled, let herself sink into the moment, and that’s when she checked her phone.

No new message from Giovanni.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:48 am

She frowned for a second. He'd been texting her on and off all day.

Always with an update or a soft, I'm thinking about you text.

But now it was silent. She was worried about him.

He loved the mission, but he didn't like the performance part of it. Her man's social battery got depleted quickly. She needed him to check in.

Paige: You know, I worry about you. If it gets to be too much, go sit quietly and recharge. I love you.

She didn't get a response, so she set her phone down. He knew how to find her if he needed her. She decided to let the man have his moment. But deep down, she knew Giovanni Dowlen didn't do silence without reason.

#

Giovanni, Emon, Brooks, and Rolani sat in the faux shop set up for the night. It felt good having his people with him, his brothers. Rolani was a given, but Emon and Brooks had both taken time off from building empires to show up for his moment. That meant something.

And of course, the women weren't missing this.

While the fellas kicked it, their wives and girlfriends were posted at the hotel, living it up, brunch, mimosas, loud-ass laughter, shopping, and taking up space like only

Black women could.

That was why they worked their hands raw.

So, their women could move through the world without hesitation or apology.

“This shit is surreal,” Rolani said, leaning back in the leather chair, the replica shop shining around them.

Rolani had been his friend way before all of this.

In fact, it was Giovanni’s dad who got him into cars also.

When he came to spend the night, if Giovanni had to be in the shop, so did he.

It was the only way his dad agreed. Rolani was better for it.

He found his passion for painting and detail work.

Now he was Giovanni’s right hand at the shop and the best in the business at what he did.

“Yeah, a nigga can’t believe this shit here. I appreciate y’all for making it out,” Giovanni said.

These were the men who’d known him when he was nothing but reckless ambition. The ones who’d seen him humbled, healing, rebuilding after betrayal. They weren’t here for photo ops. They were there for him. Proud of his accomplishments.

“Bruh, we’re family. In more ways than one. I wouldn’t wanna be anywhere else. How you feeling?” Emon asked.

Giovanni exhaled, heavy. “Like a fish out of water. I’m hype... I don’t know how to show it. I feel like this is a big moment, but... something else is eating at me.”

“Is it ‘bout the show?” Emon asked, tipping back his beer. “Or about Paige?”

Giovanni smirked, rubbing his thumb along the bridge of his nose. “Both. Always. She’s a thought in everything I do.”

Brooks laughed. “She got you wide open.”

“Nah, she got me locked in. Crazy part? We’ve only been together a few months. But time seems not to even matter much with her.”

He listened with intent as they spoke. These were men who’d loved out loud. Who had taken risks on women they couldn’t unsee once they saw them.

Giovanni blew out a slow breath.

It still surprised him sometimes— how much he’d changed. How fast it had happened. How fast he’d fallen in love with Paige. And Giovanni, normally a man with good common sense, felt reckless and bold.

Time had never stopped him. When had he ever played it safe? Every win that mattered came from moving off instinct, not permission. The shop. The TV deal. Hell, even stopping traffic for a stranger that night. That wasn’t a strategy. That was faith. A faith that felt like God's highest favor.

“So?” Brooks shrugged, catching his eye. “When you know, you know.”

“And you know,” Emon added without looking up, like it was fact.

Giovanni let the words settle before nodding. These two had already done what he was now stepping into. He'd watched Emon love Blake like his whole soul was tied to hers. He'd seen Brooks shift his entire world to wrap Taylor in peace.

And he'd do both.

His phone buzzed; it was a text from Paige. He smiled.

Paige: You know, I worry about you. If it gets to be too much, go sit quietly and recharge. I love you.

He read her message but didn't respond right away.

With intense eyes he stared down at his hands, scarred, calloused, capable.

Built to carry, to create, to protect. Hands that would rub her back when she needed, hold her hand when she needed, wipe her tears when she needed, hold their children.

Flashes of the future had been plaguing him all day.

That ache in his chest showed up again, familiar.

It'd been lingering ever since she got to town.

Her simple message, the way she worried about him, supported him without being asked, crystallized everything. This wasn't just love. This was partnership. This was home.

"I'm not tryna show up to this premiere treating it like some solo achievement," Giovanni said finally, certain. "Not when the woman who centered me enough to make this possible is waiting back at that hotel."

Emon leaned in, knowing. “You saying what I think you saying?”

“I think so.”

Even Brooks sat up straighter. “Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

He didn't need another sign. He'd already seen enough. That woman had changed his damn life. There would be no halfway with Paige Bishop. There had never been a stutter step or a misfire. From the night she slid into his car to every moment she'd poured into him after. He didn't need more time to figure out if she was his to have and hold forever; he needed her .

“Let us know how we can support. Proud of you.”

They'd been all in from the jump, even when they tried to play it cool. He wasn't a man who believed in signs from the universe, but he believed in what his hands could build and what his heart could feel. And both were telling him the same thing: Paige Bishop was meant to be his wife.

Giovanni stood up, already moving. “Y'all feel like being late to the premiere?”

The men slapped their hands on Giovanni's back, congratulating him, fully aware that the theme of the night was going to shift tremendously.

He pulled out his phone and made a single call.

“I need a favor, a big one sis.”

#

Paige checked her makeup one last time in her compact mirror, smoothing a finger over her perfectly lined lips.

The midnight blue dress hugged her curves, strapless with a high slit that showed enough leg to keep Giovanni's attention where it belonged, on her, not the cameras that would be everywhere tonight.

“You good?” she asked, glancing at him. “We can still turn around if you're not feeling it.”

Giovanni's face was focused, tight, that quiet intensity he got when his mind was working through something. He looked damn good in that tailored black suit, no tie, gold and diamond chains resting against his chest. His eyes flicked to her briefly, a small smile breaking through the seriousness.

“I'm good. We need to make a quick stop before we hit the premiere.”

“A stop? Baby, we're already cutting it close. You hate being late, and I do too now.”

“Paige, this our shit. Trust me, one last time.”

Those words. So simple, but heavy between them.

‘Trust me’ had been the unspoken thread of their relationship from the beginning, from the moment he asked her to get in his car at the fairgrounds, to when he sat with her father during dialysis, to every time he showed up exactly when she needed him without having to ask.

“Always,” she replied, because it was true.

The car turned off the main road, heading away from the glittering strip of

Hollywood where the premiere was being held. Paige raised an eyebrow but didn't question it. Giovanni's hand rested on her thigh, squeezing gently before leaning in for a kiss.

"You do this every time. You're gonna mess up my lip combo."

"That glossy thing you do with your lips drives me crazy, baby. I'm sorry."

After fifteen minutes, they pulled up to what looked like a private airfield. Security waved them through without checking ID. In the distance, the sleek outline of a helicopter stood silhouetted against the setting sun, its blades motionless but ready.

"Giovanni," she said slowly, "what's happening right now?"

The driver put the car in park but didn't kill the engine right away. He turned to look at her.

"Do you trust me?"

"I already said I did," she replied, trying to read his expression. "But you're acting weird as hell right now."

That pulled a smile from him, a wide one.

"I know, and I'm sorry. We're not going to the premiere. Not yet anyway."

"Then, where are we going that requires a helicopter?"

He took her hand in his. His palm was warm, steady.

"Vegas."

“Vegas?” she repeated, blinking. “Tonight? Giovanni, your show-”

“Will still premiere whether I’m there or not. And we’ll watch it.”

Paige stared at him, trying to make sense of what was happening. “But why...”

“Because”—he cut her off gently— “I’ve got something more important to do tonight than stand around taking pictures with strangers. I want a sure thing by my side.”

The intensity in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine.

“What’s more important than your career-defining moment?” she asked, her voice dropping to match his tone.

“You. Us.”

Realization didn’t just creep in—it crashed, loud and sure. Her heart pounded, wild and frantic. Marriage. Tonight.

The magnitude of what he was suggesting crashed over her in waves.

A year ago, she would have called this crazy. Six months ago, she would have needed time to think, to plan, to control every variable. But sitting here with Giovanni, watching him risk everything for them, she realized something had fundamentally shifted inside her.

She wasn't afraid anymore. Not of loving him completely, not of being loved completely in return. Every careful wall she’d built had already crumbled anyway - brick by brick, kiss by kiss, gentle gesture by gentle gesture.

“Vanni...” tears rushed to the brim of her eyes, but not from fear. From recognition.

This was right. He was right. They were right.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:48 am

“You sure about this? About me?” she whispered.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

She searched his face and found only certainty reflecting back at her. The same certainty she felt bone-deep.

He brought a hand to her chin, drawing her gaze back to his. “Hey, don’t do that.”

She nodded her head and drew in all the breath she could muster up.

“I’m not doing it here.” He wanted that to be clear and quick. “Not in a car or in a parking lot. But I need you to know that’s where we’re headed. If you want to say no now, we can turn around. No harm, no foul, baby.”

Paige let out a shaky breath. “To Vegas? Or to whatever you’re planning to ask me on a rooftop somewhere?”

His smile deepened, eyes crinkling at the corners. “Both.”

She should have been surprised. Should have needed time to think.

But nothing about them had ever been traditional, from stopping traffic at a car show to dancing slowly in an empty shop to falling in love faster than either of them had planned.

Spontaneous wasn’t reckless when it came to Giovanni. It was just them.

“Let’s get on the helicopter,” she said, voice calm despite the butterflies running amuck in her stomach.

He studied her face for a long moment. “You sure about this? When I make my mind up, you know-”

“I’m sure about you,” she replied cutting him off, she didn’t need to hear anymore. “Everything else is just details.”

Giovanni leaned across the car and kissed her, one hand cradling her face. When their lips parted, his eyes were now brimming with tears.

“Let’s go then.”

The next hour passed in a blur. The helicopter ride was both terrifying and exhilarating, Giovanni's hand wrapped around hers, calm and certain as they soared above the city lights.

As they approached Vegas, the pilot announced they had one more stop before landing. The helicopter banked toward one of the tallest buildings on the strip, a luxury hotel with a rooftop helipad illuminated against the night sky.

The rooftop was transformed. String lights cast a warm glow over the space, and a small table with champagne stood near the edge, overlooking the neon landscape of the Vegas strip.

The breeze was cool against Paige's skin as Giovanni guided her, his hand warm at the curve of her waist. They stood in silence for a moment.

He was more nervous about this than he was the premiere.

“You know,” Giovanni said finally, close to her ear, “the first time I saw you at that car show, everything went quiet. Like the world stepped back to let me see you clearly.”

Paige turned to face him, her back to the railing. “I remember. You stopped traffic.”

“Worth it.”

He took both her hands in his and kissed them both but letting the last kiss linger. She could feel the slight tremor in his fingers. Her man was nervous. That made her love him more.

For a moment, they stood at the edge of the rooftop, the world going on about its business.

It wasn't worried about them, and they weren't worried about it.

Their world was right here on this rooftop, swirling and rotating around them.

The city hummed with noise below, but up here, there was only the quiet certainty between them.

“I didn't plan this,” he admitted. “Not like this. But watching you this weekend, seeing you with my people, in my world... I realized I don't want to wait anymore.”

He took a breath.

“I love you, Paige Bishop. I love the way you carry yourself. I love how you take care of your people. I love how you take care of me. I love how you let me love you. Because then I get reminded that I deserve that shit too.”

She tightened her grip on his hand, letting the gesture acknowledge what words couldn't.

Her eyes were glossy but anchored. She wasn't the type to cry, and neither was he.

But the tears in his eyes stole her breath and nearly tipped her over.

This was a moment so big it deserved tears of joy. She understood and felt the same way.

And the silence stretched. He was praying he hadn't read her wrong. The thought that the universe might say she wasn't his to have and to hold made his stomach turn. The wind kicked up, but she didn't flinch. Her fingers stayed laced within his.

"I love you. And I need you just like you need me," she affirmed.

That did it for him. It always did. In one fluid motion, Giovanni dropped to one knee.

"You are everything to me. Beautiful, kind, funny. You have such a good heart, and the way you love people should be offered as a college course. We could all stand to learn something from you and the way you embody love from the top of your head to the soles of your feet.

"I'm not even gonna hit you with that lame-ass 'you deserve the world' line.

That's too passive. Too soft for how I'm coming behind you.

You will have everything your heart desires.

Everything you deserve , and then some. You won't ever have to ask, beg, or wonder if I got you. I do . That's a promise."

He paused, eyes locked on hers.

“I want this life—with you . Only you. I want you to be my wife. It’s that simple.”

“It’s simple, huh?” she asked, voice cracking with emotion.

“Yeah,” he nodded, stepping closer. “So, what do you say? Will you trust me... just one more time? And marry me?”

“Yes,” she whispered, then louder, “Yes, of course. I’ll marry you.”

“Tonight?” Giovanni asked, already on his feet, his hands cradling hers again.

She pulled her head back, blinking like she needed to be sure he meant it.

He did.

“Tonight,” she said, smiling through the shock.

Giovanni laughed, lifting her off her feet in a tight embrace. “I fucking love you, Paige Bishop.”

“Uhm, Paige Dowlen,” she corrected, grinning against his mouth.

“Damn, that sounds good.” He lowered her gently to her feet, mouth still close. “You still gon have my babies?”

“Yes, but not five. I was coerced into saying that when you had my legs pinned by my ears baby.”

He laughed through his tears, emotion thick in his throat. They stayed locked in that

moment, suspended under the Vegas sky, until reality tugged at them both. The helicopter pilot gave a discreet nod toward the elevator.

Hand in hand, they rushed back downstairs to the waiting limo, still floating on the decision they'd made. When the elevator doors opened to the lobby, Giovanni guided her through with his hand resting on her hip, protective and proud all at once.

As they slid into the limo, laughing about how crazy they were for doing this, Paige suddenly froze. Her laughter died in her throat as tears sprang to her eyes.

"Oh my God."

Blake and Emon sat waiting, Blake already dabbing at her eyes with a tissue, Emon with a bottle of champagne and four glasses balanced on his knee.

"Y'all..." Paige's voice broke. "Thank you for being here."

"Stop," Blake said, reaching for her hand. "Family sticks together. We're here for y'all in any capacity we can be."

Giovanni caught Emon's eye in a silent exchange of brotherhood. Then his thoughts turned to Spirit, he'd need to give his sister a raise. She deserved it. None of this would've been possible without her pulling these strings behind the scenes.

The Little White Chapel wasn't what either of them had imagined for their wedding day.

Not that Paige had spent much time dreaming about white dresses and flower arrangements, she was too practical for that.

And Giovanni had been too focused on building his empire to think about who he'd

share it with or if he would ever share it.

Yet here they were. Paige in a cream dress that Blake picked out when they parted.

Giovanni was still in his premier suit, standing before an officiant who looked like he'd seen everything Vegas had to offer twice over and remained unimpressed.

No flowers. No fuss. No extended family or childhood friends.

Just them and Blake and Emon as witnesses.

When the officiant asked for their vows, Giovanni took her hands in his thumbs brushing over her knuckles.

“Paige...” He breathed her name knowing the weight it held.

Like it was the only thing keeping him standing.

“I spent years building everything I thought would make me whole. The shop, the name, and even the show. But none of it.” He paused, jaw tightening, voice threatening to crack, “None of it ever made me feel like this. Like you do. Nothing I’ve ever created matters as much as what we’re building together. I promise to acknowledge your dreams, honor your independence, and see you, not just as my wife, but as the complete woman you are, every single day for the rest of our lives.”

He swallowed; eyes fixed on hers. “You came into my life soft and loud at the same time. I knew from that moment that I’d be willing to do whatever to make it to today.”

She reached out and touched his face. Her big teddy bear was a mess. He leaned into her hand, placing a kiss to the inside of her palm.

“I haven’t always had the words. Still don’t sometimes. Because how the hell we get here?” He laughed. “But what I know is that I’m better with you. Calmer. Louder in the right way. And I promise, on everything, I won’t let this love sit idle.”

“I promise to honor your quiet days, hype your wild ones, and hold you through the in-between. I’ll be your safe, your steady, your soft spot to land, even when it’s hard . Especially when it’s hard.”

He exhaled slowly, tears finally pushing past his control.

He was a mess behind Paige, and he wasn’t ashamed to let the world know that.

“You are... the best thing I’ve ever been part of building, Paige.

The only thing I got right without a blueprint or a backup plan.

And let me be clear you never needed that from me. It was always in you.”

He blinked through the tears. He never wanted to take away from who she was before, what she had accomplished, and experienced. “I’d do it all again. From scratch. Just to end up here, with you. ”

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Paige fought her tears; suddenly grateful she hadn't bothered with complicated makeup. It was her turn now and she drew in a deep breath to calm her nerves.

"Vanni..." Her voice cracked on the first syllable, and she had to pause, blinking fast. "I told myself I wasn't gonna cry."

She laughed, quiet and trembling, He wiped the tear falling down her cheek.

It was useless because that simple gesture made more tears fall.

She looked over at Blake, needing a minute to calm down.

Blake nodded her head, silently telling her she could do this.

Giovanni didn't need her to continue. This was enough but she did.

She wanted him to know that she was just as in love with him as he was with her.

"I spent so long being the strong one. The one who held it all together because I thought that's what made me worthy. And for a long time... I didn't even know I was tired. I didn't know I was lonely. I didn't know I was waiting."

She looked up at him, this man, hers now, in disbelief.

"You didn't try to fix me. You just showed up. Again and again, until I stopped bracing for the fall, for the disappointment. And now I can breathe."

“I promise to choose us. Not just in the big ways, but in the quiet ones. In the moments no one sees. I’ll protect what we’ve built.

I’ll make space for your silence, your rest, your joy.

Just like you made space for me.” She stepped closer, fingers curling around his.

“You are not just my peace. You are my everything in between.”

A tear rolled straight down her face, and this time, she didn’t bother with it.

“I love you, Giovanni. And I vow to love you loudly. Freely. And forever.”

When they kissed to seal their vows, the ground shifted beneath their feet. And as he’d just vowed to do, he caught her. They stayed together in each other’s arms until Emon cleared his throat.

“This was some beautiful ass shit. But we gotta get moving bruh.”

They stepped into the Vegas night as husband and wife, the reality of it hitting them in waves.

Giovanni kept squeezing Paige’s hand like he needed proof this wasn’t a dream, while she kept catching glimpses of her ring in the neon lights.

The limo waited to carry them back to LA, to the premiere, to the rest of their lives.

Once they were alone in the limo, the partition raised between them and the driver, Giovanni pulled her onto his lap, her legs straddling him.

“We just got married,” he whispered still in disbelief.

“We did,” Paige said, rubbing his beard before pulling his chin close for a kiss. “Having second thoughts?”

“Not a single one.” He tilted his head to kiss her, deep and unhurried, hands finding the curves of her waist. “You?”

“Never,” she murmured against his mouth.

His laugh rumbled through his chest until he saw the mischief in her eyes, that particular glint that meant she was about to make him forget his own name. His throat went dry.

“Paige,” he warned, voice rough. “We gotta be on camera in less than an hour.”

“Good thing I keep it efficient with no panties,” she replied, already working at his belt, her movements quick. “Consider it our mini honeymoon.”

He didn’t argue. Not when her soft hand gripped the head of his dick. Paige lifted to position, herself above him, her eyes never leaving his. She sank down slowly, taking him inside her with a satisfied moan that made him throw his head back.

“Fuck,” he breathed, one hand tangling in her hair while the other gripped her hip. “You feel so damn good.”

Paige set the pace, slow and controlled at first, then faster as urgency built between them. The limo’s tinted windows hid them from the world outside, but the possibility of being caught only added to the thrill.

Giovanni leaned forward, his lips trailing from her neck to her collarbone, then lower, finding the soft swell of her breasts just above the neckline of her dress.

With a slow drag, he slipped the spaghetti straps down her arms, baring her completely.

Her scent hit him like a drug. He took her into his mouth, pulling a moan from deep in her chest, her head falling back with abandon.

“My wife,” he growled the words sent a shudder through her.

“My husband,” she gasped, her voice breaking as he found that spot—the one that activated her crazy.

It was quick, intense, almost desperate, the way they gave each other everything in the back of the limo. When Paige tightened around him, her body tensed as pleasure overtook her. Giovanni followed immediately, holding her against him as they rode out the waves together.

Foreheads together, breaths mingling, they stayed close. Neither of them ready to pull away.

“We’re really doing this,” Paige said softly. “All of it.”

Giovanni brushed a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear.

“All of it,” he agreed. “The show, marriage, whatever comes next. Together.”

“That night you came to the shop. That’s when I knew. That’s when I stopped asking what you saw in me and started asking how I could make sure I never lost it.” Paige swallowed hard, emotion bubbling beneath her smirk. “You better be lucky we got places to be.”

“Or what?” he grinned, sniffing and licking her neck.

She didn't answer. Didn't have to. The look she gave him said it all.

The limo began to slow as they approached the airport, where the helicopter waited.

Inside, they pulled apart reluctantly. Paige straightened Giovanni's shirt collar and bowtie while he adjusted her dress straps, both of them smoothing away evidence of their stolen moment. She smoothed his waves, taming what she'd messed up, while he gently wiped the smudged lip gloss from the corner of her mouth.

A shared exhale, and they were ready to face the world again.

But underneath the dress and fresh lipstick and pressed suits, they were different now.

Married. Anchored. One.

Before stepping out he leaned over toward her with a look of pure admiration, "I love you."

"I love you too."

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:48 am

The premiere was in full swing when they arrived. Red carpet, cameras flashing, network executives mingling with industry players. Giovanni had missed his official entrance, but it didn't matter. The real show was about to begin.

"Ready?" he asked, offering his arm as they stood at the entrance.

"Ready," she replied. They stepped into the light together. The cameras immediately swung toward them. Giovanni's arm was fixed around her waist, her hand resting on his chest where his heart beat strong and sure beneath her palm.

"Mr. Dowlen! You're late to your own premiere!" a reporter called out.

Giovanni's smile was unapologetic. "Had something more important to handle."

"And what was that?" another voice asked.

He looked down at Paige, seeking permission. She gave a subtle nod and lifted her hand.

"Getting married to the love of my life." The crowd erupted in surprise.

Inside, their friends were waiting, champagne already flowing.

Spirit rushed over, hugging them both. They turned the corner toward the press wall, and there was Sienna.

Posted up next to Darren, smile strained, eyes trained on Giovanni like she was

waiting on a reaction.

Giovanni didn't flinch. His hand rested firmly on Paige's.

His wedding band was shining and gleaming.

"I see the bitch showed up," Spirit muttered beside them. "She better not try to ruin your night. I can turn into Suge Knight real fast."

Sienna stepped forward, fake smile in full effect, her tone syrupy sweet and full of venom.

"Congratulations, Mr. Dowlen. The show's a hit. And the marriage?" Her eyes flicked to Paige, "Bold move. Quick, too."

Paige tilted her head, that classic slow blink loading like a warning shot.

"Not shade, when you couldn't do it after what two years? Yikes," Paige asked, catching the slick jab. She was gonna keep it cute, but Sienna should've known better than to even blink at Giovanni, let alone her.

Sienna's smile faltered. Just for a second. Paige pressed on.

"But listen, I get it. It's hard watching someone build what you fumbled. Especially when the only thing you managed to customize was how to steal. I ought to run your pockets right now for my man money."

Spirit choked on her champagne. Giovanni tried not to laugh. Paige stayed focused on Sienna because for some reason a bitch that thought she was untouchable was Paige's favorite type of bitch to touch.

“Anyway. Good luck with whatever you’re plotting next. Just don’t steal anything on your way out. Because he can’t beat your ass, but I can.”

She kissed Giovanni’s cheek, then leaned close to whispering to him, but loud enough for Sienna to hear.

“Let her watch, baby. It’s the closest she’ll ever get to this kind of loyalty.”

Paige didn’t say another word. She saw her. Saw the tension in Sienna’s jaw, the hunger behind her stare, the death grip she had on Darren like she was still trying to save face.

Giovanni leaned down, a message just for Paige.

“That’s old news,” he murmured, placing a kiss on her lips that was a little too sloppy for public but perfect for the moment.

Giovanni appreciated her checking Sienna, even though she didn’t have to. Still, having someone in your corner? That kind of ride-or-die? Felt good. Paige made him feel good.

“Get a damn room,” Spirit said, giggling and swatting at them.

Paige and Giovanni glided away, unbothered, unbent, and completely victorious.

“Congratulations, you two,” the event coordinator called. “They’re about to play the first episode. You made it just in time.”

As they were ushered to their seats, Giovanni kept Paige close, his hand always somewhere on her back, her arm, her hand. Like he needed the constant reassurance that she was real, that this night was too. And that they did the craziest thing either of

them had ever done.

The lights dimmed. The room hushed. And the screen illuminated with the opening sequence of “The Build by Giovanni.”

The audience gasped as the first build was revealed, a restored ‘67 Impala with custom paint that shifted from baby blue to sparkling silver depending on the light. Applause erupted when the camera panned across the intricate detailing Giovanni had done himself, each line telling a story about the car’s history and its owner’s dreams.

Paige’s chest swelled with pride. This was Giovanni’s art, his vision brought to life. He didn’t just build cars; he built beauty from broken things. Turned metal and muscle into something that made people feel .

But as the show played on, as his voice narrated the journey and his work took center stage, Giovanni wasn’t watching the screen.

He was watching her. The way Paige leaned in, eyes locked, a quiet smile tugging at her lips.

Pride radiated from her, visible in every subtle shift, every breath held, every soft exhale.

She saw him. And that meant everything. This was success. Not the show, not the cameras, not the industry validation. His work reflected in the eyes of the woman he loved.

“What?” she whispered with a smile feeling his eyes on her.

“I love you.”

“I love you more. Now pay attention,” she said, with a smile and kiss to the corner of his mouth.

As the crowd around them responded to the show, laughing at the right moments, gasping at the reveals, and applauding at the end of particularly impressive builds, Giovanni and Paige remained in their own world, connected by touches, heated glances, and deep breaths.

He was tryna get between her thighs again and for the rest of the night. But there was still more to do.

When the episode ended and the lights came up, they were immediately surrounded again, congratulations on the show mixed with surprise but well-wishes for their marriage.

Her phone buzzed in her clutch. A text from her father.

Daddy: Congratulations, he called me this afternoon and asked for my blessing.

Before she could feel guilty about him missing out on an important milestone in her life, another text came through.

Daddy: I’m happy for you, baby girl. That’s all I ever wanted. Me and your momma. She’s here too.

Paige’s eyes watered as she showed Giovanni the message. He kissed her behind the ear and her phone rang showing it was her mom calling.

“Congratulations, baby. I’m so happy for you. Lord grandbabies. Paige, what should I call myself? It must be fly and cute.”

“Ma, you’re getting ahead of yourself,” she laughed. “First, we need to be husband and wife before we become mommy and daddy.”

“Yes, you’re right, I’ll brainstorm alone. Any who, you looked beautiful. My heart couldn’t take it. I cried so bad at the pictures from Blake.”

“I love you, Momma. Call me tomorrow.”

“I love you, too, Paige.” Paige disconnected, happy that her parents weren’t feeling jaded, but Paige had always felt like she raised herself. Her mom was too busy being the fun mom and getting her life back after grief. That wasn’t them.

“Son, I am so proud of you,” Betsy said, pulling Giovanni into a hug before cupping Paige’s face. “For the show, for the man you are, and for the husband and father you’re about to be. You’ve made us so proud. Paige, welcome to our family.”

“Thank you,” Paige said, her voice full of emotion. “But more than that, thank you for raising this man beside me. To love women. To protect what he values. I’m so blessed.”

Giovanni leaned in with a smirk and whispered, “There you go again.”

Paige gave him a playful glare, before she swatted at his chest, and hugged his momma tight.

Spirit appeared next, practically vibrating with excitement. “I can’t believe I pulled that off. I can’t wait to tell my niece or nephew how I came through with the come-through for their parents. Welcome to the family, sis.”

“Thank you. And you did the damn thing,” Paige said, shaking her head. “It’s a story worth telling.”

Later, when the night was quiet again and the cameras were gone, Giovanni would tell her the truth. That none of this, not the deal, not the network, not even the buzz, meant shit without her.

The song switched, and she dipped her head back, laughing as the opening notes of “ART” by Tyla filled the room.

The same song she’d been humming that morning in the hotel, the lyrics that had been living on her lips for days. “I’ll be your piece,” she sang softly against his ear, swaying into him, her movements fluid, in sync with the rhythm pulsing between them.

No wonder the song had been on the tip of her tongue all this time. The universe had been preparing her for this final reveal. She was a masterpiece, his masterpiece. And he was hers. They moved together on the dance floor, husband and wife, artist and muse, builder and foundation. Balance.

Giovanni’s lips found her temple. “Thank you for trusting me with your heart.”

“Thank you for being someone I could trust it with,” she whispered, and she meant it with every fiber of her being.

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Paige leaned against the hotel balcony railing, steaming coffee mug cradled in her palms, as she watched the city wake up twenty floors beneath them.

The traffic looked like toy cars, the palm trees like miniatures in an architect's model.

The premiere had been a whirlwind, cameras flashing, industry executives shaking Giovanni's hand, congratulations flowing like the champagne they'd sipped until the early hours.

She couldn't believe her life. She was married. Someone's wife. Giovanni's wife. The thought sent a thrill through her that made her giggle softly until her phone rang beside her.

“Hey Momma, everything okay?”

“Baby, everything is fine. I'm calling to check on you. How you are feeling?”

“A little like I don't know how I got here,” Paige admitted, settling into the patio chair. “This is crazy.”

“No, this is what's on the other side of consistency and trust. Commitment.” She could hear the wisdom and pride in her mother's voice. “Paige, you deserve this, and I hope you never forget what you deserve and what you mean to this world. To him.”

She looked behind her through the open balcony door, eyes settling on Giovanni who was still asleep.

His broad frame sprawled across the king-sized bed, one arm flung over where she'd been lying minutes before.

Her lips tugged at the corner, taking in the rare sight of him completely at rest, no phone in hand, no problems to solve.

Vulnerable and peaceful in the aftermath of his triumph.

“Thank you, Momma. We'll come see y'all first thing when we get back.”

“Okay, take care of yourself and your husband today. Y'all had a big weekend.”

Myra's voice cracked with emotion. “Lord, my baby got married.”

“Momma don't start crying,” Paige laughed, though her own eyes were getting misty. “I love you.”

“I love you too, baby. Now go enjoy your honeymoon before real life comes calling.”

After they hung up, Paige sat in the quiet morning air, coffee growing cold in her hands as the reality of it all settled over her.

Less than a year ago, she'd been drowning in everyone else's needs, afraid to ask for help, convinced that independence meant isolation.

Now here she was, Mrs. Giovanni Dowlen, sharing dreams and burdens and building something beautiful with the man sleeping behind her.

She stretched, savoring the luxury of having nowhere to be. The bank had given her the week off, a gesture of goodwill from Ashton, who'd insisted she deserved to enjoy every moment of Giovanni's success.

She slipped back inside, pulling on his discarded T-shirt from the night before.

It still held his scent, soap, cologne, and that indefinable something that was only him.

Her reflection in the mirror caught her off guard: hair wild, lips still slightly swollen from his kisses, eyes bright despite the lack of sleep. She looked... happy.

“Wake up, superstar.”

Paige's voice pulled Giovanni from sleep, her lips pressed against his temple. Giovanni groaned, reaching for her without opening his eyes, pulling her close.

“What time is it?” he mumbled into her neck.

“Almost nine. The world's been up watching your show while you've been drooling on thousand-dollar pillows.” She ran her fingers through his beard.

“Damn, you look good in my clothes.”

Paige smiled, “You say that every time.”

“Because it's true every time,” he said sitting up and pulling her onto his lap, “How'd you sleep?”

“Like the dead,” she admitted, leaning into him.

“Good, yesterday was a big day.” That was an understatement. A premier turned into a proposal, which turned into her taking vows to love him in sickness and health.

“Yesterday was amazing.”

He nodded toward his phone, and she handed it to him. This wasn't his normal routine. He was intentional about not touching his phone for at least an hour after he woke. The day had a way of handling you otherwise. But he couldn't keep his curiosity contained.

"You nervous about how people will react to the show?" Paige asked, noticing his hesitation. Giovanni didn't answer right away.

"A little," he admitted finally. "This is my vision, my community. If they try to edit it into some reality TV bullshit..." He shook his head.

"Hey, why are you thinking like that?"

"I'm being a realist it's a possibility."

"But you won't let that happen. No one gets to play with your name. That's what I love about you. You protect what matters. And the show is a hit. They'd be fools to change anything."

"Our name." He paused, looking at her.

She smiled. It was going to take some time to get used to having a new one.

"It is a hit," he murmured, shaking off the doubt creeping in. "I'm tripping."

"Of course it is." She reached for his phone to read the reviews. "I don't know why you had doubts to begin with."

"A little doubt is healthy. That's how I stay sharp."

She looked down at him, eyes tracing the faint tension in his brow, the kind that never fully left. He carried so much without complaint—but she saw the toll.

“I’m proud of you,” she said simply. “Not just for the show. For everything you built to get here. It’s been a pleasure to watch.”

His eyes met hers, something vulnerable passing through them briefly before he smiled. “We’re just getting started. Spirit’s already talking season two, maybe even a line of custom parts.”

She nodded, fingers tracing the tattoo that peeked from beneath his tank top. “Long as you don’t forget who you are in all this.”

“How could I?” He caught her hand, pressed a kiss on her palm. “I got you to remind me.”

The moment stretched between them; comfortable silence filled the room. This was her favorite version of them, unguarded, unhurried, existing together in the quiet moments.

“We should make breakfast,” Giovanni stated like he was sharing a secret, “I’m tired of the hotel room service shit.”

Paige smiled, remembering the morning after their first night together, how he’d fed her and cared for her even then. “First day things.”

“Nah, stepping it up this time.” He stood, lifting her easily with him. “Pancakes. Bacon. The works. Celebration breakfast.”

“You always drive me a good kinda crazy. I’ll help.”

The kitchen became their playground. Paige perched on the counter, legs swinging, occasionally handing him ingredients but mostly watching.

“My daddy used to make Sunday breakfast,” Giovanni said, the memory seemingly

surfacing without warning. “No matter how late he worked Saturday, no matter what was going on at the shop. Pancakes, eggs, bacon so crispy it shattered when you bit it.”

Paige smiled, imagining a younger version of the man before her, watching his father with the same fascinated attention she now gave him. As Giovanni described his father's Sunday breakfast tradition, Paige found herself smiling, but with a distant look in her eyes.

“What?” he asked, catching her expression.

“Just thinking about PJ.” It came out softly, almost reflective. “He used to steal all the bacon before I could get to it.” She laughed, the memory both painful and sweet. “Haven't thought about that in years.”

Giovanni reached for her hand, understanding the rare gift of her sharing these memories. “I wish I would've been able to meet him. I'll be sure to honor him by eating all the bacon,” he smiled and kissed her neck.

PJ would've liked Giovanni. That thought came out of nowhere, but it settled heavy and true.

Maybe the guilt would never fully leave her.

But this life she was building, it felt like a kind of redemption.

The healed woman in her knew now: if it was his time, nothing she did could've changed it.

Her parents would've just buried two children instead of one.

“Your pops would've loved the show.” She wanted to refocus her mind on anything

else but missing her brother.

Giovanni nodded, flipping another perfect pancake. “He would've had opinions, though. ‘Why you letting them film that part? That's trade secrets, boy.’ ” His impression of his father's gruff voice made her laugh. She wished that she could have met him, but she had a pretty good idea of who he'd be.

“What about your momma?” she asked. “She excited?”

“Shit, you know it. Already texted this morning talking about how the phone's been ringing off the hook. Ladies at church, cousins who ain't reached out in years. She's eating it up.”

The easy rhythm of their conversation continued as they moved to the table, plates piled high with food. Paige closed her eyes at the first bite, making a small sound of appreciation that had Giovanni grinning.

“Told you.” He reached for the syrup. “Skills.”

“Never doubted you, baby,” she said around another bite.

As they ate, conversation drifted—plans for the day, maybe a drive up the coast, maybe nothing at all.

“I was thinking...” Giovanni set down his fork.

Paige raised a brow. “That's dangerous.”

He gave her a look—half amused, half something heavier. “I'm trying to have a moment here.”

“My bad.” She straightened up, tone playful. “You were thinking...?”

“About what's next.” His eyes held hers. “For me. For you. For us.”

A flutter started low in Paige's stomach. What he might say next scared her a little bit. She wasn't quite ready to share him, so she hoped this wasn't about kids. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He reached across the table, lacing his fingers with hers. “I want more of this. Mornings. Breakfasts. Just... us. All the time.”

“I never want us to forget this. The quiet, the comfort. The small moments that make everything else make sense. Because as we move and continue to grow, I feel like shit might get hectic.”

“We won't. I promise to always make time for you. You will be the head of our home. Oh shit, I gotta move in now. We have a home.”

“Yeah baby, you do. You ready for that?”

“I'll get ready. I wanna be where you are. And I know my husband wouldn't dare let me sleep anywhere that's not our home, at least I hope he wouldn't.”

“Exactly, you coming home the minute we get back. Shit, I might make a phone call and get it moved like right now.”

“Do it. My spare keys with Pedro. That's one less thing for me to stress about.”

Giovanni smirked, eyeing her with affection. “Look at you, handling shit like a big girl.”

Paige moved to clean the table off. She rounded the table, grabbed his plate. She kissed his shoulder and winked at him. Giovanni pulled her back before she could walk away, “I adore you, Paige.”

“I love you, too.”

After breakfast, they moved to the couch, their limbs tangled, her head on his chest, his heartbeat beneath her ear.

The TV played softly in the background, some cooking show neither of them was watching.

Giovanni's fingers traced along her spine, occasionally dipping beneath the hem of her (his) shirt, making her shiver.

“How my dawg doing?” he asked.

Paige nodded. “As good as can be expected. Dialysis still kicking his ass, but the new meds are helping with the fatigue.”

“I've been thinking about that too,” Giovanni said, shifting slightly to look at her. “About what we could do. For him. For people like him.”

She lifted her head, curious. “What do you mean?”

“The show's got reach now. Platform. Audience.” His eyes lit up the way they always did when he was building something in his mind. “What if we used it? Did a special episode, maybe a fundraiser. For awareness of Kidney disease. All of it.”

Paige stared at him, emotion welling up unexpectedly. “You'd do that?” she asked.

“In a heartbeat.” He held her face gently, his thumb moving across her temple. “Your family is my family now, P. That's how this works. And your pops felt comfortable enough to ask that of me. I gotta honor it.”

She kissed him so deeply she tried to pour everything she was feeling into it.

Because sometimes words failed her when it came to his heart.

She'd never met a man that had a heart like his.

A man that effortlessly put others before himself.

When they finally broke apart, both slightly breathless, she rested her forehead against his.

"You're somethin' else, you know that?"

He grinned, that same cocky, confident smile that had caught her attention the first time she saw him. "I got my moments."

They spent the rest of the day in that peaceful bubble, alternating between lazy conversation and comfortable silence.

Giovanni sketched ideas for builds while she read beside him, occasionally sharing quotes and moments that made her laugh or think.

They ordered in, fed each other bites between kisses, and let themselves enjoy the rare luxury of being nowhere, except with each other.

"If someone had told me six months ago that I'd be here," she murmured, "I would've laughed in their face." Six months ago, she'd been dragging dead weight, stuck in old cycles, pouring into everyone but herself. Now she had peace. The kind that came with partnership.

Giovanni caught her hand, pressed it flat against his chest. "And now?"

"Now I can't imagine being anywhere else." She lifted her eyes to his, letting him see the truth in them. "You were the catalyst to everything changing for the better."

“We changed each other,” he corrected, voice thick with emotion. “And we're just getting started.”

As sleep pulled at them both, Paige curled into his side, fitting against him like she'd been carved from his rib, like she'd always belonged exactly there.

In the quiet space between yesterday's triumph and tomorrow's possibilities, there was only them, Paige and Giovanni, building a love worth keeping.