



# Another Constant

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** Can he be a YN lover boy? Or does he have to live by a certain creed and be just as reckless as all the others, not looking for a constant? They say you find what you're not looking for even when your eyes are closed. Can he fly off the handle and still be her peace in a world full of people trying to use his name for motion?

Kinga West is a mechanic, working on his cars and staying out of the way until a series of events pull him into the way. Can he be a YN and lover boy? Or will the choices he has to make drive a wedge between his lover boy ways and YN tendencies?

Harlem Bleu is a dog breeder and shop owner who happens to choose the wrong mechanic. A hole and a boot later, she encounters him. Can he be a YN and lover boy? Probably

**Total Pages (Source):** 18

# Page 1

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Kinga West

“ You can be in the streets and not be in the streets. Just because that is how you make your money doesn’t mean it has to consume you. You can just be you and someone will love you for just that.”

“Tete, c’mon. You know I ain’t out here looking for love. That shit can miss me.” I sucked my teeth, looking everywhere but at the old woman. She hated when I cursed and wouldn’t hesitate to hand me my ass for it.

“Everybody is looking for love, Kinga... everybody. Even the toughest man hiding behind his words and venom is looking for somebody to love him constantly... You’re just denying it. That’s fine for only so long. When the time comes don’t be big headed and let it pass you. Let it be everlasting and infinite. Let it be constant.. like what me and your uncle had.” She smiled, looking at the picture of him on her mantle. Sudden death halted their constant.

They said you found what you needed when you weren’t looking for it. What was messed up was I didn’t need a damn thing from a soul. Shit, at least that’s what I thought. Matter of fact, that was what I’d told myself for most of my life. I had everything I needed, and what I didn’t need, I didn’t have.

I was under my favorite oldie, checking the brakes. I heard a loud knocking sound when I was riding through the blocks earlier and I didn’t like that at all.

Some shit by Jeezy boomed around me while I rapped with the chorus. He was all I listened to, so I never knew the exact name of a song, but I knew the lyrics. When my

money was good, I spent more time in the garage working on my cars than out on the streets protecting a facade. This was what brought me peace, rather than crashing out and acting up in these streets. The only time I was really with that heat was when people came out of their necks. If it wasn't the cars, then I was in the kitchen. Nah, I wasn't one of those big niggas or even a soft one. I just baked when I felt myself about to go there.

"How come every time I come in here you under one of these fucking cars?" Sora asked, all in my damn business as usual.

"Because it's a job, you know? We can't all be out here racing anything with a motor."

My brother laughed. "Don't be mad I beat you in the seven block."

I chortled, then rolled from under the car. When I sat up, I peeped him leaned under the hood, looking things over like he knew what was what. "You keep telling yourself that."

I was on my feet in seconds, moving toward my tool chest. I still had yet to find out what had my baby knocking and that annoyed me.

"What's the problem, Kinga?"

"What do you mean?" I turned and glared in his direction.

"It's always something with this fucking car. What got you about to go home and bake a cake now?"

I flipped him off. He always had jokes but wouldn't hesitate to come through and go in my fridge or under my cake plate.

He chortled. "You're right about that. But what's the problem now though?"

"Knocking near the brakes. Where are you coming from?"

"The house. You know Blaze been tryna keep me cooped up with her high risk ass." He shook his head, seeming convincing. However, I knew how he and B were, so I knew for a fact it was him. He was always trying to be in her skin.

"Yeah, I hear what you're saying. How is the baby?"

"She's good." He smiled, bringing a smile to my face as well. He was about to be a father in less than three months.

"You ready?"

"Hell nah, but I will be. You talked to Oden?" He was talking about our oldest brother, the only person I knew who could go missing like Nine but live in the same city. He was a loner, but had been that way since we were kids, so we never took offense to it.

I was about to respond to him when I heard yelling in the distance. A female voice if I wasn't mistaken.

"Hell nah, you're not about to tell me to shut up or keep it down. I have called this fucking shop five fucking times, and nobody could call me back, so if I come in this bitch yelling, that's on y'all." She sounded like she was crashing and the last thing I needed was for my spot to be hot.

Sora laughed. "Looks like you got some heat out there, huh?"

"Nah, some heat got me. Whoever is out there doesn't want this shit. Big Jay better

handle that.”

Of course Sora’s stupid ass laughed. Everything was a joke for him, maybe not everything because when Blaze told him she was pregnant, I damn near admitted him. Especially because at first Shorty was giving him every excuse in the world why she wasn’t looking to move back to Chicago. She eventually moved and he got his head back after walking around for months without it.

“No, I will not calm down. I had to pay to get a fucking boot removed, and somebody in here is going to reimburse me.”

I glanced from my brother to the door leading up front before I dropped the socket wrench into my toolbox and started in that direction.

I was five feet from the door when it opened and Big Jay popped his big ass head in.

“Um, boss, I tri?—”

“The fuck up? This broad better be six-six and three-fifty the way she out there handing you your ass.” I pictured some big, funky ass broad up here showing her ass, so naturally when I made it to the front and there wasn’t anybody who fit that description in sight, I was confused. The only person in the shop couldn’t have been the same motherfucker in here raising hell. Not the way her backside was shaped, shit the way her backside was stacked had me mesmerized. Until she turned around and I saw the fire in those big otherwise pretty ass eyes of hers. Her eyes were on me for all of five seconds before they found themselves back on Jay.

“Excuse me, but this is not the man I handed my keys to. Where is he? You said you were going to get him.” Shorty’s fury shot at Jay with a quickness.

I’d never seen Jay cower, but as soon as she looked at him, he looked at me like I was

about to save him. I was.

“Look, sweetheart, I didn’t say he was. This here is the owne?—”

“And? As a matter of fact, the other guy I handed my keys off too told me the same fucking thing. I don?—”

“Anybody ever told you that you’d catch more bees with honey than shit?” Her attention and fury rested on me from the moment I opened my mouth. Fuck, she was beautiful, so beautiful that if the next few words that came out of her mouth came right, I might’ve been inclined to swiftly fix whatever issue she was having.

Her eyes narrowed and she tilted that big ass head of hers to the side. “It’s flies, and no, because I only got shit right now.”

I laughed.

“What can I help you with, shorty? Why are you here giving my employees hell? It’s ten in the morning, too early for all that.”

She sucked her thick ass lips. “So you’re the real owner? Or somebody else claiming to be the owner? Because I’ve definitely heard this before.” She once again cut those eyes in Jay’s direction

I laughed and shook my head because I knew exactly who she was talking about. I had just got down on ol’ boy and fired him for telling people he was the owner and doing fucked up work at my shop. She wasn’t the first person to come through about some work she had done here, and the way he had been moving, she wouldn’t be the last.

“Nah baby, I’m the owner. Now what is the problem?”

“First I found a hole in my floor and no it wasn’t there when I dropped the car off months ago. Then I look up and my shit is booted. The boot might sound like a personal problem, but nah, it’s not. My driving record is perfect, so I had them pull up where I got the tickets, and they were all written while my car should have been here, getting worked on. Course I’m questioning how if my car is getting worked on over here, why the fu-freak every ticket is either on Quincy or Taylor. Now if you need me to I can give you the?—”

“Nah, I got you. How much were the tickets and everything you paid to get the boot off?”

She looked from me to Jay before pulling her phone out. “Hold on, let me pull it up.”

It was about five seconds before she was holding out her phone for me to see. I grabbed it and she stepped back, resting her hands on her hips while I scrolled the invoice from the city. Maurice had damn sure taken a joyride in shorty’s shit and was using it like it was his car.

She was steaming and I saw exactly why. I wouldn’t have even pulled up yelling. I would’ve come through blasting nothing but heat.

“I’m about to send this to myself.” I was already messaging myself the pdf before she could respond.

“Um ok.” The heat she came in here was going out, which I was grateful for. I didn’t usually take it easy on motherfuckers, but she was too damn pretty for all that balling her face up shit.

Once I sent myself what I needed, I handed her phone back. “Come show me the hole,” I then requested.

She nodded then led the way. I followed her, eyes damn sure locked on her backside, because her shit was thick, so fucking thick I just knew err' thing on her sexy ass was hers.

When we reached her car, she opened the passenger side door and lifted the floor mat. Sure as hell, there was a fucking hole. It wasn't big, but it was big enough something could damn sure come in her car.

I shook my head and examined the hole. "I'll handle it. What did you initially bring the car in for?"

"My brakes were making a sound. They still make the sound when it rains, but I don't drive when it rains, so I guess I wasted money an?—"

"You should be able to drive your shit whenever."

She looked off. "I'm no?—"

"I'll fix it and you'll get your funds back soon. Anything else, mama?"

"No, but when do you want me to drop my car off?"

"Now. I'll have it fi—" I started, but barking caught her and my attention.

She rushed to the back of the car. "I have to take my puppies to get their shots."

"Puppies?" I asked, knowing it wasn't my business, but I still asked.

"Yes." She looked me over before moving to the back door of her car and opening it.

"This is why I need my car."



I followed and watched her pull out a tan colored dog, nine times out of ten the one crying, because as soon as she had it in her arms, it was quiet.

“How many dogs do you have in this car, shorty?” I know I was being nosy, but right now I wanted to know her business and I didn’t give a fuck how it came off.

“Six. I’m a dog breeder.”

I tilted my head to the side, looking at her. She didn’t look like the type, but shit nobody looked like the type to do anything these days.

“Again, this is why I can’t give you my car right now.”

I chuckled, not knowing what the hell I was doing. “Yo, if I hand you the keys to my shit, can you guarantee yeen gonna get no dog shit in my car?”

“Course I can, but I’m not taking the keys to your car. I only drive my own car, nobody else’s. Now Mr.—”

“Kinga, call me Kinga.”

“Okay, Kinga. When can I come back and you fix my car?” She put an emphasis on you and I liked that.

I cracked a smile because she was funny as hell without even trying to be. “Monday night, and since I’m doing this shit for free, bring me a meal.”

She sucked her teeth. “Excuse me?”

“You heard right. I’ll see you around seven or eight, that works for you?”

She looked at me, eyes nearly jumping out of her skull. She nodded though, agreeing with my terms. “If I was to bring you something to eat, what would I be bringing?”

I laughed. “Anything, except fish. I’m allergic to that shit.”

She nodded. “Fine.”

“Now, you're gonna gimme your name or what?”

“Harlem.”

“Like the street?” I asked, just to fuck with her.

“Yeah.” She licked those thick full lips of hers, pushing a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

“Good, I’m a see you then. Call that number and I will send the invoice when you pull up.”

She agreed and about fifteen minutes later, she was pulling out of the shop’s driveway, leaving me to stare at the back of her truck as she drove further and further away, because what the fuck was that?

She was not only fine as hell, but something about her had me coming at her differently than I would have anybody else. Had she been a soul else I would have told her to keep it moving, but she wasn’t. She was more than attractive, shit, she had personality and I could tell that much from her face.

I purposely chose Monday night because I knew I would be the only person in my shop. While the shop was closed to the public on Mondays, I liked to come through and work on my own shit. Also during that time I was in the shop alone and able to

only be bothered with my own thoughts.

“So you offer your ride out and smile in chicks’ faces now?” Sora’s voice made me look in his direction.

“You listening so fucking hard, but you ain’t listening. Maurice fucked up her shit and my name was attached to it. Why wouldn’t I help shorty out?”

Sora laughed. “And that’s all?”

I waved him off. “What else would it be?”

“Yeah okay. Now what are you about to do?” he asked.

“Pull up on Maurice and beat about two racks out his ass.”

Sora laughed. “Thought you were baking and shit, controlling your anger.”

“I have a red velvet on the cake plate right now. I ain’t angry. This right here is fun.” I smiled and my little brother shook his head. My temper was somewhat famous around these parts because as a youngin I could go from zero to a thousand before anybody could blink. Safe to say that shit got me in a lot of trouble as a kid. Then my auntie said fuck that and made me put my energy into something else. Over the years I might have dabbled and dabbled in my temper, but I always found my center again in the kitchen. Auntie had taught me everything I knew, making sure my energy was focused somewhere and any leftover energy was spent out in the garage with my uncle and cousin Nine. “Yo, you talked to Nine?” I asked out of the blue, thinking about my blood.

“Yeah, he said he and Stella might visit sometime this summer.”

I nodded.

“I’ma ride with you to make sure you don’t do anything dumb, then you bouta take me to your crib so I can get my baby mama a piece of that cake. Ever since she tried that chocolate cake last month, she has been hooked. That piece of cake might get me some pussy tonight from her mean ass.”

I chortled, even though the expression on his face was serious as hell. Blaze being pregnant kept him on his toes now more than anything, and even though I wasn’t looking to have any children of my own, I loved that shit for him. It slowed him down in a way he needed. Sora used to run the streets heavily, then he met Blaze. He didn’t run them like me, but in a more reckless adrenaline-filled way. She slowed him down a little then the baby slowed his ass down even more. He needed that.

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“I feel like you’re playing me, Maurice. You tell me yeen take no money from nobody, but shorty came to the shop and acted a plum fucking fool. Not to mention the fact that you racked up over a thousand dollars in parking tickets on her shit parked outside your baby mama’s house.” My temple was throbbing and heat rose from my skull. I wasn’t mad, but I was getting there. I hated for anybody to lie to me, because one, I never asked questions I didn’t already have the answers to, and two, he was coming off too cocky for somebody who was seven seconds from swallowing their composites.

“You know I wouldn’t lie to you, King—” He couldn’t finish that statement because I sent my fist in his direction. The laughter and talking in the bar we were in the middle of died down and the only thing heard was the music.

Everybody was frozen still, waiting for my next move. Not a soul in here would say anything to me because they knew like I did they could catch this heat as well if they

even attempted to step in.

“Kinga, man, you know I was going through—” Now he wanted to explain, but I was far past that.

I stepped back and handed my piece to my brother, then I delivered the ass whooping he deserved for not only playing with shorty, but also playing with my business and my name. By the time Sora’s hand found my shoulder, he was balled up in the fetal position tryna cover his head. He didn’t try to fight back, shoot, as if he had any sort of chance.

“That’s enough, bro.” Sora’s voice brought me back from a place I tried to avoid. My anger always sent me blank, numb, and deaf to everything I was doing until it was done.

“Don’t let me see you again. ’Cause I promise I’ll finish your pitiful ass life for you.” I backed up and glanced around the bar. Though some people looked mortified like they’d witnessed a mauling of some sort, out west this was a normal Thursday night. Anybody from the area knew how I gave it because it was no secret. They also knew I didn’t fuck with anybody unless I was fucked with.

“You good now? You got that off your chest?” Sora asked as soon as we were back in my truck.

“I was always good,” I lied, still breathing hard and trying to calm myself. I was for sure headed in the house to bake something because had I not stopped myself I would have taken his life in that bar. It wasn’t full of people or crowded, but there were enough neighborhood people in attendance to be witnesses.

“You weren’t. Your eyes went black. Had I not stopped you, shi?—”

“Nah. I was delivering a message. I knew what I was doing.” I turned the car on and rested back against the seat for a moment. “You still want this cake or am I dropping you off to your bike?”

“Hell yeah I want the cake. You know that shit is gonna get back to auntie and she’s gonna have your ass. You know those old ass ladies from the church still call her to gossip.”

I shook my head. “The old lady doesn't scare me like she scares you. I’m a real nigga.”

He laughed and held his hand up to his ear like it was a phone. “Yeah you say that, just wait until she gets your real ass on the phone.”

It took me about thirty minutes before I was dropping my brother off to his bike. Right after I went home and straight to my shower. I had been on the ground and messing with my car all day to no avail.

When I finished, I moved through my house to the kitchen where a precut slice of red velvet cake awaited me. I usually didn’t eat what I baked, but after the adrenaline wore off from when I was pissed, I always found myself in need of something sweet. I never said my temper was under control, shit I never thought it was, but I got angry less. I instead filled my days with work and business. I couldn’t help it if they couldn’t get their shit together though. All I could say was I tried my best to keep it cool and not crash out behind everything. Tonight’s thing was big though, somebody I hired had knowingly put my business at risk.

I finally made my way to my bed around ten, but before I could doze off I found myself texting Harlem.

Me: How do you want your money, ma?

I didn't expect to get a message back so fast, let alone tonight considering the fact that she looked like the type to get all her rest.

Harlem: You got it back?

In actuality I didn't even ask for her funds back from Maurice. I beat his ass and chalked it up as I would pay her. He didn't have a job nor any ambition, so I knew for a fact he didn't have the twenty-five hundred dollars to give her back.

Me: Zelle or Cash App?

Harlem: How did you get it?

I laughed aloud at her obvious curiosity. Then, instead of texting her back, I opted to call her. I wasn't with all that texting shit. She answered on the first ring.

"How do you want your money back, Harlem?" I asked.

"Uh... I don't know. I didn't think you'd be able to even get it back. You can Zelle it to my phone number."

I laughed, because obviously she didn't know who I was. That shit was cute. "Why are you up so late?" I found myself asking as soon as she sucked her teeth.

"I have six puppies, their mother, and another pregnant dog right now. Gotta keep the hours of the puppies. What's your excuse?"

"I ain't got one."

"Oh."

“How much would one of those dogs run me for?” I asked out of the blue, realizing I didn’t want to get off the phone with her.

“Depends on which one you want. All of them have an amazing pedigree because they’re my dogs. But some people don’t think about that. They only go off color genes. Are you even looking for a dog?”

“Probably. Shit, probably not. Your customer service gotta be better than this, lil mama.”

She laughed. “You just randomly asked me about a dog at ten or eleven at night. Anyways, what kind of dog are you interested in? What is your color preference?”

Of course I laughed at how fast she switched that shit up. “I’on know. Gimme a gray one and don’t try to run my pockets either.” I warned. The fuck was I about to buy a dog for? I didn’t need no fucking dog.

“Depends. You want straight blue or blue merle? Probably even a lavender tri.”

“Yo, what? I just said gray.”

She giggled. “Check your messages.”

I put the phone on speaker and checked the message from her. She’d sent me a link to a website. On it were the different colors of bulldogs. It was extensive.

“So, again. Blue or lilac? Maybe even a blue merle.”

“Nah, that merle shit looks demonic. Either the lilac or the blue works for me.” Was I actually out here about to buy a fucking dog just for some conversation?



She laughed. “It’s just a picture. If you saw it in person, you’d feel differently. I promise. Drop by the shop and I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“The shop?” I was confused by her mention.

“I have a pet store. I breed, so the dogs are there when I am. I sell pet accessories and treats there.”

I found myself nodding as I responded. “That’s dope.”

“Thank you.”

We spoke for a little longer, her giving me the address to her shop and telling me when she’d be there. I guess I was buying a dog, knowing damn well I had never even liked them. Not since my auntie’s poodle bit my ankle as a kid. I kicked his ass halfway across the garden for that too. Safe to say he never opened his mouth near me again. As a matter of fact Scruffy never came near me again. He learned quickly.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:43 pm*

Harlem Bleu

Days later

I glared at my half-brother who was once again trying to tell me how I should run my kennel. A man with no funds or any sort of business shouldn't have felt so comfortable, but that was my fault. I didn't check him in the door like I would have anybody else. I gave him grace, and I didn't do that with many.

"I'm just saying, Harlem. You could make a couple racks off this one. Stud him out and ge?—"

"I don't stud my dogs, Hari. You know that and can you put him down? I thought your father sent you here to work?" I rolled my eyes to the ceiling. My father had called asking if I had any extra work for my older brother to do around the shop. That was lowkey code for he needed him out of his face. I guess he couldn't look in the mirror for too long.

"Yeah. I'm on break though." He put the puppy back in the pen.

I rolled my eyes again before I glared at him. "Hari, will you go break down the boxes please? I need to take an important phone call."

"What? I can't be in here while you talk on the phone?" he asked, immediately irritated.

"Nah, you can't. You came here to work, right? You're not getting paid to stand in

here when work has to be done.” I could only hold my irritation at bay for so long before I exploded. I had been this way since I was a kid, let my mama tell it.

He sucked his teeth and stormed out of my office, sure to slam the door behind himself. He was a straight bitch and he knew it.

I was seconds from picking up my phone when it started ringing. Of course it was Caya. I told her I was about to call her and she called me instead. I guess I was taking too long for her impatient ass.

“You said five minutes. It’s been seven.”

I cackled. “I was trying to get Hari out of my office. Now what’s up? What was so urgent that yo?—”

“How did it go?” she asked, sounding like she was in a busy club. She was probably just at her shop.

“How did what go?” I asked, standing and moving to pick up the puppy Hari had just put down. I had to admit he was a cute little thing. Had he been a girl I would have kept him, but I couldn’t. Then again I could have him neutered and make him a pet only. Shit would be a first. The pup was a full suited, blue merle with the cutest eyes. At first glance they were glacier blue, but in the sun they were green crystal. It was magnificent.

“You walked into that damn garage and showed your natural born ass two days ago.”

I laughed. “Well, actually... The owner is gonna fix my car Monday night.” I couldn’t help the smile that spread onto my lips at the thought of Kinga. I didn’t know much about him, but the man was fine. He looked so mean, but when he smiled he had teeth white enough to light up the entire room. The man had to be sculpted,

standing at about six-three with the most menacing stare. His locks were triceps length, black from the scalp and a deep auburn from his ear on down. Tight eyes centered his handsome, strong facial structure as well as a few freckles. They by no means made him look any softer because the man looked mean... shit too mean. He was the color of fresh honey with tattoos all over from what I could see. The only place they were missing were his neck and face.

“Hello, earth to Harlem. Where are you?”

“My bad. What did you say?” I asked, coming out of my thoughts and back into the present.

“I said how did you swing that? The owner fixing your shit.”

I shrugged like she could see me. “I don’t know, probably with my charm.”

Caya laughed. “Bitch, you’re gorgeous, but you have as much charm as my left toe. You kinda mean, baby girl.”

“I’m really not. I just don’t like bullshit. And apparently I am because by the time I made it home he was asking me where I wanted my money to be sent.”

“So wait, he reimbursed you? Damn, how did he get the money back?” she asked just as curious as I was.

“Who knows. That was the same thing I asked, but when he called me we didn’t talk about it. We ended up talking about dogs.”

“Waiiittt. Bitch you’re holding out on me. Not only did he offer to fix your car, and reimburse you, but you also had a casual phone conversation? How does he look?”

I ended up giving her the best description of Kinga I could without sounding like I was too into the man. That was the last thing I needed.

“He sounds fine and fuckable. You gonna fuck him?”

“Um no, I’m not. He is the mechanic who is gonna fix my car. That is it, Cay.”

“Girl, bye. You’re on a break with Zax and depriving yourself of pleasure. Not only that but you’re about five days from joining the nunnery. Please get some or, if you don’t do that, give somebody a chance.”

“Um no. How about that? And the fact that you keep saying break is triggering. That man has a baby on the way by his secretary. You sound like him saying ‘break’.” I rolled my eyes to the ceiling just thinking about the bullshit I was scraping off my shoe. One minute I was in a loving, committed relationship, or so I thought, and the next he asked for a break. Like a dummy I gave him one and went about my life, not messing with anyone or anything, just learning to be alone for once. Three months into the break Zax came back saying he loved me. We were together for three months before he had the balls to tell me about the baby he had on the way. It was his belief that since it was a break baby, it didn’t count as cheating. Too bad it did to me and nothing he could say would make me think otherwise. Honestly, the situation was messy, and only kept getting worse because instead of addressing it and telling him this break was indefinite, I was still having sex with him and doing couples shit up until last month when I found out I was pregnant. I aborted it and the only person to know about it was Caya because I refused to tie myself to him. That was my first and last time doing anything like that. I didn’t believe in abortion, yet I’d used it to rectify one of my reckless ass decisions.

“But anyways, dinner tonight at Willows? I’ve been craving some of Mama Ruth’s smothered pork chops.” Caya’s voice interrupted my brief trip down memory lane.

“Uh yeah. Seven?” Caya was a health freak ninety-two percent of the time, but that other eight percent had her requesting I bring her plates from my mama’s house and eat at Willow’s with her at least once a week.

“And you know it. Now let me get these heffas out of my salon.”

Once we hung up, my attention went back to the puppy in my arms. His price was ten-thousand. If nobody bought him I’d keep him as a pet, no breeding.

I stared aimlessly at my inventory when I heard a knock on my door.

“Come in.” I figured it was Emile. She was my only full-time employee while the others were part-time. When I looked up and saw the face entering my office, annoyance filled my body. Why the fuck was he here?

“Hey, babe. I haven’t heard from you, I just figured I’d check in and come see about you.” Though I borderline hated his ass, he was still fine. So fine that I just looked at him. He had skin the color of the moistest dirt, early spring. Simply beautiful without a blemish in sight and he knew it. Zax stood about six feet even, with a head full of curly hair. He was a pretty boy, and damn sure not my type, but shit, when I met him I didn’t have a type. Well maybe I did, but probably not a physical type. Truth was, my type was any man who could make me laugh. Most of all a man who could make me feel protected and loved. Zax had the first part and maybe even the second but feeling loved disappeared when he asked for a break. Even after the break ended, before I found out about the baby, the love had yet to come back. I guess I just swept it under the rug and told myself at some point I’d trust him with my heart again. Some point never came.

“I kind of wish you would have called. I’m getting ready to leave for the night.”

He nodded, sitting at the corner of the tall table a few feet from my desk. “Let me

guess, standing dinner with Caya?”

“Yup.” I began to gather my things with one hand while the other gripped the puppy. I still had to load him, his siblings, and his mother up and take them home before leaving to meet Cay.

“I miss you.”

I had no response for that. I actually felt sick to my stomach hearing him utter that shit like he really meant it. Maybe he did, but that didn’t matter to me. It couldn’t.

“I know you’re not gonna say it back. I just needed to get it off my chest.” He was also a smooth talking lawyer, good at getting his point across.

I nodded. “Is that al?—”

“I know you need time, and I swear I’m tryna be patient, but baby can you just let me show you?”

“Show me what?” I asked, confused.

“That I’ve changed. That I learned from my mistakes.”

I didn’t respond. I was on my feet getting everything ready to leave.

“Say something, Harlem. Shit... curse me out.”

I held up the little dog I had become fond of. “Hold him, will you?”

He sucked his teeth, but ultimately grabbed the dog. He hated breeding and most of the time called it a hobby.

“I think I’m gonna keep him,” I said, moving around to finish loading everything else.

“Why? You don’t keep boys.”

I shrugged. “He was the only boy of a seven pup litter. He's cute and very charming.”

“Oh.”

“Do you know why I gravitate toward animals, Zax?” I asked with my back still turned to him.

“You’ve always loved them.”

“No, because you can look an animal in its eyes and see how much it loves you. A dog in particular cannot lie or deceive you. It’s just a dog, loyalty on four legs.” Once I had the puppies in the carrying crate and their mother on leash, I turned to look at him.

He just looked at me. He was pitiful... so fucking pitiful. “I am loyal to you, Harlem.”

“So you say, but in order for you to need a break that means you thought about fucking her and whoever else, right?”

He was quiet, giving me an answer I didn’t need because I’d surely go home and obsess over it. I was over the situation, or so I told myself, but I was still the type to obsess over the smallest things. Including an unnecessary conversation with the ex who refused to let go.

He helped me get the dogs to the car, then cornered me between my door and his



body. “I love you enough to wait as long as you need to forgive me. I’m not going anywhere, because I know like you know we’re meant to be together.” Then he kissed the side of my face and backed up.

Hopefully he would be able to wait a lifetime because I had no intention of going back to him. \*\*\*

“So you’re telling me as soon as we got off the phone he pulled up?”

“Yep.”

“And you compared him to a dog, Harlem?” She giggled and I nodded.

“It should have been an honor for him to be compared to one of my dogs.” I shrugged because that was the truth.

“Shut your crazy ass up. You weren’t comparing that man to your dog because you thought highly of him. You were telling him your dog is better than him...right?”

I shrugged. “Well.”

“So, you’re not taking him back?” she asked, eyes housing seriousness for once tonight.

“No, I’m not. I can’t. After everything I feel like what I did would be in vain. Not only that, but I’ll never trust him again. I’ll never be able to love him freely because who knows when he’ll get tired of me and need a break again? Is he gonna make a baby that time too? I refuse to put myself through that.”

“And you’re right. You shouldn’t have to. There is someone out there to love you and give you all that you need. Just gotta be patient. And love yourself extra hard until

that person pops up.”

“So I hear. How is my godbaby? Does he miss me yet?” I asked about her son Adonis. He usually came by the shop to puppy sit with me during the summer, but I hadn’t seen him. Cay had allowed him to spend several weeks of the summer in Crescent Falls with her mother.

“He’s good. He’s not ready to come home, but I’m going to get him next week. I miss my baby and I’m sure my mama has overfed him every day he’s been there to spite me.”

I laughed. “To spite you?”

“Hell yeah. I said no pork...she gave my baby pork. I said no sugary juices and she gave him that too. Shit I even told her to limit his cheese and dairy intake, for obvious reasons, and the other day when I was on FaceTime with him he had a fucking yogurt pop in his mouth. That lady is corrupting my child.”

I laughed so hard I couldn’t control myself. Just the thought had me in stitches because Cay was a lowkey control freak about things like that. “You know she ju?—”

“Aht, aht. You are not about to take her side. Not on my watch. She’s wrong and she knows it. I gave her my baby for a month and now I gotta get him home and deprogram him. Lord knows what I’m a do if he gets his ass here and asks me to smother a fucking pork chop.”

I looked at her like she was crazy, then pointed to her plate where she definitely had a smothered pork chop. “This is different, I’m grown and it’s only once a week,” she tried to explain, but nope I wasn’t going for that.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re still eating it.”

She waved me off.

“You’re so bullheaded, woman.” I dug into my mac and cheese, then stuffed a spoonful in my mouth.

“So you gonna fuck the shop owner?”

“Nope. It’s not like that. He’s just gonna fix my car.”

“Among other things. Shit, if he looks like you described, I’d climb that tree right after he fixed the floor in my car.” She then winked.

“Um no, I’ll pass,” I said aloud but clutched my thighs together tightly. Just the thought of that man sent heat signals between my thighs. I had no intention of sleeping with him, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t fine.

“So you say, and you probably mean it, but your insides aren’t dead. You think he’s fine. I can tell by the way you’re clammed up over there. Either take Zax’s bitch ass back or move on with your life. Either way I won’t judge you, but I will curse your ass out initially if you choose to take him back.”

I laughed. “I hear you.”

“Glad you do because I only have one convincing pep talk in me a week.”

Caya and I talked for a while longer before paying our tabs and going our separate ways. I needed to get home and care for the pups while she was tired from being on her feet all day. Usually when we got home we’d call one another and talk on the phone the whole night, but tonight differed when I pulled up and my oldest brother OA was at my door. I got there right in time to see him jabbing his key in the door to open it. I had already noticed his car parked in my driveway when I pulled up.

“The fuck you coming from so late?” he asked, tone just as brash as his attitude.

“Dinner. Why are you here this late?”

“Toya. Thought somebody was about to stay at her people’s house with her so I dipped. The fuck I look like laid out in a twin sized bed?” he grumbled, opening the door for me to enter first.

I laughed. OA was every bit of our mother even though people always told me I was. OA and I shared a mother while Hari and I shared a father. I was naturally closer to OA, because we not only grew up together but my brother was a man. He handled his business and always had my best interests at heart. Every time I looked up Hari was either trying to get over on me or being like his stank ass father.

“Shit pissed me off. You know I don’t be for that arguing shit, so I left. I didn't feel like going home so I came over here. You cooked?”

“No, but I didn’t eat all my food. Barely even touched it.” I set the food carton on my counter and went straight to my fridge.

I heard the carton opening behind me, so I grabbed him a bottle of water while I grabbed one for myself. When I turned around he was already chowing down on my pasta.

“Yo, I saw your stupid ass brother posting pictures of your litter. You knew about that?”

“No I didn’t. How did you see it?”

“Toya. She sent me a picture asking if you knew about it. I told you that you needed to keep that boy and his daddy out of your space. Now look, he’s not only tryna put

your life in danger, but your fucking livelihood too.”

I laughed angrily, wondering just how Hari had gotten any pictures of my puppies. He damn sure hadn’t done it in front of me, so nine times out of ten it was when I was up front helping Joy with the influx of customers we’d gotten. That pissed me off because I shouldn’t have had to lock my office in my place of business. The problem was I was being too nice, but I’d rectify that soon, very soon. Anybody who knew me knew I didn’t show my litters on social media. That was a surefire way to get robbed, or worse, killed.

“Don’t trip though. Just keep them out of your circle.”

I nodded, about to respond but my phone vibrated on the counter. Of course it was a message from an unsaved number. When I looked at it, I knew the number. I didn’t mean to memorize his number but I had. I didn’t know if I should save or disregard it, however, he had texted me.

Him : How you tryna sell me a dog but ain’t sent me one picture of it?

I didn’t know why I smiled so hard, but I did.

Me: I haven’t sold him to you yet and if I remember correctly you were supposed to be coming by the shop to see it.

Him: Yeah, when you told me you was there. I’on want nobody else helping me. I want yo’ help sweetheart.

“Who has you smiling at your phone?”

“Nobody,” I answered quickly, knowing OA was about to be all in my business, talking shit like he usually did.

“That big dumb ass smile ain’t a nobody smile. It’s somebody and it better not be ol’ dude who got a baby on the way.”

“Nah, it’s not him.” When I looked up, OA was looking at me like our mother looked at me. It was that look that let me know he was waiting to deliver a lecture.

“I’m serious, O.”

“Be that, but I said what I said. Leave him alone. Don’t make me kill him.”

“Stop. I’m done messing with that man. I can’t anymore. Trust me I won’t.”

My brother gave me one last look before nodding. “Whoever he is, tell him your brother is a shooter and shit will get ugly behind you.”

“Not necessary. Now please.”

“Yeah right.” He waved me off, then turned to go into my living room with the bottle of water and food carton.

I left the living room and moved toward the puppy room. I wasn’t too worried about how it looked or anything because I had situated them before I left. Not only that, but I paid this teenager down the street to check in on them when I wasn’t near. She was trustworthy, and also had a puppy from my earlier litter, so I knew she was capable of taking care of them. If not, then I had a puppy doula/sitter I hired when I needed her.

When I made it in, the puppies were sound asleep and both their mother and her sister who was currently pregnant were asleep as well. I was happy about that, because all I had to do was make sure everything was clean. I’d be puppy free in a few months though, and for a minute, I was looking forward to it.

My phone vibrated in my hand. I glanced down and saw it was reminding me I had received a message from Kinga two minutes ago. I reread it before responding.

ME: When do you wanna see the dog, sir?

I went to set the phone down, but it vibrated again. This time a long vibration, letting me know it was a call instead of a text. I answered, quickly cradling the phone between my ear and shoulder. Of course this was Kinga and for some reason I was okay with that, knowing damn well I shouldn't have answered, but instead returned his call in the morning. There I would have been keeping it professional, but we both knew a ten in the evening call was nowhere near professional time, meaning this man didn't want a dog any more than I wanted to keep any of this professional. It just sounded good to tell myself I was. So hell yeah, I was about to take this late ass call.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:43 pm*

K inga

I glared at Oden with my head spinning. Everybody said I was the hot headed one in the family, but he called me to his crib at three in the morning needing help. I was pissed because I had literally just fallen asleep when my phone was ringing. When I saw it was Oden I answered quick as fuck because he had never been the type to be up at this time of night. Again, my older brother wasn't the type to be on anything me or Sora was. He stayed his uptight ass out of the way.

“You mean to tell me you walked in the door and they was fucking in your be?—”

“Nah, he was sitting at the end of the bed getting dressed. When I went to confront him, he started shooting first. I ducked and sent shots of my own. When I lifted my head, things were like this,” he responded, eyes leaving my own and landing on the bodies sprawled against the blood stained bed.

I made the mistake of turning and looking as well. His wife Ashley lay sprawled against the top of the bedding while the half clothed buster was laid against the foot. Oden had slumped both of them without even trying or maybe he did. Nine times out of ten had I walked in on my woman in this position, I probably would've sent a few shots and asked the corpse questions later.

“What about Aja?” he asked, voice filled with regret. He was referring to my niece, his daughter.

“She's gonna be straight just like you. This is water under the bridge, bro. Don't touch shit. Matter of fact, go take a shower and put the clothes you are wearing in a



bag. I'm about to let B in so they can clean this shit up."

"Clean this shit up? Like wha?—"

"Yo, let me handle this. Just go shower and gimme your phone." I held my hand out for the phone.

He placed it in my palm and went into the closet. He then came out with a few items of clothing in his hands and a somber expression. See, this shit right here was about to piss me off. I tried to have patience for others, like my auntie asked me to, but what the fuck was he moping for?

"Um, I'ma use the guest bathroom."

"Good idea. Stop walking around looking sad and shit. We told you she was a ho when you first brought her home."

"Fuck you, Kinga," he gritted.

I laughed. Good to know he hadn't gone all soft.

About ten minutes later B arrived and I left him with the room. I found my way into my brother's living room, staring at the pictures he had adorning the small hall. It baffled me how happy they looked only for things to end up like this. I wasn't just talking mess when I said we told him she was a ho. She tried to kick shit to Nine, and he was a straight shooter, so he told Oden. Like the typical tender fool, Oden didn't believe him, and now here we were, a dead man and a dead bitch he'd literally just called and told me was carrying their second child days ago. It bothered me that things could look this perfect but be a mess under wraps. Oden could tell me he didn't know it was happening all he wanted, but he had to have an inkling or something. He had to know she was cheating on him or maybe he was truly oblivious

and really believed they were happy. Things like this were why I didn't fool with no chick past the mattress because there was no way I'd still be aight. I'd have a motherfucker in the trunk of that sixty-eight taking a final ride.

"That was on Aja's third birthday. Ash told me she wanted to go to Milan. I took her, no questions asked. I made all the rig?—"

"Nah, you didn't. You forced some shit you knew deep down wasn't there. It's cool; I guess we all do that from time to time." I shrugged like everything that had happened tonight was nothing.

"Not you. You don't force shit. As a matter of fact, you don't give a fuck about things well enough to force anything."

I shrugged. "It's all in the way you see it, bro."

"What am I going to do?"

"Pick up and go on with your life. Shit, yo' wife decided to abandon her child and run off with her side dude. Took ten Gs from you and all. Ain't nothing left to do, bro," I responded, already having planned this shit out in my head.

"But what about?—"

"Nothing. By morning that room will be cleaned out and there will be no fucking trace. You should probably contact your realtor in a few days, tell her you're looking to sell because you'd like to be closer to family."

"What?"

I laughed. "We miss your muscle head ass and you damn sure can't live here no

more. That was what, your first body? Get you something in the city. Where is my niece anyways?"

"Ashley's grandmother. She spends the night with her when we need a baby sitter. When she stays over, she takes her to school those mornings as well. Either Ashley or me picks her up."

"Good. I'll slide by and pick her up. Figure out your next move, I got this."

It took B four hours and three big dumb ass contractor bags to remove death from the room. Then, after he was finished, I of course inspected the space and I swear my boy B was worth every penny he charged.

"Have you done this before?" My brother's voice made me turn around. His newly-soft ass was standing in the doorway of the room.

"Not this, but similar. Tighten up, Oden, Unc would eat your ass for dinner sitting in here acting like you're finna throw up."

\* \* \*

I picked my niece up from school and headed straight to Sora's spot. Nine times out of ten he and Blaze were doing some soft ass homebody shit. I judged it, but I honestly understood. For the right person you did a lot of shit you never intended. Sora's right person was Blaze, which I loved for him, but it didn't mean I was gonna stop cracking on him about it.

"Uncle, where is my mommy and daddy?" Aja's little ass asked as we drove to Sora's spot. We were right up the block.

"What, you can't chill with your uncle for a bit?" I asked, eyes trained on the road

ahead. I wasn't trying to lie to her or give any sort of answer because I didn't know what my brother wanted to tell her.

She giggled. "I do, Uncle. But usually my mommy or daddy picks me up from school."

"Well today it was me. You got a problem with that?" I asked, pulling up in front of my brother's spot. What I saw put me on alert immediately.

"Stay in the car, Aja." I hopped out and moved swiftly to the stone path where Blaze stood yelling at somebody.

The closer I got, the more I heard. From what I could hear, ol' boy was apparently a delivery driver and he had gone into her food.

"The fuck you mean? No, you're about to call corporate and tell them I caught you going in my fucking food," her squeaky voice bellowed.

Ol' boy was just trying to back away from her but he didn't see me behind him. He didn't realize until it was too late and I had his ass by the back of his neck.

"Yo, you good, homeboy?" I asked, not about to let him go, because Blaze was pissed and I needed the full scope of the situation. Shit had to be serious because she was out here in socks with a fucking remote in her hand.

"Yeah, yeah I wa?—"

"About to take off running because I caught you going in my food. Trifling ass." She was livid.

"Blaze, cool out before you have my niece hyped up." I gave her a stern expression

and focused my attention on ol' boy. "You ate her fucking food, huh?"

"N-no," he stammered, attempting to get out of my grasp. His five foot two inch frame wasn't shit for me.

"Nah, 'cause she ain't got no reason to lie. Empty your fucking pockets."

"For what? I didn't put any in there."

"You right, you didn't. But you 'bout to pay for what you ate and call them motherfuckers you report to and tell them you ate her fucking food. If you don't I'ma beat your ass out here." He didn't empty his pockets fast enough for me, so with my free hand I went in them. When I had his wallet in my hand, I dropped him to the ground and started going through it. He had a few twenties and an ID. There wasn't even a driver's license in there.

"Blaze, this fool doesn't even have a fucking license. How are you trusting him to deliver your food?"

"That's why the app said he was on a bike. But that was the app." She shrugged.

I shook my head because I hated those food delivery apps with a passion. You never knew what somebody did to your food before they got it to you.

"Yeah, Darelle, this shit is taken. Next time play in traffic before you fuck around like this." I tossed his wallet back at him and handed the twenties to Blaze. She turned and headed back into the house, while I now stood there waiting for him to call corporate and tell them he got caught eating her food. When he finished, I let him go and went to the car to get Aja. She was still engrossed in her phone, so I didn't worry much about her seeing what I did. If she had, oh well, she was old enough to know her uncle wasn't playing with the fullest of decks.

Right when I got Aja out of the car, my brother was pulling into his driveway. He met me at the door and nearly snatched lil mama from me. “Damn, mama, your phone is more important than your uncle?”

She giggled while he tickled her belly. “Nooo.”

When we made it into the house, he put her down on the couch while I went to mess with Blaze. Shorty was still steaming from her food. Sora had told me she was serious about her food, so I shouldn’t have been surprised.

“You good, big homie?” I asked, watching her toss shit around in the kitchen.

“No, because I’m hungry and had your brother gone and gotten me some food, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“I told your ass to wait. This yo’ fault, short stack.” Sora’s voice let me know he had entered the kitchen behind me. “Now what’s my fault?”

“The fact that Kinga just had to yoke my delivery driver up because I caught his trifling ass eating my food before he brought it to the door. Anyway, lemme go find a menu to see what you’re about to get us to eat. Aja, you hungry, baby girl?” Blaze left both my brother and me in the kitchen to talk.

“Yo, what? You know they gon?—”

I shrugged, knowing a lecture was on the way. “Shit happens, now lemme spit with you about something right quick before I head out.”

“What’s up? What did you do?”

“Why do you always assume it was me? Anyway. Some shit went down and we

might have Aja back and forth for a minute.” My brother hadn’t said it, but I figured as much. Aja was the spitting image of her mama, and unlike most of my family, Oden had a heart. So I knew nine times out of ten he couldn’t look at her...not right now, knowing what he had taken from her.

His eyes ballooned slightly, then he threw his head in the direction of his office for me to follow. Of course I did, because the last thing I needed anybody to hear was what I was about to say.

“What the fuck happened, Kinga?”

“Don’t be questioning me.” I grimaced, hating his tone because they definitely made it seem like it was always me.

Sora shook his head. “Cool off. You are hostile with me like I did it.”

“Oden knocked off Ash and some dummy she had laid up in their spot. He called me at three this morning.”

Sora’s expression showed his shock. “Where is he at now?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but I imagine he needs some time after everything. I told him I had baby girl but didn’t think about the fact that I needed to be at the shop tonight. She’s good here with y’all until I’m done with this car?”

Sora nodded. “She’s straight. Do you think he’s good?”

“Shit, he doesn’t have no choice but to be. I had it cleaned up and everything, so ain’t no evidence. Cars were gone and money moved. You know how that goes, B handles things on the back end and front.”

Sora shook his head because he was in the same disbelief I was in when I first got to Oden's spot. "We told him she was a ho. Took him six years and a kid to finally peep it."

"True, but he'll be straight. Shit, lowkey he doesn't have no choice but to be aight." We ended up talking for a while longer before I promised my niece I'd be back to get her tonight and headed out. She was cool with that because Blaze had all her damn attention.

When I pulled up to the shop, the only thing I had in mind was that three seater sofa positioned in the corner of my office. A quick forty-five minute nap would have me energized for the rest of the night. I needed that though because I was lowkey looking forward to seeing shorty. We'd talked a few times over the last few days, each conversation starting over the plan for me to buy a dog, but it always evolved past that. She let me get small glimpses of her personality and who she was while still keeping me at an arm's length. A few times I felt like a bitch because I wanted to know more about her than I ever wanted to know about any chick. I wanted to know her...



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:43 pm*

H arlem

I pulled up in front of his shop a few minutes early and spent that entire time scrolling through my emails. I was about to call him when a call came through my phone. A call I should have expected at this time of night because knowing my mother, she had indeed tracked me before calling me. My mother had my location and I had hers while OA had both. It was a safety, “we’re all we got” type of thing when it came to us.

“Yes, Mama?” I stared ahead at the car garage in front of my car.

“Where the hell are you? Better question, why are you out at this time of night?”

“Getting something with my car taken care of. Why are you up?”

“Because I’m grown. I hope the same guy who duped you ain’t the same one you’re letting fix your car.”

“No ma’am, he’s not.” I laughed at her response that she was grown. Shit I am too.

“Then who? And why this time of ni?—”

“I don’t know, Mama. I guess that’s the only time he could fit me in. He’s the owner of the shop and he’s doing it for free.”

“Mhmm. Nothing is free, baby. And I mean absolutely nothing. I don—” She was about to hand over a nice ass lecture, but my other line began to beep. It was Kinga,

his name flashed across my dashboard just as I saw the garage door on his shop rise.

“Mama, I have to call you back. I promise I’ll be safe. Any funny business and I’ll call OA.”

“You better. Love you, baby.”

“I love you too, Mama.”

When we finally hung up, I took my car out of park and pulled forward. When I pulled into the garage, he was standing there.

This man was fine, so fucking fine. Those long, perfectly proportioned locs were in a bun atop his head, adding to the dangerous appeal he gave. He wore a tank top and his shop suit, the top half tied at his waist, like he’d probably gotten hot wearing it. I surely wasn’t complaining, especially not when he opened my door for me to get out.

“Hello to your rude ass too, Harlem,” he greeted in a voice to hydrate the thirstiest.

My mouth I didn’t even realize was open popped close quickly. “Rude? How?”

“Cause you brought your lil ass in here and didn’t speak.”

I chuckled. “Correction, I haven’t come in yet. I’m still in the car. But hello to you too, Kinga.”

He smirked, something I could tell was foreign to his handsome face. He seemed like he was always irritated, always ready to crash out. I just bet he was the strict kind.

“What you bring me to eat?” he asked, reminding me that he’d indeed required that I feed him tonight.

“Nachos but with French fries. Do you have a microwave so I can put it together? I brought the condiments because I didn’t know what you ate.” I reached toward the passenger side for the lunch bag I had not only packed for myself but him as well. I figured while he fixed I’d eat or we’d both eat at some point.

He nodded. “Yeah, come on.”

I grabbed the bag and got out of the car. Once he had the garage door secured, he led me into the actual shop. It was nothing like I expected. Shoot, I didn’t know what I expected, but this wasn’t it. It was clean and had order. Then we entered the kitchen and it was absolutely the cleanest men’s kitchen I had ever seen.

“It’s so clean here,” I complimented, setting the food on the counter.

“What you tryna say, Harlem?” He took a seat at the island, giving himself a good view.

I smiled. There was something about the way he said my name. He was so comfortable saying it, so familiar. “It was just a compliment.”

“Mhmm. Women don’t just compliment. They say shit with underlying meanings.”

I laughed. “Maybe the women you encounter do, but not me. No underlying meaning is necessary because I’m grown and I think we’ve established that I’m a say what’s on my mind.”

Again this big, sexy hunk of man meat smiled at me and it took everything in me not to smile back. It was never a good idea to smile at a man like him. Shit... next thing you knew, you were getting your core wrecked on an uncomfortable three seater sofa with fucking cuckabugs along the material.

“Maybe.” That was his only response before his phone began to ring. He answered it, putting it to his ear and leaving me to do what I needed.

Once my hands were clean, I moved around his kitchen like it was mine. First I unwrapped the condiments—sour cream, green onions, tomatoes, and a few other necessary options. Then I poured the golden steak fries into a pan and pushed them into the oven on air fry. After that I worked with the microwave to warm both my meat and cheese. Though my focus was on the tasks at hand, I could feel his eyes with every move while whomever on the phone had his attention.

“You cook on a regular basis?” he asked, making me turn around. His phone was no longer at his ear, but on the counter. His face was tight, much tighter than it was before he got on the phone.

“Yeah. I gotta eat.”

“Yeah, but most motherfuckers got those apps downloaded. They gotta eat too.”

I shook my head. “Can’t go out like that. Death by poisoning because she trusted somebody else’s kitchen, or worse, somebody she didn’t even know to deliver her meal. Nah. If I want it, I’ll cook it and if I don’t feel like it, I’ll go get it or call my mother to do it.”

He nodded. “So you can cook whatever?”

“Within reason. Not sweets though. I never mastered that baking skill.”

“Never? It ain’t that hard.” His response made me look at him.

“You know how to bake?” I found myself asking in complete and utter shock. Yep, I prejudged this fine hood ass man.

“Yeah. There you go.”

“There I go with what? I was just about to ask what you bake?” I definitely lied because hell yeah I was completely taken aback.

“Assuming shi?—”

“Nope, I haven’t assumed anything. Yes I am shocked you know how to bake, but can you blame me? You look like...that. And you’re that. Hell yeah I’m shocked that you can bake. Now what can you bake?”

He chortled like I had cracked a joke, which I didn’t.

“What’s funny, Kinga?”

“What do I look like? What’s that?” he asked, reminding me of my statement from a few seconds ago. The very statement that had me kicking myself in the ass, because yes I was outspoken but I was also easily embarrassed when I had to recall exactly what I said.

“Kinga.” I bit into my bottom lip, feeling heat rush my cheeks. “What do you want on your nachos?”

“Everything. Now what do I look like?”

I was quiet for a moment, putting the condiments on his food, and of course he patiently waited for an answer, sending straight fire down my spine.

I finally turned around and looked at him. “You look good, and you look like you don’t consume sweets like that. It’s giving my body is a temple type.” I had to throw a joke in there because hell naw I wasn’t about to just be out here showering this man

who already knew he was fine in compliments.

He laughed.

“Nah, not that at all. I just bake for...patience.” It was like he paused but still finished his statement.

“For patience, huh? Do you have anger issues?”

He nodded and so did I.

“This good, real good,” he complimented.

“Did you think it wouldn’t be?”

“I don’t know. You’re fine and all, but I ain’t na?ve enough to think off bat you can cook.”

I smirked, watching him dig into the food. “I’m fine and all?” I had to repeat that statement.

“Yeah, you look good, but you know that already. Now c’mon so you can keep me company while I fix your car.”

Before I knew it we were both in the garage and I was seated in my driver side seat while he had the passenger door open doing whatever down there.

“What made you get into dogs? You know, breeding them?”

“I love dogs. Always have, because one. They’re not dishonest. As a matter of fact they don’t have dishonest bones in their bodies. A dog cannot fix their mouth to lie to

you, whereas humans can.” My response probably sounded crazy, but it was all I had.

He looked up at me, eyes housing questions. Not one, but a few.

“You've been lied to before?”

“Who hasn't? I asked, showcasing the pessimism living beneath my smile. “It's the one part of life I wish could be bypassed.”

He nodded. “I feel you.”

“I just wish people brought their full and whole selves to situations rather than showcasing parts of themselves they can't keep up with and lying.”

“You're right, but you know lying is a part of life. Motherfuckers do it eve?—”

“You lie?”

He lifted his head, serious eyes landing directly on me. “Nah. I don't have a reason to.”

“What about people's feelings? Their emot—” I started, but he interrupted.

“None of that is my problem.”

“And your girlfriend's feelings?”

“Don't got one of those.”

Him saying he didn't have a girlfriend shouldn't have sent a jolt down my spine, but it did. Why did I care when I had surely written men off for the foreseeable future,

plus this man was my mechanic, nothing more.

“You telling me you care about everybody’s feelings, so you lie to them?” he then asked.

“No. I show people who I am from the beginning, so I never have to lie and they never have to wonder what side of me they’re getting.”

“Respect. Do me a favor and go sit in that oldie over there, ma. I’m about to have to weld some shit and the last thing I need is your fine ass going blind on my watch.”

I did as he asked, taking my phone with me. For the remainder of the time, he fixed my car and we made small talk, allowing me small glimpses into his personality with responses to any question I asked.

\* \* \*

“W here are you headed after this?” he asked, eyes trained on me as he leaned against the side of my truck.

I glanced at my watch, noticing it was way into the evening. “Probably take it in.”

He looked at me for a minute, then he spoke again, “Come eat with me.”

My whole body panicked. Why was this fine ass man asking me to eat with him at eleven o’clock at night? The only thing open at this time of night was legs. Shit I didn’t mind if it was mine, but that wasn’t the point. “What’s open at this time of night?”

“A lot of shit. You’re just thinking uppity, ma.”



“Oh really? Like what?”

“Mama’s or Billions?” I watched as he pushed the work suit down his frame, showcasing a pair of gray sweats he’d been wearing underneath.

When he said Mama’s, a big ass smile filled my face. “A rib platter from Mama’s with the homemade potato wedges on the side sounds like a plan.”

He smiled. “What do you know about that?”

“Enough. Do you want me to meet you there?”

“Hell nah. While the metal dries, we’ll leave your car here. You’re riding with me. I mean, unless that’s a problem for you.” He had a coy smirk on his face.

“Why would it be a problem for me?”

“I’on know. You tell me.”

I waved him off, then went around my car to grab my purse. Once I had it across my shoulder, I met him at the front of the garage where he was busy tapping away on his phone.

I was shocked when he opened the passenger side door for me to get into his truck. Shit, even more shocked when he waited for me to get in and closed it. He was impressive in a “damn I didn’t expect that” type of way.

Once we were settled and I was seat belted, he pulled out of the garage. I thought he was about to blast some of that YN-remixed R&B. He struck me as the type. He didn’t though, instead he let whatever was on the radio play.

“You ’ont got a nigga somewhere tracking your moves, do you?” he asked out of the blue, making me look in his direction while he stared ahead at the road. God this man was fine.

“No,” I responded simply. I’d heard of guys tracking their women, but that was overboard for me. If a man wasn’t married to me, then what did he need my location for?

“Why not?” he asked, as if it was a simple question. That it was not. I also wasn’t expecting him to ask me so coolly.

“Because he needed a break and I gave him that. Now he has a baby on the way and believes things are supposed to go back to normal.”

“You don’t think they can?”

“Nah, because if he needed a break from me then he didn’t need me.”

He nodded. “How’d you fare?”

“Ugly crying, Ben and Jerry’s, and a few weeks of overthinking. I’m good now though because I know how to be alone. What about you? Why isn’t there someone at home tracking your motion?” I had to get myself out of the habit of only answering his questions, instead asking some questions of my own.

“Because one, I’on like people and two, I told you I ain’t got no girl.”

“Hmph. You don’t seem that mean to me.”

“I didn’t say I was mean.”

I shook my head. “You didn’t have to. Why don’t you like people?”

“Because motherfuckers are irritating. Having people all in your space and talking too much. People want your attention too much for me. I’ on really like being bothered too much.”

I nodded, with absolutely nothing in mind to say. So for the rest of the ride, music filled both of our eardrums. He was fine, so fucking fine , but it was obvious this man was irritable. It was like everything annoyed him. I could see it in his features.

When we pulled up to the restaurant, I felt his eyes before finally looking up from my phone. “You on the other hand... I’ on mind your company at all. You seem like something to do.”

My expression went dark at what he meant. He picked up on it though, then threw his hands up in surrender. Of course his fine ass was smirking.

“Something to do? I don’t know what type of wom?—”

“Not like that, shit yeah like that, but that ain’t what I meant initially.”

“Mhmm.”

He exited the driver side of the car and came around to my door before I could get out. “Hood dude or not, my auntie would have my ass if she knew I didn’t open your door. Whenever you with me don’t touch no fucking door, Harlem.”

Whenever you with me don’t touch no fucking door, Harlem. Those words echoed a few times before completely dispersing.

The whole thirty-second walk through the crowded parking lot, people kept

attempting to speak to him or spark up a conversation, but he either waved them off or threw his head in their direction. Some didn't even get a response.

When we entered, he didn't wait for us to be seated. The moment we crossed the threshold into one of the city's oldest watering holes, he grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the back of the restaurant. There he seated us at a table in the corner of the restaurant. It was a round booth, overlooking the entire restaurant. Mama's was a medium-size, dimly lit, hood function type of place. It was aged, seats with rips and old school stitching, colors different from the original material. The floor was tiled but chipped from years of poor upkeep and overuse. Some hood joints were hit or miss, but Mama's was nowhere near. Mama's hit every time and had you wanting to come back for more. The only problem was the plethora of niggas who loitered in the lot and out front. The spot was too hot.

Suddenly, I felt nervous under his gaze. He was looking at me like he wanted to get to know me for real. Honestly, that alone scared me.

"Why are you acting shy around me?" he asked, sitting back and stretching out those long ass legs.

"I don't. I'm laid back most of the time. I mean, until I lean forward. Nobody wants that, because then I'll end up showing my ass at people's establishments."

He grinned. "You mean like you did at my shit? Remind me to get you back for that. When I come to pick up my dog, I'm coming in that motherfucker yelling."

"Pick up your dog? You haven't even told me what type of dog you want. Do you even want a dog, Kinga?"

"You're a fucked up salesman. You're supposed to be selling me, but instead you're asking me if I really want to buy it."

I giggled.

“Now you laughing. Yo, you sure you in the right business?”

“I am. You’re just funny. If you’re really serious about buying a dog, come by the shop. There we can talk about what you’re looking for. I promise not to charge you for insulting my skills.”

“Damn that’s cold.”

“Very.”

He was about to say something else, but a waitress appeared at our table. When I looked up, her expression was tight, so tight I just knew it was over the man sitting across from me. It had to be because I had never seen her face a day in my life.

“Good evening, what can I get you?” Her attention was immediately on Kinga.

“What do you want, baby girl?” he asked, directing her attention to me.

I didn’t need a menu to reiterate my order to ol’ girl and neither did he, so she was only writing for less than a minute before she nodded and went in the opposite direction.

“That your type?” I found myself asking, knowing damn well it was none of my business.

“Nah. Too easy. I like ’em difficult and driven.”

I giggled, eyes locked in with him. His eyes said what his lips didn’t. Well at least that’s what I thought, until he spoke again.

“I think I like you, but I gotta get to know you more.”

I nodded, eyes living on his face. He was serious. How could he like me? Well how could he think he liked me when he didn't know me? Well at least I wasn't the only one. Dinner went well, we ate and got to know one another even more. I continued to challenge myself to ask him questions rather than just answering him. There I learned he was raised by his aunt and uncle along with his brothers. I also learned he was the middle of four, and even though he was the hot head, he was the most reliable. I learned a lot about him, so much that I felt like I had known the man for more than a few days or so.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:43 pm*

Kinga

I kept my eyes on the road the entire way back to my garage for Harlem to pick up her truck. I had to do that, because had I not, I wouldn't have kept my hands to myself. I ain't never talked to a chick as much as I talked to Harlem tonight. I didn't even talk to people, but with her I did. Not only that but I listened to her. Every word from those thick ass lips of hers had me entranced. Harlem was a beautiful caramel complexion, with the thickest two-toned lips and chocolate freckles to match. Tonight her hair was wild and curly, spilling down her back and all over her face. Harlem was fucking beautiful and my type, even though she acted like she didn't know that shit over dinner.

My phone ringing stole my attention. When I glanced down I saw I had an incoming FaceTime from my niece's iPad.

I glanced over at Harlem before I answered. "Yeah, lil mama?"

"My daddy isn't answering the phone, Uncle King, and my mommy isn't either. Are you coming to get me tonight? I wanna stay at your house."

"Okay. I'll be there in a few." Her saying she called her mother sank my fucking heart. That also reminded me I needed to be calling my brother because I hadn't heard from him since.

"Okayyy. Love you."

"Love you too."

Once she hung up, my attention went back to the road.

“Cute,” Harlem murmured, head against the window while she stared down at her phone.

“Ain’t shit ’bout me cute. I’m grown as fuck.”

“That you are, but that didn’t take away from that moment being cute,” she replied smartly, bringing a smirk to my face.

“You got it, mama.” I pulled into the lot of my garage and pressed the button above my head to open the door where her car was. Then I climbed out and went to open her door. I walked her to the car and opened the driver’s door for her. I wouldn’t lie like I didn’t want to feel her soft ass skin.

“I guess I should say thank you.” She stood her fine ass in front of me peering up at me.

“You could, but damn yeen gonna give me a hug or nothing?”

She giggled, then stepped further into my space, throwing her arms around me. “Thank you for fixing my car from your mechanic’s fuck-up. Also, thank you for dinner. It was good.”

All I remember thinking was how piss poor her hug was before my hand found the side of her face and I dropped my head, placing a kiss on her lips. I didn’t even kiss women, but I had been wanting to do that shit all night. I usually told a bitch to keep her lips to herself, but I didn’t know how long I used my lips to keep Harlem’s ass right where I wanted her... in my arms.

“Well. That was definitely a thank you.” She smiled, trying to pull out of my



embrace, but I wasn't having that. Not just yet.

"It was. I fuck with it. I want you to call me and let me know you made it safe."

"I can do that."

Something compelled me to kiss her again and I did just that before watching her get in her car. I watched her until she pulled out of the lot. Then I closed the garage and hopped into my own shit. I was ready to be home, but I had already told Aja I was coming to get her. Had I not, I promise I would've been sped home.

By the time I reached the house I was exhausted and seconds from staying over at Sora's crib, but instead I called him and told him that I was out front. I wanted to lay in my own shit.

About fifteen minutes later I was pulling off and she was in the back seat going on and on about some shit I was paying no mind to. One thing about kids, no matter how old they were, they babbled their asses off about the most unimportant shit.

"Uncle, do you hear me?" Aja asked from the back seat.

"Naw, what did you say?"

"I said I don't have anything to wear tomorrow or to sleep tonight. We have to stop at a store."

I sucked my teeth because I damn sure didn't think about none of that. Then I looked at the time console in the middle of my truck. "It's late as fuck so yeen going to school tomorrow. I'm sure you got a shirt and some shorts or something from the last time you spent the night at my house. If need be, I'll take you to a store tomorrow before we go to the shop."

“To the shop? I’m going to the shop with you?”

“Yeah, for a little bit,” I said, hoping that was the case.

“Uncle King, where is my mommy and daddy?”

I was quiet for a minute, not too keen on lying to her. “They had to go take care of something. You ’ont wanna kick it with me for a while?”

“I do bu?—”

“Ain’t no but, shrimp. What did you eat at your aunt and uncle’s house?”

“Vegetables. And nasty pizza.”

I laughed. “What is nasty pizza, Aja?”

“Vegetables on the pizza. That’s nasty.”

I laughed. I ended up taking her by a McDonalds before we took it in for the night. Aja was eight, so I didn’t have to do much for her as she knew her way around my house and didn’t need me for much.

My phone vibrated with a message from Harlem.

Harlem: Made it in.

Me: Good. Hit me in the morning.

She didn’t respond and I wasn’t bothered about it. Well I was but I wasn’t. I had too much going on to be thinking about a woman I didn’t know. The thing was, I was

attracted to her, not just physically that much I could tell from the fact that I actually listened to her talk rather than trying to fuck. Maybe not trying to fuck because what I set out to fuck always got fucked regardless of the motion. Harlem was different though. She gave less than a fuck about all that extra and she didn't try too hard. My lips on hers at the shop was all me, shorty was fully prepared to pull back from my embrace and not try anything, but not me. I craved just a taste of her, even if it was only her lips I had been watching the whole fucking night.

I didn't know when I finally fell asleep because I spent a good amount of time thinking too damn much last night. I only realized I had been asleep when my phone vibrated on the end table to the side of me. Another early ass call bound to have me cursing somebody the fuck out.

When I saw it was my brother, my irritation eased. I had more worry in me than anything right now.

"Yo," I answered, rolling onto my back with my phone against my ear.

"Are you at home?" Oden's voice filled my eardrum.

"Yeah. With ya daughter sleeping in the other room. What's up?"

"Come outside." Oden sounded suspicious, making my eyes pop open.

"The hell wrong with you? I know you have your key. What's the prob?—"

"I can't come in there, Kinga. You know I can't. Not right now."

I got what he was saying, even though I was mad and confused. I was on my feet in seconds, grabbing a pair of shorts from the dresser and moving toward the bathroom. When I had myself together and my slides on, I turned the lights out and moved

toward the front of the house. I stopped and looked in on Aja. When I saw she was still asleep, I closed the door and went toward the front door. When I made it outside, Oden was standing in the driveway leaning against his truck.

He blew smoke from his lips as I approached. “When I married Ashley I thought we had forever in this shit. Thought everything was perfect, then time happened and we hated each other. Well shit, she hated me, but I still loved everything about that woman. Even the child she produced for me, the child that is the spitting image of her.” He glanced in the direction of my house. “I gotta get outta here for a while, Kinga. I can’t stay here and be reminded of a split second decision I made that will affect her for the rest of her life.”

His words hit me like bricks. “What does that mean?” I was dumbfounded as fuck while I asked.

“I need you to keep her for me, Kinga. I need to figure myself out without worrying about my daughter. I need you to st?—”

“I got you.” I didn’t know why I said that shit, but absolutely nothing in me knew anything about raising a fucking child. Then, to make matters worse, my auntie would be no help because her inconsiderate ass had long decided Chicago wasn’t her scene anymore. She went south and had no intention of coming back.

He nodded. “Just for a lil while.” His eyes went back to the house. Then he looked at me. A minute later he pulled an envelope from behind him and handed it to me.

“What’s this?”

“The legalities. Even though I have the letter you had ol’ boy draw up for me, I still don’t ever want Ashley’s folks anywhere near my child. I had it drawn up this afternoon.” He ashed the blunt and put it behind his ear.

I nodded. Every base was covered for it to look like Ashley picked up and ran off on him. As long as he didn't allow his bleeding heart to drip, nobody would know I had B clean up, frame her running off, and dispose of anything incriminating. B's folks owned a cemetery, so the one thing that would never be found was the bodies, even if they put Sherlock himself on the case.

"You don't wanna say bye to her?"

"Nah, I can't. I'll call from time to time, but I gotta get out of here."

I just looked at him, seeing the thunderous storm in his eyes. Of all of us, he felt everything, so I knew turmoil filled his veins, weighing him down with every motion. I wouldn't push, shit I just hoped he'd come back soon because his departure would leave a lot of questions for the little girl in there. A lot of questions I didn't have the right answer to give her.

"What am I supposed to tell her?"

"That I love her and it's for the best. Shit ain't forever, bu—" He had a tear in his eye, so I pulled him into a hug, rising above this for the both of us. That's all I could do at this moment.

"But nothing. Go take care of yourself, man. I got it."

Shit, I think.

\* \* \*

D ays past first. Then a week and before I knew it I had been uncle-daddy for almost a month. At first Aja asked a million questions, wondering where her parents were, but somehow I was able to distract her enough to which she just stopped asking

questions all together. Maybe she realized I wasn't gonna answer her questions, so she stopped asking. Either way I was attempting to settle into this for her and my sake, especially with the life I led. I wasn't necessarily the kid-friendly type, meaning I had a lot going on in my world.

"Uncle King, where are we going?" Aja asked

"To check out this school. While you are with me, I can't have you halfway out the city if it's an emergency. I gotta be able to get to you, shorty." I was probably talking to her like she was too old, but I didn't know shit about having a kid with me full-time. I was learning while Sora and Blaze helped me out from time to time when they could.

"Oh. Am I going to be with you for a long time?"

"I don't know, short fry. Why?"

"I just asked. If I am, can we decorate my room? It's boring and I miss the toys and stuff I had at home."

I felt bad...like shit because Oden still had yet to call and check in, so I didn't know where he was. For all I knew, he was backpacking through the fucking mountains.

"Yeah, we can get that together. After we get this school shit together."

We pulled into the parking lot of a private catholic school close to my house. I was about to put her ass in public school, but Sora talked me out of that shit.

"This place is big."

"It is. Better be a good school for how they tryna hit my pockets," I mumbled, helping her out of the car.

“Your pockets, Uncle? They’re hitting you?”

“Nothing, baby girl. Nothing you need to be worried about.” I patted her head, kicking myself in the ass because my auntie had already told me to stop saying certain shit around her. It was hard to filter how I talked out of nowhere, especially when I never had to before.

We entered the school, immediately greeted by an old ass woman sitting at the front. She looked mean as hell. I could tell by the hair on her chin she was giving somebody hell on a regular.

Old ho didn’t greet me either, just blinked those big ass eyes, waiting for me to speak. Instead of cursing her ass out, I nodded and simmered down because this wasn’t about me. I had to get baby girl enrolled.

“Here to see Headmaster Johnson about enrolling my niece.”

“Mhm. You are her legal guardian? Only legal guardians can enroll children into our school. We don’t do the antics of public schools.”

I screwed my face up, ready to curse her ass out again. “The fuc—yeah. Are you the headmaster or you about to take us to her? I ain’t come here to be stuck near the fucking door hound.”

Her mouth popped open. “Excuse me?”

“Yo, you excused. Can somebody in here show me to the main office?” I got loud, trying to get some help from anybody but her ass. That fast she had worked my fucking nerves.

Ol’ dude on the other side of the door spoke before the door hound could utter

anything else. “Straight down the hall to your left.”

With my hand on Aja’s shoulder, we walked in the direction ol’ boy had given.

“You’re impatient, Uncle.”

“Yeah. I am. I don’t have time for bullshit.”

We entered the main office a second later. It was a spacious room, a bench for a waiting area and a counter separating the school personnel from those waiting. On the bench already was a little boy around Aja’s age staring at a phone and what looked like a pissed off security guard. While Aja took a seat, I approached the counter.

“I’m here to see Ms. Johnson to get my niece enrolled. We had a meeting at nine-thirty.”

The woman sitting behind the counter looked up from her computer with a welcoming smile, much more than the gargoyle at the door. “Good morning, Mr. West. We spoke on the phone yesterday morning. The headmaster will be with you in a few minutes. Feel free to help yourself to any refreshments on the table while you wait.”

I nodded and looked toward where the refreshments and shit was and shook my head. The table was lined with pastries and shit. I didn’t grab anything though, instead I went to take a seat next to Aja. With my phone in my hand, I went to text Harlem’s fine ass back. I was definitely trying to see her today because though we talked I still needed to lay eyes on her.

“Yo, you’re pretty. What’s your name?” I heard what sounded like a little boy macking, or trying to.



When I looked up from my phone, my eyes landed on lil homie sitting next to security. His little ass was now on his knees and looking over the chair at Aja. He was literally waiting for a response.

“Yo, you just gonna mack my niece in front of me, lil homie?”

He shrugged. “Just stating the obvious, old school.”

I threw my head back in confusion, not this lil private school ass child calling me old school. “Old school?”

“You wanna tell me why I’m back up at this school, Sabastian?” A male voice made lil man’s whole posture turn around.

“Joey said something about my mama, so I handled that. Then he yelled at me like I’m his son. Tell him I’m not his son, Pops.” Lil man pointed at the security guard like it wasn’t shit. As a matter of fact his whole damn demeanor was too fucking cool. I probably needed to rethink sending Aja here because if this was how lil boys acted she was getting her ass homeschooled.

“Mr. James, I assure you that is not what happ?—”

“You calling my son a liar, Greg?”

“Nah I’m jus?—”

“Hold on.” The father held his hand up to quiet security, then answered his phone. “Yeah Luck, I’m at the school. This yo’ fucking son. I don’t know why yeen came up here then. Aight... here.” He then handed the phone to his son. “It’s yo’ mama.”

Apparently being handed the phone to speak to his mama put some fear in his chest

because his face immediately drew up.

“But Mama, I ain’t do nothing. He started it,” he tried to explain, but apparently she wasn’t trying to hear any of that.

I watched the whole scene play out before lil homie and his father were seated and also waiting on the headmaster.

“Ain’t never at the school for his sister, but him? I’m up here every fucking week,” ol’ boy gritted.

I chuckled. “He got heart.”

He shook his head. “Too fucking much with his spoiled ass. My daughter doesn’t do any of this. She stays to herself and is about her dolls and shit. The moment she grows up, I just know I’m a do a sentence.”

“Damn. That’s why I don’t need any. I’m good. Stay my ass in the uncle lane.”

“I said the same shit. Married with three in and the fourth baking. Shit happens fast. Wouldn’t trade nothing in the world for it though,” he responded, eyes on his son.

“I hear you.”

“Sabastian James. Ms. Johnson will see you now,” the woman at the desk said.

Ol’ boy stood to leave with his son but quickly turned to me. “Primal James. It was cool talking with you.”

“Kinga West.” We shook hands, familiar eyes to one another. We didn’t run in the same circles, but we moved around in the same world.

We both nodded.

About thirty minutes later we got the ball rolling for Aja and school. Then we did some long ass tour of the school while the headmaster mostly spoke to Aja and I played the background. I was cool with that because I half listened anyway. I should have tricked Sora into this shit. Shit, it would be good practice since he was about to be a father.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:43 pm*

H arlem

I spent a good amount of time with the puppies, making sure their quarters were clean and that their mama was well taken care of. A large percentage of breeding was making sure the mama was healthy throughout the entire process rather than just focusing on the puppies. If the mama was happy and healthy, so were the puppies. I was spending most of my time today at the shop since I really needed to get some new products out this week and next.

I was doing fine and breaking down bags when I heard the door of my shop open. When I looked up, I was faced with a set of eyes similar to my own. My father, well my biological one, if that's what they even called them these days. He and I didn't have the best relationship, because one, I felt like he never wanted any good for me, and two, nothing was ever about anyone else. The only time he came around was when he needed something. Some days that was work for my brother and others to see how much money he could con me out of. I said con because he had long since stopped using words like borrow or lend. He was bolder, like he knew I had it. I always wondered what type of man thought that was okay, but I was quickly reminded that my father wasn't a man at all, but instead a boy in a man's body. I mean seriously, what man allowed the child he fathered to be raised and cared for by a man other than himself? Shit, in my eyes, my stepfather was my father and he died three years ago.

“Damn, you can't greet your daddy, girl?”

My eyes found the ceiling before I was on my feet moving in his direction. “Hey.” I dreaded the thought of calling this man daddy.

“You got somewhere in private we can talk?”

I looked him over before nodding. “Y’all watch the front. I’m going to the back right quick.” There were two associates on the floor so I wasn’t worried. With the small puppy I had decided I was keeping in my arms, I led the way for Joseph to the back. When we entered my office, he immediately glanced down to the pen where the puppies and two mamas lay. Tilly was still pregnant and due at any moment while Tato was the mama of my current litter.

“Those dogs make you a lot of money, huh?” he asked, peering down at them and making me uncomfortable doing so.

“What’s up? What made you stop by?”

“I can’t stop by and see my daughter now?”

My hands found my hips and my eyes found his face. Stopping by to just see me was highly unlikely and we both knew it.

“Your brother called me. Told me you haven’t returned any of his calls. You know he needs the mo?—”

“Let me stop you right here. One, Hari is grown, and two, maybe you ought to put him to work at your shop.”

Of course he shook his head. “He needs a job, Harlem. Some stability before he’s back in jail again.”

“Then give him that because his stability is not mine to find. I had one rule, and he broke that. So, again, I cannot help him.”

“They were just pictures, Harlem!” His voice elevated like he didn’t understand why I was pissed off.

“Yeah, pictures I asked to not be taken. Pictures that could have put not only my livelihood, but also my dogs, in jeopardy. It’s like neither one of you get that.”

The look he gave me was hateful, like saying he didn’t get it was some sort of insult. Maybe it was. Either way I wished he felt offended enough to leave, but he didn’t. He was still standing in my office looking at me like his look would intimidate me into changing my mind.

“I need... uh, something else.”

I knew that statement was coming. “And that is? I don’t have any mon?—”

“I need twenty-five hundred dollars. Few of the barbers are behind in the booth rent, which is putting me behind on the rent.”

“I don’t have it,” I replied simply. The last time Joseph showed up here he got four hundred dollars out of me and the time before that six. I didn’t know why I gave it to him, but I did. I never thought I’d get it back, which I didn’t, but I guess I gave it to him to get him out of my face. This time though, I couldn’t, plus OA had already gotten in my ass about being useful to Joseph and Hari. Maybe not useful, but I had to stop paying to get out of my face and actually just have some damn boundaries.

“What do you mean you don’t have it? You must have some?—”

“I don’t have it. You haven’t even paid me back for the last time you came here in need.”

“I gave you life. You’re my damned daughter and without me you wouldn’t be here.”

Anger was all over his face, letting me know his mouth was about to go there. I had to remind myself that I couldn't go toe to toe with Joseph here because this was my place of business.

"I don't have it, Joseph. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to work if there isn't anything else."

"There is something else. I need that money."

"And I don't know what to tell you." I walked over and opened my office door for him to exit. The man was literally building up to ask me for a kidney or my first born at some point. I could feel it.

"Fine, I'll take a thousand." He stopped in front of me.

I shook my head. "And I don't have that to just give away to you either. If your business is in trouble, maybe you should go down to the bank and take out a loan."

"Fuck the bank. You got it, you just don't want to give it to your old man." He started down the small hall toward the front with me behind him. "And fuck you too." His anger seeped from his lips as soon as we made it to the sales floor.

I didn't respond. I just looked at him, holding my own anger at bay. While he had nothing here to lose, I had everything. My shop was in a decent neighborhood and I actually had clients in the store. This was how I knew Joseph was no grown ass man. He was seconds from throwing a temper tantrum in the middle of my shop.

His voice grew louder when he began to speak. "You always thought you were better than us..." he started, but his sentence trailed off when a tattooed hand found his shoulder. Only when he turned his lean body to the side I was able to see the face of the man. The face of a man I had been talking to on the phone for weeks but hadn't

physically seen since the night he fixed my car and kissed me. What the hell was he doing here?

“Who the fu—” The rest of the question was caught up in his throat as he turned around and saw who had grabbed his shoulder. Apparently he was familiar with him... had to be.

“Uh, yeah. Fine. What are you doing out this way, Kinga?”

“Don’t be questioning me like you know me, old motherfucker. Get your ass up outta here before you see the inside of a trunk.”

Joseph jumped, straightening his posture before he booked it out of the front door much faster than he came in. He left so fast I just knew he left the bottom of his shoes.

“Do I even wanna know why that ol’ country, broke pimp was doing in here?” Kinga asked, now standing right in front of me.

“Nah you don’t, but if you must know, that’s my mama’s baby daddy. The only thing that would stop her from getting into heaven in my eyes.”

Kinga chuckled. “That’s cold as fuck. So, that’s your father.”

“Nothing near, but that’s what he likes to call himself.”

He nodded.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” I couldn’t help how widely I smiled up at him.

“Figured I’d bring my niece to finally see the dog you’re supposed to be selling me,”



he responded, looking down at the pup in my arms. “Aja, where are you, shorty?”

“Coming, Uncle.” I then heard little feet moving in our direction before a cute little girl stood in front of me, chocolate with a head full of beautiful curly hair.

Once I greeted the cutie who nearly begged me to hold the puppy in my arms, I took her and her uncle to my office. I was pretty sure she’d enjoy seeing all the others as well. Nope, I still wasn’t looking to sell Bleu, the little pup I had now named and became more attached to day by day.

“You still ain’t tryna let him go, are you?” Kinga’s voice interrupted my thoughts as I watched the puppies play and love on his niece. On the phone one night we’d briefly discussed the fact that I didn’t want to let this one go.

“And I’m not. His name is Bleu.” I leaned back on my desk as he stood near the door.

Laughter escaped his lips. “And what if that’s the one I wanted?”

“You would be shit out of luck.”

He laughed. “You got plans tonight?”

“None. Baby girl is due any day, so I kinda gotta play it close to the house. What did you have in mind?” I turned and put the puppy I had become obsessed with in the enclosure with his siblings and Aja.

“Dinner. Me and you after I drop shorty off with my brother.”

My eyes left him momentarily and landed on the little girl. She was having the time of her life in the enclosure with the dogs.

“Nothing out. I’m cooking tonight, you can come over for dinner. That is, if you want to.”

His lip was tucked between his teeth as he nodded.

“So that’s a yes or no?” I asked in a somewhat teasing manner to hide the fact that I had shocked the shit out of myself inviting this man over to my home. Not that I didn’t trust him, but shit, I didn’t trust me.

He laughed. “Yeah, but since you’re overthinking shit I’m only coming over to eat, shorty.”

I giggled...shit, I had to under his gaze. “I don’t believe I invited you to do anything else.”

“Not with your words you didn’t, but nah Harlem, you don’t want these problems. I’m hood as fuck and I complicate shit.” He glanced around my office, checking on his niece before those eyes found their way back on me.

The tension between us grew with each passing second, me standing a few feet from him and him leaned back against my desk giving me that look.

“Like how?” I found myself asking.

He spoke only loud enough for me to hear. “Like the fact that I liked the feel of your lips against mine. Been craving them since that night. You gonna let me kiss you?”

“What’s stopping you?”

He didn’t say another word, but instead his hand firmly gripped my neck and pulled me in close enough to land his lips against mine. When they made contact it was like

water meeting earth for the first time, shit, like the sun rising in the morning. Fuck.

When we parted I felt caught up under his sight. It was inebriating...he was intoxicating.

“What are you cooking tonight anyway?”

“Chicken dish. I thought you weren’t picky.”

“I’m not, but I am about some things. We’ll see though. Now how much you finna charge me for lil homie over there?”

I followed his line of sight with my own. My eyes landed on Bleu who was currently playing with his sister.

“Nothing, because he isn’t for sale. I’ve told you this already.” I had since removed his price off the site. Matter of fact, I had removed the entire listing for him.

He chuckled. “Sell him to me and you’ll be able to see him whenever you want.”

I shook my head. “I think not. He’ll be yours and not mine. Imagine me showing up to your place just to see him in the middle of the night. Might mess up your action.”

“Only action you fucking up is the fact that you saying you’d only be there for him Damn.” His hand went to his chest while he faked being affected.

“You know what I mean.”

“Nah I don’t. I ain’t fucking with it. If you come to my crib, then you are coming to see me.”

“Kinga, I don’t even know you.”

“And that’s why you’re getting to know me. What time do you want me to come through?”

“Seven or eight is fine.”

I nodded. I was about to speak but unexpected contact halted it. Those lips were against mine again. It was a welcome contact.

We parted and I couldn’t look anywhere but at him.

“Do you need me to pick up anything?”

“No. I think I have everything I need.” I called myself moving out of his immediate space, but he never moved his hand from my side.

“Good. Send me your address.”

That I did have to move to do. My phone was on the other side of my desk. Once I had it, I keyed in my password and navigated to our messages. I sent him my address, then began to pack up. A little small talk later, he and his adorable niece walked me and my puppies to my car. He stood behind me while I settled them in. Coincidentally his car was parked right next to mine. We left the parking lot at the same time, him in his truck behind me.

\* \* \*

“S o what I’m hearing is you’re fucking the mechanic tonight?” Caya’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“No, we’re just having dinner. Getting to know one another.”

“Bitch, you said that but all I heard was free oil changes and tire rotations for life. Can’t be the only thing he’s rotating.” She was way too giddy. That was her personality though.

“Caya.”

“What? Fuck that man for all the helpless bitches in the world. We get got err’ time we walk in a fucking tire or mechanic shop.”

I couldn’t stop laughing at her stupid ass because she was so serious.

I wasn’t gonna say this was just dinner again because then the question would be if I was convincing her or myself. I was taken aback when he kissed me that day, but even more so tonight. He kissed me with authority, even after asking if he could. His energy wasn’t asking for shit though. He wasn’t the type of man to ask anything, I could tell that much by his eyes. Asking but already knowing the answer wasn’t asking, it was foretelling in my eyes.

“Um hello, earth to Harlem.” I had gotten caught up in my thoughts.

“My bad, what did you say?”

“I said you better let him wax that ass. Now if you will excuse me, I have to go deal with your nephew. Apparently Bluey went off and he’s still not trying to go to sleep. Get some for both of us. Love you.”

She hung up before I could say anything else to her. I closed my eyes momentarily. Then I moved to the pots on the stove, checking the temperature. Everything was still warm. My eyes nervously jumped to the Alexa on my wall. It let me know he’d be

here soon, sending slight tremors through my body. Shit, he made me nervous. Why? I didn't know. Shit, maybe because he was straight forward and beat around no bush. His demeanor and countenance reminded me so much of OA.

Once again I checked on the puppies, nervous energy sending me from room to room before I heard my doorbell and my phone lit up on the counter.

He was here.

I checked myself in the mirror, of course, before going to the door. I was dressed comfortably, another thing I overthought when I got out of the shower after cooking. A gray fitted T-shirt and a pair of black leggings.

I opened the door and there he stood. I had taken him in earlier, but right now was different. Right now I was stuck on the fact that this man was standing at my door holding a damn cake plate. Did he make me a cake?

"You baked?" I asked, stepping to the side to let him in. He didn't pass me when he was in though. Instead, he stopped in front of me and hugged me. Not one of those friendly hugs either. He then kissed my forehead before moving across the threshold.

"Yesterday. Figured I wouldn't show up to your door empty handed."

"Well, aren't you sweet?" I grinned.

"Nah, I'm not."

I laughed.

"It smells good here."

“Then what do you call showing up to my door with cake?” I closed the door then moved around him to the kitchen.

“Being raised right. Where do you want me to sit this?”

“Right there is fine.” I pointed over to the island. “Do you want anything to drink?”

“What do you have?”

He didn’t wait for my response. He had already moved to the refrigerator and opened it.

Yes, Kinga was forward, so forward and so sexy that I didn’t mind. None of me minded...like at all.

He grabbed what he wanted then backed up and closed the door. I heard something hit the counter then I felt him behind me. His citrus, musk, and cedarwood aroma engulfed my senses before I heard him.

“You gonna let me taste it?”

My brain went south, moistening my panties for the second time today. I squirmed.

“The food, Harlem,” he elaborated, seemingly catching my reaction.

Without another word I spooned some of the creamy mixture onto the wooden spoon and turned around to hold it up for him. He accepted part of the spoon into his mouth, eyes locked on mine.

“Damn that tastes good. You gonna fuck around and have me only wanting to eat what you cook.”

I laughed.

“And also, I’m down to taste that too if you let me and stop acting so damn nervous around me.”

I didn’t respond. I had no response. The man had rendered me speechless. No, I wasn’t nervous, I was speechless. Without fucking words.

“Harlem.” His voice calling my name was enough.

“I’m not used to you. You’re al—” I started but he stepped into my space. Then he reached behind me and cut the stove off. I heard the click. About a minute later he picked me up and spun around on his feet, sitting my body on the counter. His lips were centimeters away from mine when he spoke again. “You’re gonna have to get used to me.”

Nothing I attempted to say stopped his stride. He smashed his lips against mine again then backed up. He moved to the kitchen sink and washed his hands. He then slid to where I already had plates waiting for us and grabbed them. He made our plates, making sure the amount he put on mine was enough before making his own.

“So you were raised by your aunt and uncle? Where was your mom?”

He shrugged. “Hell if I know. She dropped us off on our folks and moved on.”

I shook my head.

“Thing is, my auntie and uncle made that shit work regardless of what we didn’t have. We didn’t even realize what we didn’t have because they always made it happen.” He handed me my plate and fork.



“That’s love.”

“Yup. What’s up with your pops though? Why does he seem like he was on some bullshit at your shop?”

I looked off, irritated at the thought of Joseph. “It started because I won’t give his son any more hours at my shop. Then he was pissed because I refused to give him money,” I replied honestly. He was probably the only person I told that to, because had it been OA he would have gone to see about Joseph and Hari.

He nodded.

“My family is complicated.”

“Ain’t everybody’s?”

“Probably.”

“Mine damn sure is. You just gotta rock with that shit, sweetheart, and know that if you need me, I’ll handle that shit for you.”

I laughed. “No you won’t.”

“Shidd. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because you don’t even know me that well. Hell, I could be the problem.”

“Probably, but from what I see, I like. So yeah, I’ll trunk a nigga for you.” He seemed so serious, so I just nodded. We made a little small talk back and forth before we were finished eating. Then we ended up on my sofa, my legs in his lap while he stared at the TV. Why did this seem so easy with him? I mean, yeah I didn’t know

him, but I was quickly comfortable around him and he was so easy to talk to.

“What about me intimidates you?” he asked, eyes still ahead.

I didn’t have to think about it, I just knew. “The fact that you know what you want. You go after it in a way that can almost be considered impulsive, but you’re far from that.”

He nodded. “Keeping it a buck, I ain’t never been this interested in nobody.”

“Don’t lie.”

“I’on got no reason to. I’on like to be lied to, so I’m not gonna lie to you.”

I nodded. “If not, then why?”

“Because I get tired of motherfuckers easily and the same thing I’ve been telling you for the last few weeks. I don’t like people.”

“So you say, yet you’re here.”

“You not people. You’re fine shit, Harlem.”

I grinned. Feeling warm from the way he said my name.

“Why are you sitting all the way down there like I’m a bite you or something?”

Of course I shrugged. Couldn’t help it. Being down here allowed me to think while being near him in the slightest made thinking impossible. I used to think people were dramatic when they called things breathtaking, but then I encountered him. Kinga was no fairytale or dream, but instead the antagonistic character in the story causing

problems for everybody trying to look good. He was everything, without me knowing everything about him. I moved closer to him, maneuvering my legs in the other direction and resting my top half against his chest.

“Close enough?”

“Yup.” His tattoo-littered arm rested across my shoulder like a seat belt.

I couldn’t gauge what was on the TV because I was in his arms and nothing else mattered. “So you came over to eat and watch SportsCenter?”

“I came over here to eat and do whatever the fuck you wanted to do. Turns out you just wanted to lay up under me while I watch SportsCenter. That’s cool with me if it is with you.”

I didn’t object. “What do you like to do then? When you’re not at work?”

“Being at the shop ain’t work because I love that shit. While the youngins work on the newer model cars and shit like yours, I spend my time on antiques. That or my own. But if you exclude working on cars in your question, then I like to cruise in one of my old schools.”

“Is that so? Then why did you decide to fix my car if it wasn’t your thing?”

“It was the least I could do since you came in my spot acting up. Plus I wondered if you looked that good angry, then how would you look with a smile on your face.”

A big dumb ass smile settled into my features while Kinga laid it on thick. I soaked it up, swooning internally. “You always know what to say, huh?” I tilted my head back, peering at him.

“Nah. I’m just keeping it a buck.” His arm tightened.

“Well since we’re being honest, I do like you but want to be dated.”

“Ain’t never done that but I’ll do that f—” His phone vibrating on his chest interrupted his statement. It was at his ear in seconds. I couldn’t make out what whomever on the other line was saying, but I could tell when Kinga’s whole demeanor changed. Anxiety and irritation coursed through him. Fuck! How was I in tune with this man?

When his phone call ended, he exhaled deeply. “I gotta head out, baby girl. Something I gotta handle just came up.”

I was disappointed. My distress had nothing to do with him, but everything to do with the fact that I wanted him to stay, but he was a busy man. “Okay.” The word dragged from my lips like it had thirteen syllables.

I sat up to give him space to get up.

He stood and grabbed his hoodie. “Come walk me to the door. I’m a try to make it back tonight. That is... if you want me to.”

“Do you want to?”

“Harlem, baby, it’s not that hard. You’re gonna let me come back and taste that motherfucker or not?”

“But didn’t you say you might be able to make it back here?”

He grinned. “Yes or no, Harlem.”

“Yes, now can you please let me know if you’re not able to make it?”

“Nah, I’m a make it.” The smile on his face was so bright it drowned out my discontent with him leaving.

I walked him to the door. Once he was gone, I checked on the dogs then found my way back on the couch. I just lay there, mind racing a mile a minute. Hell yeah I wanted that man to come back and taste it. Shit, he looked like he could devour some shit... hopefully my shit.

I didn’t know when I fell asleep, but it felt like a blink. Like as soon as I closed my eyes I heard my phone ringing. It was loud too, because of course I didn’t put it on do not disturb or silent. When I glanced down it wasn’t Kinga or Caya but Zax. I glared at the time, pissed, before I answered. Who called someone at eleven at night, especially if the call wasn’t expected? Who was I kidding? My ass was just mad it wasn’t Kinga, but according to my phone he’d left over two hours ago.

“Yes.”

“Har, it’s been long enough. I need some direction here. I need you to tell me wh—” His voice was slurred, letting me know he’d been drinking. Singing followed... Mariah Carey’s “We Belong Together” had seen better days.

I set the phone down and sat up. Damn, I was looking forward to Kinga coming back. Then I remembered he’d brought cake. At least if I didn’t have him right now I could have cake. I moved into the kitchen with my phone in hand on speaker while Zax now sang his apologies to me. This wasn’t a normal thing, but the man got drunk enough for me to know not to hang up, because he would blow down my line.

I was seconds from digging into the slice of caramel cake I’d cut when my doorbell rang. I looked around before grabbing the knife in my hand and moving toward the

door.

When I reached it, I peeked through the glass. My eyes feasted on Kinga. Shit, he was back... shit, he was back. My nerves went haywire, but hell yeah I opened the door.

“I just hit your line twice.”

“My bad, I was jus—” I couldn’t even finish my statement. The man pulled me against him and stuck his tongue down my throat. I welcomed it...shit, I welcomed him.

No words, no anything, I was in his arms and he was carrying me through my house like he knew where he was going.

“Wait, I was about to get a piece of cake.” I giggled when he buried his face in my neck.

We took a pitstop in the kitchen. He sat me right next to my phone and the cake.

“You don’t get that I need you, Harlem. I need you in my life so fucking bad that I can’t let you go.” Zax's voice filled the kitchen, alerting me that he was still on the phone.

Kinga’s expression tightened. “The fuck is?—”

“He’s drunk. Doesn’t do it often, but if I hang up he’ll blow me up,” I explained, knowing this seemed weird.

“You still got feelings for that nigga?”

“No. If I did you wouldn’t be here and he wouldn’t be on this phone.”

He just looked at me for a moment. “Then hang up and block him.”

“I don’t block people. Because what if it’s an emergency? What if?—”

“His emergency ain’t your fucking problem, not no more.” There was no amusement in his eyes. He was serious. I shocked myself when I reached for the phone and hung up. Then I blocked Zax, something I knew would drive him to show up to my shop at some point. Right now I didn’t care.

“Good, now eat this fucking cake so I can eat you.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. Shit, he stood his big ass between my legs, watching me eat the cake with his hands resting on my thighs. He wasn’t rushing me, but yeah, he was rushing me.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:43 pm*

K inga

Watching Harlem eat that cake had me wanting to feed that shit to her. She was probably eating that shit so slow to fuck with me because I took so long to come back. Fine ass.

“ This is so good,” she complimented, holding the fork to my lips for me to accept like I hadn’t tasted it already. I accepted, because at least I was getting that shit out of the way.

“You ready or you gonna keep fucking with me?”

“I’m not messing with you. I was enjoying what you baked. Can you hand me th?—”

I didn’t let her nervous ass finish that statement. I picked her up and started down the hall, not knowing where she was going. “Which door, mama?”

“Last one to your left.” She giggled, holding on to me like I was gonna drop her little ass. “See, you knew you were on bullshit, but I got you.” I pushed the door to her bedroom open. I tossed her on the bed and stepped back, taking the space in. Her bedroom was her, decorated in different grays with a rose contrast. I also noted though she was a dog breeder and had multiple dogs in her home, it didn’t smell like it. Her home smelled like deep amber mixed with cool flannel.

My eyes were back on her in seconds as she lay against the concrete colored sheets, waiting for me.



“After I put this pussy in my mouth, it’s mine. You know that, right?” I didn’t know why I asked, because I didn’t care if she said no. I was claiming her and this pussy regardless.

“How are you staking a claim already?” She giggled like I was joking.

“‘Cause I ain’t sharing.” I pulled my hoodie and T-shirt off and tossed it onto the rose chair at the left of her bed.

I looped my fingers into the waistband of her underwear and leggings, sure to bring them both down together. When I had them off, I dropped them, leaning forward and pulling her to the edge of the bed. Thank God she had one of those low beds unlike most chicks I knew.

Her shit was so slippery and inviting that I knew I was fucking up. I didn’t eat pussy like that, but with Harlem? I could see myself eating often. My first lick across her slippery nub was like the first taste of a vanilla chew. Shit, her pussy had me on some greedy shit, forcing my tongue in and out of her mound like a hound to the hunt. She was fulfilling and I felt starved, wondering where the hell her and this pussy had been all my fucking life.

I licked and licked, using my hand to control her movement until she was trembling under my touch. I had tuned out her moaning and stuttering with a need to feel her peak under my grip.

“Kingaaaa...” She moaned my name, her body becoming more tender under my touch.

Her hands locked around my locs, trying her damndest to control my movement but she couldn’t.

She came so hard and loud I thought her body was seizing. I stopped to look up at her and it was the most beautiful sight I had ever witnessed. In a state of complete bliss, she had the most beautiful fuck face I had ever laid eyes on. A face that egged me to go on and had my dick harder than a freshly packaged jawbreaker.

I lapped up her essence, seeing just how much of an obsession she would become for me.

“You wanna stop here?” I asked, now hovering over her.

“No,” she uttered, chest seemingly caving with every breath.

“Good.”

I reached into my sweats and pulled out a condom while pushing my sweats and briefs down with my other hand. My teeth ripped through the wrapper within seconds.

The entire time she lay there watching me with lazy eyes and her bottom lip tucked into her teeth.

“I meant what I said, Harlem,” I voiced, my eyes locked with hers.

She nodded, scooting up further onto her bed.

With my dick now covered, I met her where she was scooting, sure to drag my tongue across her flesh. Her breasts sat on display, begging for me to taste. Shit, every part of this woman was beautiful and addicting, begging for me to taste.

With a need for all access, I locked my arm around one of her legs, hoisting it up so I could get all the admittance I needed. Then, when I had her where I needed her, I

pushed forward, piercing her slick creases just so she would feel everything I was sending her way. I wanted her to feel me like I felt her when I wasn't inside of her. I felt Harlem on a level I didn't intend, because deep down I knew she wasn't what I was used to. Something in her would require more out of me.

Sopping warmth welcomed me into her apex, like it was waiting on me, awaiting my exploration of a body so perfect I didn't know existed. Her feverish lips pressed against mine with a need I had to fill.

"Kinga." She was choked up, wrapping that one free leg around me.

"Hmm." I fed my shaft into her folds with intention, sure to feel and fill her in ways neither of us had experienced. I paused, then pulled all the way back, ramming my entire length into her snug, slippery core again. This pussy felt like it was made for me, the way it seemed like seconds in it was trying to pull the nut out of me. Could it be?

"I feel you," she moaned aloud, breaking my thoughts that had gone into overdrive.

"Where?" I asked through grunts, trying to pace myself.

"Everywhere."

"Good." I pushed my lips against hers, sure to hit bottom with each stroke. If I was coming fast, I needed her to be coming first.

The louder she became, the more I felt like she was begging me to go harder, to send her body as mad as my mind was going with this obsession of her perfection. It wasn't long until unforgiving strokes exploded the moments and those buttery soft thighs of hers were shaking around me. Shit, she was coming so hard that seeing the thin layer of sweat on her forehead and divine fuck expression on her face had me

there as well. I had never been in sync with anybody or gave a shit about that soul ties bullshit folks spoke of, but with Harlem one night made me feel them all.

In sync...

Soul ties..

Shit... constant.

“You said you didn’t share, but what if I don’t either?” she asked, head to my chest while we lay in her bed after a few good nuts and some heavy breathing.

“Never said you had to.”

“But you said you don’t do relationships and I don’t want to rush into anything. What is?—”

“You overthinking, Harlem. I’m up for seeing where this goes between us. But only us.” I flipped her over, my face hovering over hers. Something about Harlem made me forget I didn’t like being bothered, because I wanted to be bothered with her.

“Okay.”

Sleep came, but it didn’t stay. Before I knew it, my alarm was going off and I was realizing I had a long ass day today. Between getting lil mama to school and the shop, I knew I’d be tired as hell today. I woke up in her bed with Harlem’s body wrapped around mine and a desire to stay right there but I couldn’t.

Not only did I have to get Aja to school and myself to the shop, but I also needed to deal with the shit I hadn’t last night. Ayden called me and said there was a DEA raid on my fucking shop. I couldn’t figure that out for the life of me. I was pissed, heat

rising from my skull while they looked for weapons. Whoever had given them a tip had that shit wrong as two left shoes. I'd never be caught dead doing business like that out of my shop. What pissed me off was, according to Ayden, they didn't come searching everywhere, they targeted my office like they knew something was in there. I didn't like that at all, but it would be handled. Any business with shipments was run out of a warehouse in Rogers Park, never in my shop. I'd learned that lesson already.

"Gone so soon?" Harlem's sleep-laced voice broke through my thoughts.

"Yeah, I gotta take my niece to school."

"Mhmm." She was still tired, shit I was too.

"I'ma see you today though, right?"

"Mhmm," she responded, tangling herself into the covers even more.

I laughed because I knew she wasn't hearing shit I was saying. I decided to just let her be and call her when I knew she was up.

By the time I left Harlem's house, I had thirty minutes to get home, grab lil mama's clothes, and get to Sora's house. Funny enough, while I was rushing, Blaze called and told me she had already taken care of it. Shorty was definitely family and a fucking lifesaver while Sora's ass lay still asleep like he was the pregnant one. Blaze also let me know she was gonna have Sora pick Aja up after school because she had scheduled her a hair appointment. That was good shit because I just knew lil mama was getting tired of ponytails I was struggling to give her. Shit, I was trying.

I made it home and jumped straight into the shower. The hot water beating against my skin gave me space and time to think. Even though I knew I should have been climbing in bed and getting a few hours, I had to hit the ground running. The DEA

raided my shit and I wanted to know why.

After my shower, I dressed and decided to check in on Harlem. I knew she was up by now.

“And good morning to you too,” she greeted as soon as that pretty ass face came into view. I could tell by her background she was in the kitchen.

“What’s good, gorgeous?”

“Nothing. Preparing puppy food, my own breakfast, and waiting on the nanny. I have to do some moving around today and I can’t do that if I’m scared she’s gonna pop in my absence.”

I nodded. “Since you got a nanny that means you're gonna slide through the shop? Maybe bring me something to eat. I put in a lot of work last night.”

She giggled. “That you did. I guess I could do that, but only because I feel bad for keeping you up last night and you had to be up and out at five this morning.”

“Don’t sweat it.” She and I spoke for a while longer then I got down to business. After making sure she was coming, I hit up a certain pig I knew should have called me. This pig in particular owed a debt.

“What’s up, cuz?” Demi asked as soon as he answered the phone. Demi was my blood cousin on our piss poor ass father’s side. He wasn’t good for anything but some information every once in a while since he owed me. Blood meant nothing to him because he had no fucking loyalty. I was tighter with my mother’s side because they raised us. For as long as I could remember it had always been me, Nine, Oden, and Sora. Though biologically Nine was my cousin, he was one of my brothers in real life. He lived up in Crescent Falls now though and his sap ass was married to a

librarian. Every time I thought about it, it shocked me because I knew my blood. He was in love though and I could tell from the moment I met her after our auntie decided to move down there with her sister.

“Don’t what’s up cuz me. Drop a location.” I grilled him through the phone.

“For what? You know I’m on the jo?—”

“You think I give a shit?” I had a lot of stress on me right now, so him giving me excuses on top of everything else irritating me wasn’t good enough.

“I’m at Grandma’s house. Please don’t bring that shit over here, Kinga. You know how she is. She can?—”

I hung up on his stupid ass. I hoped he didn’t think I gave a fuck about his grandmother. Old bitch ain’t never did shit for me and my siblings and we grew up six blocks from her house. As a matter of fact, I owned three liquor stores in the vicinity of her crib. Of course they sold other shit, but predominantly liquor. It made the big bucks while all that extra stuff went stale.

Demi was the golden boy of my pops’ side of the family. They kept him away from the streets and always made him seem to be better. Thing was, he wasn’t shit but a broke ass pig looking for something to either make his career or fill his pockets.

It took me all of an hour to get myself together and pull up where he said he was. I was glad he was standing out in front of his grandmother’s house when I pulled up because I would’ve hated to storm her shit and grab him, but I would’ve.

“Yo, Kinga. Don’t start that sh—” My fist connecting with his face halted his entire statement.

He hit the ground. Quick on my feet I backed up, giving him space to stand. “Get up, bitch, and please make sure you keep that badge on.”

He stumbled to his feet, holding his face, still trying to explain. He needed to understand that no explanation would help him right now.

“I didn’t know. I didn’t know it was going down like that.”

“The fuck you didn’t. You expect me to believe that shit? I ain’t. I’mma beat your ass until you admit it.” He caught another jab, this one right in the jaw.

“It wasn’t me. It was him. It was him.” He fell to the ground like I had kicked him in his chest or something. Shit, I should have.

“Who is him?” My expression stoned as I waited for an answer.

“Your father. He’s putting his bid in for mayor. You have more control over these parts than him.”

As soon as he said that I was thrown for a fucking loop. I didn’t acknowledge the coward who was supposed to be my father for reasons unknown, but it was shit like this that made me hate his crooked ass even more. I hadn’t seen him in years. Even though we lived in the same city, we didn’t run in the same circles.

I laughed. “Well tell him if he’s coming for my streets then he has to come a little harder.” Then I hauled off and kicked the shit out of Demi. “And that’s for having me come see your bitch ass to find out.”

I left him lying right there and hopped in my truck. Blood or not Memphis better had found something safe to do because I wasn’t above spilling his blood in these streets.



\* \* \*

“S o you beat up Demi in front of his grandmother’s house today?” Sora’s voice filled the garage.

“Yup. What, did somebody call and tell on me to you?”

“No fool. You’re you. Everything you do out here travels. I’m not on no question shit, just worried. What’s up, bro?”

I shook my head. He was doing that thing he did that pissed me off, but I had to accept him caring for what it was. “The DEA raided the shop last night. All of my tools are out of order.” I glanced around at the unorganized mess, livid. “I paid Demi’s debt and kept his stupid ass alive. He owes me. All he ever has to do is tell me things before they happen. He failed last night. There was nothing in here but what if it was? Anyway, I beat his ass first to teach him a lesson, then I finished him off to send Memphis a message.”

Confusion filled his features. “What does Memphis have to do with this?”

“Yeen heard, huh? He’s running for office and needs to clean up his district. According to Demi I have more control over it than him.”

“So he handed your name off to them?”

I nodded. “Yup. Ain’t like they ain’t always had eyes on me, but to send them to my shop? That’s a new low for him. Guess he didn’t learn from when I broke his jaw.” I leaned into the back of an old black school.

I felt Sora’s eyes before he spoke. “I know you mad as fuck, but you been doing good, bro. Plus you have Aja right now, you can’t do the usual. Can you go bake

something? May?—”

“I’m fine. I swear I am. What they did was his one pass. I’m too smart for them to try me head on.”

“So just like that? You’re giv?—”

A knock on the door got mine and his attention. When I lifted a smile immediately crossed my face at the sight of Harlem holding a lunch bowl and a smile indented those thick ass lips. She looked good as fuck too. She wore a pair of indigo, wide leg, distressed denim, showing too much of her fucking thighs for me, and a fitted tank top.

“Damn. You didn’t forget about me? I thought you did.” I dropped the tools I was using into the tray and picked up a rag, moving toward her. I felt my brother staring, but I was too engrossed in her presence to say anything to him.

“No, I didn’t. My puppy nanny was a little late. And I told you last night I was dropping two puppies off to their new homes today,” she explained, but I pulled her in by her ass cheek for a kiss.

Of course Sora cleared his throat. He couldn’t not be all in my fucking business.

When I turned around his expression was questioning, but of course he smiled in Harlem’s direction.

“Damn yeen gonna introduce me at all, bro?” He stepped forward, now standing directly in front of us. “I’m Sora, his brother.”

Harlem smiled. “Harlem.” She shook his hand.

“You came in and cursed the whole staff out, right? About two or three weeks ago, right?”

She nodded. “For good reason.”

Sora chuckled, eyes traveling from me to her a few times. “A match made in fucking heaven. Not one but two hotheads. I’m going to pick up Aja. I’ll slide back through. It was nice meeting you, Harlem.” He walked off and I knew I was gonna hear some shit from him later.

I grabbed Harlem’s hand and pulled her in the direction of my office, past my employees and the more crowded spaces. I didn’t want nobody in her fucking face.

“You look good as fuck,” I complimented, taking a seat on the couch while she looked around.

“Thank you. Though you’re greasy, you don’t look too bad yourself.”

I chortled. “What did you do today, besides drop offs?”

“Honestly just that. I made your food and ran a few errands.”

I couldn’t not look at her. Shit, even when I got up to go to the washroom and wash my hands, my eyes felt like they needed to be looking at her.

“You said you made sliders? Like White Castle?” I dried my hands, moving toward my desk chair.

“Yeah, but baby White Castle ain’t got nothing on me.” She now leaned against my desk, body sitting right as fuck.

I licked my lips. “Oh for real? Let me be the judge of that.”

“Alright.”

I opened the bowl and that shit looked good and smelled even better. “Damn, Harlem.”

“It’s the least I can do since you left that cake at my house.” She smiled widely.

“Come here.” I motioned for her to sit in my lap.

“And how are you going to eat?”

“With you right here. C’mere, man.” I maneuvered away from the desk so she could sit.

“How about I sit here and you eat your food right there.” She moved around my desk and sat on the side, next to me. Course I laughed because she was back on that nervous shit.

“What I tell you about being bashful around me, Harlem? I just had your pussy in my mouth less than eight hours ago. At this point we can’t get any closer, love.”

“I’m not nervous.”

“To keep it a buck, I plan on having that motherfucker in my mouth tonight too.” I set the bowl down and put my hand between her thighs, gripping them from the inside and scooting her little ass down until she was directly in front of me with that big, dumb ass smile on her face.

“Damn you’re trying to bully me already?” she asked, sitting back on her hands,

looking at me while I ate.

“Trying to? Baby, yeen heard? I am a fucking bully.”

“Mhmm.”

For a while we just talked back and forth. I was enjoying her company more than I had ever enjoyed anybody’s company. She didn’t want shit from me and she wasn’t trying to be slick. Shit, she didn’t know of any of my street shit. She was getting to know me for what I told and showed her, not a reputation I built in my younger years. Hell yeah I maintained that motherfucker, but she didn’t see me like that, and that much I could tell from the way she looked at me.

“So you’re coming over tonight?”

“I got my niece. Are you good with her coming through?”

She nodded. “That’s fine. What does she like?”

“The fuck you mean what she like? What about what I like?”

She cackled. “Everything ain’t about you, handsome.”

“Fuck outta here.”

She giggled some more upon seeing I wasn’t fucking smiling. “Get over it. You’ve had my cooking three times. I doubt you’ll dislike what I cook tonight.”

She left the shop about an hour later, leaving me to work on my old school and a few other things I needed to take care of. I threw myself so far into work that I didn’t realize time had flown by the way it had. By the time I looked up at the clock, it was

dark and I was hungry as shit, like Harlem hadn't fed me hours prior. I was getting cleaned up to leave when a familiar voice up front in the shop caught my attention.

"You just said he was out back and you just said he's gone. Which one is it?" Jewlz asked. I had been told everybody up front not to ever tell anybody I was here. I didn't like nobody thinking they could just walk up on me.

"Either way I need to talk to him and it's serious and none of your business."

I shook my head. "Let her back." I was loud enough for them to hear.

"Thank you. And don't be looking at my ass." She said that shit loud as fuck as her heeled sandals clacked against the concrete in my direction. When I looked up, shorty looked good as fuck but in that too much type of way. I hadn't ever paid any attention to the fact that she did too much until now.

She wore a short skirt and an even shorter shirt. Shit looked good, but it was tight as fuck. She wanted the attention... my attention.

"What's up, Jewlz?" I asked, pulling my hoodie over my head. I was waiting on Sora to drop Aja off then we were going by the crib to grab some shit before we went to Harlem's.

"I haven't seen you around. Was just trying to see if you had some time to catch up." She leaned back in my car.

"Whoa, watch out," I called out, reminding her not to touch my shit. I didn't like people leaning on my cars. Too many textures could fuck up a good paintjob and the last thing I needed was to be hitting Rud to paint me up before the new season.

"My bad. So, are you free?"

“Nah I ain’t.” I eased out of the shop suit, thoughts of my lil fine shit filled my mind. I couldn’t understand how it had only been a few weeks, but she was on my mind like this.

“What about later?”

“I’ on know. I gotta see about later. Is that all you came by for?” I had no intention of seeing about later seeing as how I intended to be knee deep in Harlem all night.

She looked uncomfortable, definitely not used to me turning her down. “Nah, I was also coming by to let you know Antwan and Kyro are planning on moving into your territory.”

I laughed at the thought. “How you find that out?”

She popped her gum. “I was near when they had the conversation.”

More laughter expelled from my lips. Her saying she was near meant she was partying with them. Breaking bread and drinking with folks who wanted my motion was wicked work. It irked me that lil dudes like the ones hugging the blocks thought they could be any match for me. The blocks they wanted to move in on were just drops in a bucket for me and I still wasn’t letting them go. My name was attached to a lot of motion in this city, from the three liquor stores that didn’t only sell liquor to the bar my name had absolutely no visible attachment to up north. Neither of those even scratched the surface of that warehouse up in Rogers Park housing enough ammunition to start a war within city parameters on any given day.

“What’s funny? I’m loyal to you and I can’t even get a moment of your time.”

“Loyal to me? Yeah, you keep telling yourself that. Who is their big homie?”

She sucked her teeth, eyes moving everywhere.

“Maj. You know that.”

I nodded. “You party with him too?”

She didn’t respond at first. “Sometimes. He doesn’t indulge like they do. We don’t do nothi?—”

“He feels their sentiments?” I didn’t want any sort of explanation from her. Jewlz was for anybody looking to party. I knew that, which was why I only kept her around to get my dick wet from time to time.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. We don’t talk about you when we’re together.”

More laughter. “Bet.”

“And what is that supposed to mean, Kinga? Like for real. I told you I wanted to be with you and you laughed at me. I gotta explore my options.”

I shook my head because I wasn’t up for this discussion. “Preciate the heads up, Jewlz.”

“So that’s it? You’re just dismissing me like I’m a basic bitch.”

“What else do you need, Jewlz?” I heard my phone ringing but my attention was on her.

“You know what, nothing. Let me know if you’re coming through later. I really miss you.” She was gone a few seconds later. I fetched my vibrating phone from my pocket and answered.



“Yo.”

“Fools told me to hit them when I’m in their city yet don’t even answer their line for real.”

I pulled my phone from my ear and looked at it. The name read Rennix, bringing a smirk to my face. Funny thing was we’d only met because we happened to be at the same vacation destination about five years ago when me, Sora, and Nine were taking some time away from the city. I said Rennix aloud, calling my cousin, and both him, his twin, and Nine looked at me. I thought that shit was odd as fuck because who just named their son Rennix? Apparently my auntie and their mom.

“The fuck you doing out this way?”

“Checking in with my family. Shitty ass city. What are you on?”

“Tonight nothing, I’m taking it in,” I responded, knowing he could party.

“Old ass. I’mma be out here for a while, so I’ll get up with you.”

“Bet.”

We hung up just as my brother walked in the door trailed by my niece.

“Damn shorty, these braids are tight,.” I complimented my lil baby who looked up at me and beamed.

“Thank you.”

“Where y’all headed?” Sora stopped a few feet from me.

“Home to grab some shit, then to Harlem’s spot.”

As soon as I said that he had a big, stupid ass smirk on his face. “Harlem, huh?”

“Get off that.”

“Get off what? I’m just saying. One minute she’s in here causing hell and the next she’s bringing you lunch and you all up in her grill. You got something you wanna tell me, brother?”

“Nah. Mind your business.”

“Hell nah. Wait till I tell Nine about this. You out here talking shit but done up and got tender over lil fine shit.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his stupid ass. “I’on know what you talking about?”

“Yeah you do. It’s all in your smile. You like her.” He was taking too much joy in his assumption.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He folded his hands across his chest. “I do, trust me, from experience. You got that look in your eyes. It’s cool, we’re gonna talk. Dinner though. Bring her to the house, we’ll order out and eat some pizza and shit.”

“She doesn’t eat out much. She cooks everything.” I smiled at the thought. I was lowkey looking forward to seeing what she cooked tonight. This was the type of thing I wasn’t trying to get used to. When she brought me sliders today, I was in awe, then the fact that she was right about White Castle not having anything on her. Those sliders were delicious, so good I had to visually appreciate them while I ate.

“Oh, so she cooks for you.”

I didn't respond. My eyes were on Aja. She was too busy playing on her iPad to pay me any attention.

“Yeah she does. I saw her walk in here with that bowl earlier. Just like I saw how you looked at her.”

“And?” I finally looked at his know-it-all ass.

“Don't fuck it up.”

“We just kicking it right now, so ain't nothing to fuck up.” I lied to him and myself in one moment.

“Yeah right, but I bet you see her entertaining somebody else, yo?—”

“Lemme stop you right there. Harlem ain't entertaining shit but the dogs she breeds. Fuck outta here.” I balled my fist at the thought. I wasn't used to being possessive about anybody, but Harlem was different.

“Yeah, just kicking it my ass. You talked to yo' brother?” He said the brother part low, just in case lil mama was listening.

I shook my head. “Nope, but I did just hear from Rennix. Says he's in town.”

“Nine?”

“No, the other one.”

“Oh damn. How long has he been out here?”

“Hell if I know. Told him to get up with me, just not tonight.”

He nodded. “Sounds about right. Lemme get up outta here. Blaze is home alone. Come give your uncle a hug, lil girl.”

While Sora and Aja said their goodbyes, I moved around shutting everything down and making sure to put the tools I used today back into their rightful spaces.

When I finished, we exited the part of the shop where I worked into the main area. Ayden and Big Jay were in their usual spaces. Jay on a stool by the door and Ayden at the counter.

“You headed out, boss?” Ayden asked, face now engrossed in his phone.

“Yeah. Don’t close up too late.”

“Bet. Yeen gotta worry ’bout that. My baby mama has been on dirt, talking about how I don’t spend enough time with my son. She dropped him off at my mom’s house,” Big Jay responded, shaking his head.

I laughed and so did Sora as we exited.

“Don’t fall in love too fast while you over there,” he cracked.

“Fu—”

“Uncle, you said you were gonna stop cursing so much.” Aja’s little voice interrupted me about to tell my brother fuck him.

“I said I was gonna try, lil mama.”

“Can you please try harder then?”

I laughed and threw my hands up in surrender. “You got it, now get in the car. We’re dropping by the crib to grab some clothes, then we’re going to Harlem’s house. Are you good with that?”

I opened her door for her to get in, then stepped back. I then watched my brother hop into his car and peel out of the lot. Sora was a fucking speed demon and he knew it.

“Your friend? The one you kissed with the dogs? That’s your girlfriend, Uncle.” Her words caught me by surprise.

“What do you know about a girlfriend, Aja?”

“I’m not a baby, Uncle. I know stuff.”

I looked at her for a moment, ready to pop her bubble, but I stopped myself. Instead, I watched her fasten herself then I closed the door. The fuck did she mean she knew stuff?

When I was in the car with it started, I looked at her in the rearview mirror. “The fuck you mean you know stuff?” I couldn’t hold it in.

“I just do.” She never looked up from her tablet.

“Yeah, aight. You bet not have some lil boy at that school thinking he’s your boyfriend either.”

“Ew, Uncle. No, I don't want a boyfriend.”

“Good. ’Cause if I find out you do, ain’t nothin’ going to be pretty. Plus, you are too

young for that, baby girl. Stay a kid as long as you can because this adult shit ain't no joke."

She was quiet, which caused me to glance in the rearview mirror again. "You heard me, Aja?"

"Yes, Uncle, I heard you."

I nodded, keeping my eyes and head on the road. I had told Aja no lies. This adult shit was heavy enough to break even the strongest. Just like we planned, we went by the house and grabbed a few things. After that we went straight to Harlem's. The craving to be near her was new for me because never in my life had I wanted to be near a soul as much as I wanted to be around her little ass.

Harlem made pizza from scratch. Shorty had hooked it up so well that my niece stuffed her face until she passed out on the living room sofa staring at her iPad with Bleu, the puppy Harlem wouldn't sell me, under her.

"Safe to say she liked it, huh?" Harlem's voice made me look up from Aja to her. She had gone to get her guest bedroom ready for Aja to sleep in. "The bed is ready." She then leaned down and picked Bleu up.

I chuckled. "Hell yeah. Then you see how attached to that dog she is? You gotta sell him to me now, baby." I picked my niece up and carried her in the direction of the guest room right next to Harlem's bedroom. Once we had Aja settled and under the covers, I cut the lights out and followed Harlem out of the room.

"I told you, I'm not selling you my dog, Kinga. She can come see him whenever she wants though. Shoot when he gets old enough, she can even babysit."

I chuckled. "Damn." We then entered her puppy haven as she called it. There were

only two puppies and the two mother dogs. One was currently pregnant and the other was seemingly nursing her puppies.

“Now would you like one of those two?” she asked, pointing to the two puppies now greeting their brother she had just lowered.

“Nah. I want the one you want, because I want you.”

“Like how?” Her expression housed mischievousness, the type that was about to have me on some other shit all night.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:43 pm*

Harlem

I woke up in his arms but then he had to leave. Not only did he have to get Aja to school but he had to get to the shop. I couldn't be mad, shit I was too tired to be mad. The way he'd handled my body last night, making sure to have me teetering over an edge I didn't realize existed, had me forgetting about all of my responsibilities. Until I heard my alarm go off for the third time after I had already snoozed it. Then again I thought it was my alarm, but no matter how many times I pressed the side button on my phone, it kept vibrating. Finally I glanced down and it wasn't my alarm at all but instead my mother.

"Yes," I answered, my voice and body filled with the type of exhaustion only a man could aid in creating.

"I'm parked out front and I have bags. You'll either come out here and help me or let me curse your ass out when I get in the house."

"Um. What are you doing here?"

"Coming to see my daughter. The only one I have and the one about to get her narrow ass cursed out if she doesn't come out here and get these bags."

I lifted my head and stared at the time on the phone. It was barely six in the morning. What the hell was she doing up and out this way? Instead of fussing, I pushed the covers from my body and rose like the dead in a scary movie. It was then I realized I was naked. Of course I was naked, that man had explored my body like a map to a nomad. I didn't have time to get dressed, so I didn't. Seconds later a white T-shirt



that wasn't mine swallowed me like a dress and a pair of sleep shorts that were mine graced my bottom. I met my mother at the steps and of course I knew she was still about to have my ass.

"You told me there was no more Zax. So whose shirt are you wearing?" she asked as soon as we were both in the house. I had let my older dogs out while she watched my every move.

"And how do you know it isn't mine?"

"Because when I hugged you, I smelled a man's cologne. Too fresh." She tilted her head to the side, now waiting for an answer.

I asked a question of my own. "What are you doing in the city?"

"One, don't change the subject on me. And two, I'm having a girls' day with Pam and the girls, so I figured I'd get a head start on driving."

"Oh, okay." I turned and peeked out the door at my dogs.

"And he is? Wait, he wouldn't happen to be the man your father called me and told me put him out of your shop, would he?" Amusement in her eyes awaited my answer.

I didn't mean to laugh, but I couldn't help it. "He told you about that?"

"Yes, and he also told me the man is a demon."

I shrugged. "That he isn't, but uh yeah, him." I let the dogs in and continued into the other room to care for the puppies. Tato stayed up with her puppies while Tilly went back to sleep. This pregnancy was whooping her ass and I couldn't wait for it to be over. I wasn't going to breed her again, just because I saw how it affected her. After

she had this litter, I'd have her spayed and keep her as a pet. I had been doing this thing for years and did good in not keeping dogs from my litter. My mom had Judah, my second ever female bred, a standard blue Frenchie. Though she was mine my mom had asked me for her since she lived alone and felt she needed companionship. Then my brother had Moma & Juice. While Juice was technically mine as well, she was also his. Tilly's litter was my next, but my most anticipated was from Tato and Moma.

"So if he isn't like that, what is he like?"

"Kind. We're still getting to know one another, mama," I called out loudly while continuing my morning duties.

"So, you say, but you smell like him and you're wearing his shirt. That indicates not only has he spent a night here, but he has also been in your bed."

"Mom." I began wiping Tilly's wrinkles. At this stage in her pregnancy, she was nesting and refusing to go outside half of the time unless I either carried her big ass or led her out with food. Either way I kept puppy pads handy and always made sure a close eye was on her. After making sure everyone was well fed and taken care of after they came in from outside, I met my mother back in my kitchen. She was making breakfast.

"So you like him?" She settled on asking.

"Yes, I do."

"Well. When can I meet him?" I felt her eyes on me while I looked anywhere but at her.

"When I know what I want from this."

“When you know what you want from it? What the hell does that mean, Harlem? The man is lying in your bed and between your legs. You better be clear on what you expect and what you want.” She was already starting her lecture, so I had to stop her before she got in too deep.

“Mama. That’s not what I meant. What I mean is I know what I need and what this is, but I’m not yet comfortable. Yes, I like him and I’m sure he likes me. I’m not rushing anything. Whatever happens will happen.”

“Well. I can accept that. I shouldn’t have had to show up and make breakfast to learn about him though.”

I laughed. If only she showed up an hour earlier, she would’ve met him. Thank God for small victories.

“And another thing. I know you’re still reeling from that mess with Zax. Yes, you should be cautious, but don’t let his stupid actions make you miss out on what may actually be for you. Now I won’t badger you to meet him, but don’t make me wait too long. You know I get impatient.”

I nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And another thing... Lenny’s daughter Cecilia. She’s a school counselor, a nice girl. She’s looking to purchase a dog from you. I told her I would check in to see what you had and get back to her.”

I nodded. “Cool. I have one left from this litter since the other is getting picked up tomorrow. I decided to keep the full suited.”

She laughed. “You’ve never kept a boy. Why now?”

I laughed as well. Everybody in my life knew me, so this was indeed a shock. “I don’t know, he’s cute. Plus I’ve already named him Bleu.”

“Well, okay. I’m gonna give her your number.”

“Okay.” My mom and I talked for a while longer, then she had to get going. She had a sunrise yoga class with her friends and didn’t want to be late. That was fine with me because it meant I could go back to sleep. At least that’s what I thought until my phone was ringing again.

Irritation coursed through my veins when I saw it was Hari. Ever since Joseph showed up to my shop showing his ass, I’d had a bad taste in my mouth when it came to both of them. Not only that, but Hari had texted me a few times telling me how fucked up I was. I didn’t respond either time but that entitled shit he and Joseph had going on irked me.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“What’s up, sis?” He sounded chipper, which meant one of two things. He was either about to ask me for some money or probably even a damn organ. He was his father’s son, so sadly I never knew what to expect.

Before I could respond, he was already talking and already pissing me off.

“Me and my boy are on the way to your house. He was looking to buy a dog. How much do you sell them for again?”

“Excuse me. On your way where?”

“Yo’ crib. That’s where yo—” he started but I stopped him in the door.

“Don’t ever bring anybody to my fucking house. What the hell do you mean?”

“Damn, I was tryna do your ungrateful ass a favor. Shit, you could’ve at least gave m?—”

“Hari, you don’t sell my dogs, I do. I don’t know how many times I gotta tell you this. My business has nothing to do with you or your father.” I hung up the phone before he could say anything else.

I was so pissed off that going to sleep was no longer an option. I got up and instead went to check on the dogs.

\* \* \*

“W ho pissed you off, handsome?” I asked, standing at his side, watching him tear into the pasta dish I’d brought with me over to his place tonight. I spent most of my day at home with my dogs and going over numbers for the shop. I was finally turning over a feasible profit, enough to where I was able to not only pay for breeding, but also have enough money left over to not be going into my savings every other month. Money looked good.

“Why did somebody have to make me mad?” he asked, not pausing a bit on his eating.

“Because as soon as I walked in the door, I smelled cake and there one is, freshly made and iced. If I’m not mistaken, you told me that you bake when you get mad.”

He chuckled. “I bake to keep from knocking a motherfucker off. But nothing too bad.”

I just looked at him, hearing his answer and not finding myself the least bit bothered.

Why wasn't I? Because OA was my brother.

"What do you do?" I asked finally. I'd wanted to ask plenty of times, but never had the courage. Not until now.

I was spending too much time with this man to not know what all he was into.

"I make money and stay out of the way, baby."

Again I just looked at him, this time waiting for a real answer because the one he had just given me was a bunch of crap.

When he realized I hadn't responded, he glanced over at me, eyes heavy with irritation. Kinga hated to be questioned.

"My name is tied to a lot of shit, Harlem. I handle my business and keep it quick. Now if that answer doesn't work, then tell me what would." This time he didn't look at me. Instead he grabbed one of the bottles of water on the counter and opened it. He chugged it, then reached for the next. By the time he was done chugging the second one I was already moving in the direction of his bedroom.

I didn't know what answer I expected from him, but shit. The vagueness of his responses irked me. I wasn't expecting him to tell me he was a drug lord or anything like that, but something. Then again, did I? I was getting attached to this man, so the last thing I needed was to know he lived the type of life that carried a high chance of him being taken... from me.

I stripped down and climbed into his shower as if it were mine in no time. I needed to think about my expectations of him. Everything was fine when we said we were seeing where this went, now weeks later it was going and I was getting attached. I didn't know how long I was standing in the shower before I heard the door opening.

“Why do you care what I do, Harlem?” He stepped into my space, cornering me between him and the ivory shower tile while the heavy water beat against his back.

“Because I wanna make sure I’m not setting myself up for failure getting emotionally attached to you. There's a saying we’ll see where this goes and then actually being around to see where this goes... the action part that some people seemingly forget..”

“We way past saying that shit, sweetheart. I’m attached to you and I intend to see where this goes.” He tilted my head up and made me look at him. “I own a few businesses, as well as facilitate the sales of weapons across city lines. I also own a few blocks, nothing too major there though. I’m just a man making shit happen and keeping his name clean.” He pecked my lips.

I just looked at him, completely thrown but not really. I knew he wasn’t just a mechanic shop owner. He exuded so much power and commanded a type of respect only street dudes got. In a way he was hood rich, but he didn’t claim it or pay it any attention.

“Is that a problem for you?” he asked, voice heavy.

“No. Just be honest with me.”

“I got you.” His hand found my neck, pushing me back against the tile. “Now I’m finna complicate some shit for us, then you’re about to go out here and warm me up some more food with your stubborn ass.”

Complicate some shit?

I was confused until he picked me up and carried us to the shower bench in the back of his shower.

I was about to ask what he meant, but before I could, I felt like I was being impaled in the best way possible.

I was suspended, him holding me inches from his body while he pushed upward into me.

I felt like my body was betraying me, like it didn't belong to me, but instead to him, while he deviously impaled me, sending his thick, hard shaft to depths I didn't think anyone had even explored, not Zax or even me with the toy in my top drawer.

"Shhhitt," I moaned, feeling my stomach balling up and vibrations through my clit. I squeezed tight, earning a grunt from him, but it didn't slow him down. Fuck I didn't want him to!

Kinga had a map to my body with the way he had me pinned and bent like a fucking pretzel.

"Keep doing that shit, you're gonna... Fuck!" He buried the whole top row of his teeth into his bottom lip. "You fucking with me, Harlem."

I smiled, but it didn't last long because before I knew it my back was against the wet glass, like he was trying to put me through it.

"Kin...Kinga," I moaned, feeling my core balling and my legs widening. My slick folds puckered for him while his hardness repeated motions, summoning an orgasm strong enough to wreck me.

Grinding forward, I accepted each thrust with a meeting of my own, attempting to lessen the shattering, but I couldn't. I was coming so hard, his continuous touch sent tremors to every part of my body he was still touching. Pure ecstasy, almost as strong as the edibles I tried years ago, washed over me and I felt him like a wave in the



ocean. Like water to a heatwave. I felt him so deep my whole existence started to unravel right there. What started out as coordinated thrusts on his part lost rhythm and before I knew it, he was coming too, holding onto me like I might disappear at any moment.

Hours later we lay in his bed talking like the best of friends about days we were both glad had passed. Who was I kidding when I said I was getting attached to this man. Shit I was already attached to this man.

Damn time.

Damn fate.

Damn anything that attempted to remind me how fast this happened.

“You wanna tell me who pissed you off earlier?” he asked when we were finally lying in his bed. He was on his side staring at me while I lay on my back, eyes glued to the ceiling.

“When?” Confusion swept my features until I remembered exactly why I’d gotten mad earlier. Hari. “My brother.”

“Who, the older one?” he asked, hand easing up and down my chest.

“No, not OA. Hari. The brother on my father’s side.”

His expression went cold and I felt his energy rise. “What he do?”

I gave him the rundown of what happened with Hari earlier, and immediately he understood why I was pissed. I didn’t know if that was because he was a street dude or what. He even seemed pissed himself. We talked for a long while after, him

assuring me that I wasn't wrong, that Hari was indeed weird as hell like I initially thought.

"I told you I'd trunk a nigga for you, Harlem, and I mean that shit."

I cheesed hard, even though what he was saying was nearly homicidal. "Just like that?"

"Just like that." His hand massaged up and down my back as I lay with my face against his bare chest. "People gotta know I won't fuck around behind you, baby girl."

Sleep came easy in his arms, a security I didn't remember ever really experiencing with Zax. Kinga's presence made me feel like nothing else mattered.

The next morning I was up earlier than him and his niece, because I was so used to dealing with my dogs. Instead of going back to sleep, I freshened up before making my way into the kitchen. There I found the things to make breakfast. I was halfway through an episode of SVU and had a stack of pancakes on the plate when I heard small feet coming toward the kitchen.

When I looked up, Aja was standing in the doorway with a toothy smile. Baby girl's hair was all over her head, coils thick and knotted up.

"Hi, Harlem."

"Hey, pretty girl, are you hungry?" I asked, rolling the sausages and flipping the bacon. One thing I loved about Kinga's kitchen was the double stove. He had one against the wall with the traditional burners and the other in the center of the island with flat burners. It was aesthetically pleasing, but also lovely when I was cooking multi-step dinners.

“Can I help you?” she asked, moving to the side of the island where the tools were.

“I’m pretty much done, pretty girl. But you can do the most important job of all. Are you up for it?”

Excitedly, she nodded. “Yes, what is it?”

“Help me plate the food or go wake up your grumpy uncle.”

She thought about it for a minute, eyes moving from the food to the doorway that led to the stairs. “Um, I think I’m gonna wake up Uncle. Can you make my plate though?”

I laughed. “Yeah lil mama I got you.”

She raced from the kitchen to Kinga’s bedroom while I removed the plates from the cabinet. I made plates and listened to the TV talk until I heard his voice. I placed Kinga’s plate on the island then went to make Aja’s. It didn’t take long since she didn’t even eat half of what her uncle ate.

“He’s up!” she squealed, running back into the room.

I nodded, then got her situated at the island, waiting on her uncle.

Kinga entered the kitchen a few minutes later shirtless, in a pair of basketball shorts and Gucci slides. His hair flowed freely, bringing heat to my cheeks. This man looked so good that sometimes I couldn’t help but admire him.

“Can I have some syrup, Harlem?” Aja’s voice interrupted my trance.

“Uh yeah.” I turned around and grabbed it for her before placing it down on the

counter. She was a big girl, so I knew she didn't need me to pour it for her.

He was at my side, frame to my shoulder blade. "You can't be doing shit like this, lil mama. I'ma fuck around and get used to it."

I laughed.

"I'm dead serious, but you'll see when I'm walking around pissed off 'cause you ain't making me breakfast."

"It's not that serious."

"The fuck it is. Like I said. You can't let me touch you like I do and make me breakfast in the morning. I'ma mess around and get used to this."

I couldn't hold the smile that found its way onto my face. When it came to him I couldn't hold much of anything. That probably should have scared me, but it didn't. I liked him too much too fast.

"You spending the day with me?" he asked.

"Uncle, Sabastian's birthday is today. He asked me to come. Can you take me?"

"Who the fu... who is Sabastian?" He corrected himself because Aja hated when he cursed. He said she even asked him to put a swear jar in the house. I found that so funny even though he was pissed.

"My friend at school. He's really nice and he's older. We met in the office on my first day."

"Hell nah. I know the fu—" he started, but I elbowed him. "Don't fucking elbow me."

Are you talking about that lil bad ass boy?” His attention was set on his niece.

She nodded, still digging into her food. Baby girl didn’t even know she was in danger.

“How the fuck you know his birthday, Aja?”

“We Snapchat, silly.”

“‘Bout fucking what?” He tilted his head to the side and I immediately closed my eyes. He was about to have a fit and I knew it. He had that protective look about him.

“Go get the fucking iPad, Aja,” Kinga roared and that was my cue to find a corner and sit in it.

She looked confused when she realized he wasn’t the joking uncle she was used to but instead a pissed off caregiver thinking he’d given her too much freedom.

“Um. I’m going to go to your bedroom. I’ll clean this up in a fe?—”

He cupped my chin, bringing my lips to his. “Nah, stay yo’ ass right here. As a matter of fact, get up here.” He then helped me onto the counter and stepped between my legs.

I turned behind me and pulled a piece of pancake from his plate and held it to his lips. He accepted it, eyes locked on me in the most seductive way possible.

Our eye contact only broke when Aja returned to the room with her tablet in hand and a frown.

“What’s wrong, Uncle?”

“The fact that I told you that you’re too young for a boyfriend and that’s exactly what it seems like you think you got.”

I ended up checking my emails and text messages while he gave Aja a long, drawn out lecture of what he thought was the game. I managed to keep my composure throughout but lost it momentarily when he told her she wasn’t going to some lil nigga’s house party because shit happened there. I swear this fool was crazy, but he loved his niece. When she began to pout, he offered to take her to the arcade. Of course she accepted and took flight to her room to get dressed while I just looked at him. He was so handsome, so uncle daddy-ish.

“The fuck you getting in the bed for? You're going with us.”

“Uh, why? You said you and her. Uncle and niece.”

He laughed. “Because if you keep letting me between the way you do, you’re on your way to being her auntie.” A wink followed.

“So just because of my sex?”

He shook his head. “Nah, plenty more reasons, but most of all because I fuck with you in a way I ain’t never fucked with anybody else.”

I didn’t respond. I just lay there and looked at him, wondering to myself if his answer sufficed. It did, but I was overthinking, praying I didn’t find myself in the same situation as last time... Thinking everything was fine when, in fact, he wanted a break. Kinga wasn’t that type though. He was the “say what you feel and feel what you say” type, a through and through street dude with no regard for any intention that differed from his.

“Now get your fine ass up before I meet you over there and Aja be mad at both of us

'cause we won't make it to no damn arcade."

## Page 9

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K inga

I was at the shop, handling business today. One of my normal tasks was having my latest project towed to me. No lie I was excited to see it considering I was an old school fanatic. I loved to restore 'em and see just what I could do. It was an interest I had somehow gotten from my uncle. My whole life he'd spend morning until night in his garage, building some shit while my auntie was in the crib making the house feel like home.

“Boss, I got Remy on the phone. He's saying there's a mess on one of the blocks,” Big Jay called out, interrupting my thoughts.

“Like what? What happened?”

“Somebody came through spraying. Yellow tape and a lot of blue lights over there.” When he said that, my thoughts immediately went to Jewlz and her warning a few days ago.

I was on my feet in seconds, giving the candy apple old school one last look before I turned to Jay. “Anybody know who did it?” My fingers itched and my skull was on fire. I didn't go messing with nobody, even when I could have. Folks loved to disrupt the peace with greedy hands. Cup handed ass niggas.

“Fool named Kyro who works under Maj from what I gathered,” Big Jay responded. He has worked with me long enough to know I didn't like questions with no answers. Even if you didn't have any answers at first, it was best to find some before telling me the situation.



I dropped my tools. “Cool, then where is Maj at?” What irked me more than anything was people thinking we were peers because we weren’t. I ran this shit and earned my stripes. Not a soul walking this earth would ever be able to challenge that.

“Getting a location right now. He hangs out at a lil hole in the wall named Willows near his territory. Making sure he’s there now.”

I nodded. Pissed off was an understatement. Most days all I wanted was to work on these cars, but I was always pulled out of my element, always taken to places where I had to move in ways that were no longer first nature to me.

His phone rang. “We got confirmation. He’s there.”

I nodded. “Then let’s go.”

While Jay drove, I sat in the passenger side of his car with my mind full. I’d always be down with the gunplay, but why didn’t people get tired of it? If we all knew how I was gonna react, why fuck with me when we know how I’mma react every time. I had always been consistent with my reactions. The ride was all of fifteen minutes.

“You strapped?” I asked Jay before we got out of his car.

“I’m riding with you. Don’t I have to be?”

I chuckled. He was right. I didn’t fly off the handle much but I’d handle something in a minute. Let Nine tell it I gave a look when I was about to get busy. I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I did know if something didn’t sound right I got busy and did the talking part later. I didn’t much care for anything coming out of anybody’s mouth because nine times out of ten it was all lies.

“You good. I ain’t on nothing for real,” I assured him as we walked into the

restaurant.

When we walked in, the aroma of good barbeque hit my nose. The space was decorated like an old school Famous Dave's with the red plaid plastic tablecloth and wooden outside tabling. I remember Harlem telling me how much she and her girl loved this place. I could smell why, but I didn't want anything in here. I was eating at Harlem's tonight, then fucking her real good and eating again.

I stood at the door scanning the spot for Maj's fat ass. Then I spotted him. He was sitting at the table in the corner, face all in his phone. That was the quickest way to get murked out here. Then again maybe not. As I approached the table, I peeped buddy to the left of him get up like he was about to stop me.

Jay stopped him in his tracks, with a pistol to the gut and a warning to stand down.

"What's up, Kinga? I didn't know you were stopping by." Maj caught me just as I slid into the seat across from him. Too slow.

"You want my blocks." I wasn't asking; I was making a general statement.

"Nah, man, what yo?—"

"Obviously you do. Your boy seems to think they're up for grabs. That I'm one of the lil homies. Do I look like one of the lil homies to you?" I wasn't letting him get a word in, I couldn't. Unc said you instilled fear in a man by letting him hear and feel you speak. With every word from my lips I knew Maj was tensing because one, I had walked in his joint and popped up on him, and two, I was unpredictable.

He grimaced. "Hell nah. Which one?"

"Kyro."

He looked at me, face filled with confusion and seemingly emotion. “What did he do?”

I shook my head. How can you run the streets and not know what’s happening on your blocks or with your youngins?

“I’m already hearing he wants my blocks, then a shooting happens and I hear he was the one behind the gun.”

He shook his head. He was truly clueless in this and that pissed me off. I could’ve handled Maj right here and went home. Problem was handling him gave me blocks I didn’t want nor need. I had no desire to overtake anything he was doing because I was on bigger things.

“He’s new to this shit. He doesn’t know the chain of command like you or me. Let me handle him and I’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

I gave him a skeptical look. I didn’t know too many willing to go to bat for their workers. I mean, yeah, have their back, but if they fucked up? I was letting them deal with the consequences of their actions. It was what it was.

“He’s my auntie’s only kid. I can’t let her lose him because I put him in the streets.”

I nodded. “Any more transgressions I’m coming for your head, and on my mama, I won’t miss.”

I was on my feet leaving the restaurant less than a minute later. I hoped my warning was enough because I meant every word. It was cool to get money with blood until blood got in the way of money. I’d never had that problem with my blood because we were all go getters, with only one goal in mind.

“Do you think he’ll make sure he gets his boy in line?”

“Nah. Anytime somebody under you does something on their own, they don’t respect your authority. Blood or not, Kyro ain’t listening to him, and when he doesn’t, things will be handled and those blocks will be up for the taking.”

“You don’t want them?” Jay asked.

“Hell nah. Too many problems and I got bigger fish to fry. Shit, you do too, so don’t be getting no ideas.”

He chortled.

When we arrived back at the shop, I was tempted to go back in and work on the oldie, but the way my stomach was rubbing my backbone, I was going straight to Harlem’s. Aja was with Sora and Blaze for the night, meaning I didn’t have to get up at the top of the morning to get her to school.

I was about fifteen minutes from Harlem’s when my phone started ringing. The center console let me know it was my auntie, which I was shocked about. Ever since she moved, her old ass had been busy. Shorty became a social butterfly within weeks of moving out there. Though I acted like I had a problem with it, I didn’t. I was glad she wasn’t cooped up but instead living her life and moving around. When Unc died suddenly, that shit broke her but she tried not to let it show.

“What are you doing up this late, old woman?”

“Minding my grown business. And I oughta hang up on you because that’s damn sure not how you answer a damn phone, Kinga.”

I chuckled. “You right, it ain’t. My bad, Auntie.”

“Nope, not your bad. You’re deliberate. Now before I find myself cursing you out, how have you been?”

“Life’s been on bullsh—some other stuff right now, Auntie,” I answered honestly.

“You’ve been keeping your cool, right?” I hated when she asked questions she already knew the answer to. She talked to Sora more than anything, so I was sure she knew if I was keeping it or not.

“Been trying to.”

“Least you try. That’s all that matters. Your brother slipped up and told me about your girlfriend. What’s her name?”

“I’ve got no girlfriend, Auntie. I’m still out here sol?—”

“FaceTime me. Let me see you lie to my face.”

I laughed.

“Right. Now... what is her name? Tell me about her at least. It isn’t like you’re gonna let me meet her anytime soon.”

“She isn’t my girlfriend. We’re just kickin it.”

“Even that’s a step for you. Son, you’ve never had adequate enough people skills to deal with people. You don’t even like being bothered, so the fact that you’ve been spending time with this young lady means a lot. I may not have to fear you growing old alone.”

I chuckled. “You never had to worry in the first place. I’m a real nigga, auntie. Just

because I'm alone doesn't mean I'm alone."

"I know, but I still worry about you. I have no choice but to. I just want you to be happy, shoot it's all I've ever wanted."

My auntie and I talked for a while longer. By the time I got to Harlem's house, Auntie was yawning. After promising her I'd make a special trip to come see her in a few, we were off the phone.

\* \* \*

"Y ou come over here to eat or actually see me?"

"Shit, both." I chewed through the tender pot roast, feeling fulfilled as hell. I hadn't had pot roast in years, since way before my auntie moved. It just wasn't one of those meals I realized I missed until the moment Harlem held a piece out for me to taste.

She grinned, lighting up the entire room. Something about seeing her smile made me feel lighter. As a matter of fact, just being around her did. I'd never purposely admit it aloud but everything about her made me feel a little less complicated. Coming home, or to wherever she was, made me feel like everything in the world was alright.

"What makes you happy?" she asked, voice making me gaze in her direction just a little bit longer.

"Shit, I don't know. I'm not the overly happy type."

"What about your cars? Do they make you happy?"

The thought brought a smile to my face. Maybe she was going somewhere with this. "Not so much happiness as fulfillment."

“Why?”

“Because for as long as I could remember my uncle used to spend days under those cars, making something out of nothing.”

“Is that how you feel when you work on yours?”

I nodded. “Feels like peace, like none of that other shit I be dealing with matters. Everything else is for the money, but the cars? That’s for the heart.”

She smiled. “I love that for you. You look like you’re at peace when you talk about them.”

“I know what else brings me peace.” Before I could stop myself, I was spewing corny shit.

“What?”

“Being right here with you... like this.”

She tried to correct me. “You mean knowing I cooked and coming over here to eat.”

“Nah, hearing about your day, eating with you, and knowing where we’re gonna end up after I’m finished.”

She laughed. “Well not right now, buddy. I wanna watch a movie, well... after you shower.”

“You finna shower with me?”

“You want me to?”

“Stop asking questions you already know the answer to. Meet me in th—” My sentence halted when I heard my phone ringing. When I picked it up, and saw it was Bry, I answered.

“What’s good, old school?” I called him that to fuck with him.

He laughed. “Y’all youngins get on my fucking nerves with this old school shit. I was calling to invite you to the bar. It’s Aro’s birthday and you know his grumpy ass doesn’t really like anybody.”

I chuckled because that was true. Every time I saw him he was frowned up about something. “I’ll slide through. When is it?”

“Shit, in about thirty or forty-five minutes. You’re good.”

I laughed at his last minute-ness, then my eyes went to Harlem who was trying to act like she wasn’t watching me. “Tonight for real?” I rubbed her exposed thighs, thinking about them on my shoulders and how if I agreed I wouldn’t be able to do that until we got back.

“Yeah. Bring your young old ass out of the crib.”

“Aight, man,” I agreed. We hung up a little bit later, my attention on what I could get cracking before we walked out of the door.

“What was that about?” she asked, nearly squirming under my touch.

“We’re about to slide somewhere right quick. My boy is having a bir—” I started but the expression on her face made me pause. “The hell are you looking like that for?”

“Because I didn’t know you had friends.”



I laughed. “I don’t. I got people that I came up around in the trenches. Go put something on, baby, we going to a bar and coming right on back here.”

“For how long?”

“Long enough to show my face,” I assured her, knowing damn well her homebody ass wasn’t feeling this sudden change in plans. I liked the fact that she liked to stay in because I did too. I wasn’t one of those people comfortable in crowds and loud spaces. That gave me anxiety and irritated me while my brothers thrived in it, everybody except Nine. He was just like me, not messing with the crowds and extra human interaction. Shit was aggy.

It took us both a minute to get dressed, especially since Harlem refused to shower with me now. That was comical seeing as how before I got that call she was all up for being bent over in the shower. Anyway, I hadn’t been dressed two minutes when I walked into Harlem’s closet and saw what she was wearing. I wanted to tear that shit off of her because I promised she had me messed up. Most of all, she had me possessive.

The way those jeans fit her frame was like they had been painted on. Then she wore a silk type tube top, held up by nothing but the breasts I knew like the back of my hand and God. Hopefully He held it up tonight because I was sure to send a body to the morgue for seeing something that didn’t belong to them. When it came to Harlem, I was jealous off rip. I didn’t want fools talking to her, looking at her, or even thinking about it. A lot of motherfuckers better be glad I didn’t have telepathy because I promise they would’ve been sent to see their maker off thoughts alone.

By the time we pulled up to Bry’s, I was lowkey ready to go home. Thing was, I was already here and climbing out of the truck. When I rounded the truck to get Harlem, I checked my waist to make sure I had my shit on me. I didn’t go anywhere naked, it was unheard of, especially in this day and age.

With my hand draped around her shoulder, I walked her into Bry's, not bothering to stop near the fat nigga on the stool in the corner. Couldn't be a bouncer because he damn sure nodded at me like he knew me instead of trying to stop me.

"Kinga, my dude." Some random walked up on me, but I shook my head. Fools acted like they knew me, but they didn't know me. If they knew me, they'd know walking up on me in the middle of a function wasn't a good idea.

We entered the space, my eyes scanning the crowd before one of the waitresses tapped my shoulder and pointed toward the back area. With the dimness of the lights and the crowded space of people, it took me a minute to spot Bry on what looked like a balcony holding his hands up. Big bro had come a long way, from opening a restaurant to opening a second location of his first bar. This location, however, had a second floor, giving the space a real secluded feel upstairs. There were a few TVs and things, removing the feel of a club and keeping the true bar atmosphere.

With Harlem's hand nestled in mine, I led the way to the stairs. When we reached them, I put her in front of me and we ascended the metal stairs to where the party was happening.

We reached the top seconds later, where Brysheer met us with a big grin on his face. "You made it." We shook hands and he looked from me to Harlem. "This you?"

I nodded, eyes scanning the much less crowded space than downstairs. Up here was more intimate and I got the feeling everybody knew one another.

He nodded then reached to take her hand... the free one . "Bry."

Harlem was unlike me. She was polite and quiet around people she didn't know. She shook his hand, then nuzzled closer into my space. My lil homebody.

A few seconds later his girl Krisis walked over and greeted me, then introduced herself to Harlem as well before asking her if she wanted to get a drink, to which she agreed, leaving me and Bry standing there.

“The fuck is the birthday boy anyways?”

“Late. Nigga got kids and he ain’t too keen on telling his daughter no. I ain’t either, but my daughter happens to love her dog more than she loves me some days, so of course she’ll kick it with her bonus grandma and dog for a few hours.” He chuckled while speaking a language I wasn’t too fluent in. I hadn’t really thought about having kids, shit not until I ended up with Aja, paying an expensive ass tuition and getting weekly reports on her progress. Then there was Harlem, the woman I was completely fucking obsessed with, the one I was seeing where shit was going with, because usually by now I was annoyed with women and trying to get them out of my face. She was different.

“Last time we talked you wasn’t too keen on finding somebody to mess with exclusively. If I remember correctly, you told me that was for the old niggas.” His voice broke my trance as I watched her interact with Krisis and another woman from afar.

“Shit... I wasn’t. Me and Harlem are just chilling.” I lied to him and myself at the same moment.

“Are you telling me that... or yourself?”

I laughed. “Both of us. But nah, that just snuck up on me out of nowhere.”

“Don’t it always?” he questioned just as Harlem and Krisis returned with drinks.

She found her way under my arm, closer to me in a way much more emotional than

physical. I hadn't much realized that until now in a room full of people and it only felt like her and me.

Harlem

A month and a half later

There was no way I should have been this gone over a man like I was over Kinga this fast. I couldn't put my finger on it, but the man gave energy like no other. He said he had never been the type to be in a relationship or constantly around somebody, but I begged to differ. His energy and how he was around me was enough to hook me. The thing was, I couldn't help but wonder when the other shoe would drop. It wasn't that I thought he was a different person or anything, but everybody had a different side to them, right?

"You've been smiling since you got here. Must be Kinga, huh?" Caya asked, gripping my hair like she had an attitude with me.

"Probably, but damn bitch, you tryna have me leave up out of here bald."

She laughed. "It's not my fault you got this soft ass hair. Shit is ungraspable."

"Girl, bye. Stop pulling my hair like you're crazy."

"Blow dry this shit next time and maybe I won't struggle to grip this shit. But do tell. What's up with you and your new boo?"

"Nothing is up. We're just kickin it."

"Just kicking it and he's tonguing you down before you get out of the car. Shit,

wasn't that man with you when your fat ass dog went into labor?" She was standing her nosy behind in the doorway when he dropped me off. How she's seen us kiss I do not know, but then again my girl saw everything.

I laughed at the thought. "He damn sure was and he was more nervous than me." I laughed because the entire ride he asked me if she was in the back seat dying.

"Well I can tell you like him and he likes you as well. Have you heard from Zax?"

"No, not since I blocked him. They told me he stopped by the shop a few times, but by the grace of God I was either out or coming in later."

"Yeah, that's God. He knows that man is not for you. Now the six-foot god with the locs who looks like he'd bloody somebody for stepping the wrong way? That's for you." She had never seen him up close in person, but a few times she'd FaceTimed me and he was at my place or vice versa. Plus, when I told her his name, the fool definitely did a deep dive on him.

"Is that so?" I asked, noticing I had a text from none other than him.

Kinga: What suite you in?

Me: 115B. Why?

Kinga: Cause I asked.

Me: Kinga.

Kinga: What man? Your girl eats like you do or she on some vegan shit?

Me: She eats like me. Why?

I saw the dots show up at the bottom like he was about to respond but he didn't. Over the last few weeks I had learned a lot about this man, from his need to always be in control to his ticks. Those being what irritated him. People really irritated him and I found it so hilarious. Any time we were out, be it grabbing a quick meal or just grabbing something, somebody knew him and they were almost trying to start a conversation. Kinga was damn sure not the type to do small talk because his irritation showed in his demeanor. The man was an asshole through and through. I often pictured him as a grumpy ass kid.

“Why did you get quiet? What's wrong, mama?”

“Nothing. Just got tired out of nowhere.” I dropped my phone in my lap and closed my eyes. We were six hours into a style I'd let her talk me into allowing her to try on my head. She was doing faux locs with barrels at the end. They'd stop a little past my shoulder.

“I'm almost done. Shit, finishing up now. See that's why I don't let you sit in front of the mir—” she started, but a knock at the door stole both of our attention.

“Come in,” Caya called out, both of our eyes on the door.

“The fuck y'all ain't got this door locked for?” I could hear him fussing before the door opened. He turned the corner, and immediately, his eyes were on me. He'd gone from fussing to licking those thick lips. “You tryna be like me, baby?”

I cackled, nervous as hell under his eyes. “Nah, I got my own motion. I didn't know you we?—”

“Ahem.” Caya cleared her throat.

“Kinga, this is my best friend Caya. Cay, this is Kinga.”

He nodded in her direction. “What’s up, shorty?”

“Apparently you. Got my girl’s nose wide open. Don’t be on no slick shit, ’cause I’ll leg your big ass for her.”

“Caya.”

“What? I’m just saying. As long as you’re happy, so am I.”

Kinga laughed. “Then we got an understanding.” He held his hand out to shake hers.

She nodded. “Good. I hope so ’cause your big ass is cute and she actually likes you. I’m almost done though, so I’m let you take my girl from me this time, but you gotta get off that hogging shit.”

Of course, this fool laughed. “You gonna let me take her? Aight, sweetheart.” He put the emphasis on the let.

“Don’t aight sweetheart me. I mean it, Kinga.”

He laughed, then focused his attention on me. “You only ate a piece of fucking cake this morning.”

I giggled. “I told you that was all I wanted.”

“A piece of cake. Is that code for something?” Judging from the fact that she was greasing my scalp and running her hands through my hair as well I could tell we were done.

“No it isn’t. You’re the only person whose mind stays in the gutter.” I didn’t know if I was lying or telling the truth because the way I felt under his gaze had my mind



buried deep.

“So you actually ate cake for breakfast?”

“Yes, and before you go judging, it was the moistest caramel cake I ever had in my life. I had some after dinner and this morning.”

“Oh, where did you get it?” she asked, now moving toward the sink to wash the excess grease from her hands.

“Somebody made it for me.” I smiled hard, looking at Kinga.

“Yup. That’s some type of innuendo, inside joke type shit. Just forget I asked.”

I laughed even harder, rising to my feet. “It’s not like that.” I moved to the mirror, taking myself in with a smile. I usually didn’t do braids or anything remotely close to this type of style to my hair, but damn. I loved this, even though I loathed the time spent getting it done.

“Mhmm. What do you think?”

“I like it, soo much.”

“Yeah, I’m glad, even though you’ll have me taking them down by next week.” She left the immediate front, going toward the back, leaving me and Kinga alone.

“Yo, I brought both of y’all some food,” he called out to her, stepping up behind me.

“Damn, you still gonna feed me after I threatened you, sexy? Bet. Yeah, Savannah, he’s a good man.” She laughed loudly from afar.

I stopped checking myself out in the mirror and looked at him. With a fresh lining and retwist, this man looked glorious. He looked so good I had to shake my head at the thoughts that had begun to slowly pile themselves in my brain.

“You look good as fuck.” His hands were at my sides, pulling my body back against him.

“I do? Even in a T-shirt and leggings. Trust me baby, I wasn’t trying to look good when we left this morning.”

“You ain’t never need to put effort into it. Lil shit look good. I want you to slide with me tonight and stay at my house.”

“Slide where with you?” I asked, eyes on him through the mirror.

“Does it matter? You with me. You can invite your girl too if you want.”

“Kinga. I’m asking where because I need to know what I’m wearing.”

“For who? Shit, if you walk in there in a T-shirt and fucking bell bottoms I better be the only one looking. I catch somebody else looking that’s their fucking forehead.”

I waved him off and went to move. “That’s a lot.”

“I’m a lot. So you finna stop giving me a hard time or what?”

“I wasn’t giving you a hard time. You just don’t like to be questioned, even if it’s the simplest question.”

“Probably.” Of course he didn’t disagree.

We spent a while longer at the shop talking to Caya then we left. She had also agreed to go tonight, so Kinga sent her the address and time to meet us. I thought we were headed to my place, but we stopped at a mall. There he proceeded to drag me into store after store. He didn't even strike me as the shopping type, but he spent big money on modest looking clothes. In so many words, just because it didn't have the logo printed a million times didn't mean it wasn't worth a stack. I called myself not letting him buy me anything, but that didn't get me far. I was checking out these indigo denim shorts with fringe around the thigh and butt, for a look I figured would work tonight, when he scooted up behind me and told the girl to put my item on his bill. The moment I tried to protest, he gave me a look. That "don't piss me off" look in Kinga language. He was the only person who hated apologies and anything remotely polite showcasing manners.

Once we finished in the clothing store, we moved to the lower level where he had to pick up Aja's earrings. She'd lost one at school one day and he decided to get the earring recreated seeing as how they were her favorite earrings and custom made from her father. While he spoke with his jeweler, I moved about the cases. I'd never been a jewelry girlie besides the gold H necklace I kept around my neck. It wasn't that I didn't like jewelry, because I did, I just didn't like the cheaper pieces aka the shit I could afford. I liked high-end pieces that, even though I had the money, I still wasn't spending for. Though that Cartier Love bangle and ring were calling my name, I just couldn't see myself buying it. Shoot, right now I had the dupes, and as far as I knew, they were fine.

"You got a man, sweetheart?" I heard a voice that didn't belong to Kinga call from behind me.

I didn't respond, just maneuvered away from him.

"I asked if you had a man. If I was your man, you damn sure wouldn't be in here window sho—" he started but his sentence halted. It stopped at the same time I felt a

presence at my side.

“Here.”

I looked in front of me and he was holding out a bag. I accepted it, assuming he was asking me to hold Aja’s earrings.

“My bad, Kinga, I didn’t know this was you.” Ol’ dude’s expression showcased fear when he saw Kinga. He was a pudgy man wearing all one color, resembling an overweight blueberry.

“Nah, you didn’t. But you do now. Move the fuck around.” His voice was final and heavy.

Ol’ boy nearly jumped out of his skin trying to get out of our immediate space. Kinga went back to talking to his jeweler for a while and I continued to look around. When he was finished, he approached me holding a bag and told me it was time to go unless I wanted to go to another store. I didn’t, so we decided to leave.

When we made it to the car, he made sure I was in before putting the bags in the back seat and getting in on the driver’s side.

“Open it.”

Confusion swept my features. “Open what?”

“The bag, Harlem.” His eyes jumped from mine to the cream colored paper bag in my lap back to my eyes. He hadn’t started the car or pulled off. Apparently he wanted me to see something, so I reached into the bag and pulled out a red Cartier box.

I looked from it to him then back down at the box. I opened it and the bangle I had

been eyeing was in the box. My jaw dropped.

“Should be another box in there, baby girl.”

I reached in and pulled out the other box. From the size I could tell it was the ring. “You bought me this?” I asked in disbelief. Had he actually spent this kind of money on me?

“The fuck wouldn’t I?” He screwed his face up, about to say something smart. True Kinga fashion.

“How did you know?”

“When we dropped Aja’s earrings off. You spent the entire time over there in that section. I pay yo’ fine ass a lot of attention.”

“You do, bu?—”

“But nothing. Before you get to telling me that you can’t accept it, just know I’on do grand gestures or any of that cony shit those folks do on those movies you watch. I just know I like you and you damn sure like me, so?—”

“You’re asking me to be your girlfriend?”

“Yo, that’s corny as fuck, because why the fuck I’m asking a question I already know the answer to?”

“Oh, so you already know the answer?” I asked, my eyes relishing in the amusement in his features.

He smirked. “I don’t?”

I sent a grin in his direction, matching his. “Kinga.”

He started the car, then I felt his eyes just before that deep, commanding, earth-hydrating voice filled the car. “You gonna be my girlfriend, Harlem?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now we got that out the way, the next time somebody asks if you got a man, tell his ass yeah and give him my name.”

“And what does saying your name mean?”

“I’m known, ma. Too fucking known and by you belonging to me you known too.” That big ass grin filled his expression. “You’ll see if you have to.”

I nodded, trying my hardest to keep the smile on my face at bay. I couldn’t help it, not only had the man bought me things he noticed I liked weeks ago, but he’d asked me to be his after telling me he wasn’t romantic. Somebody sounded romantic to me.

\* \* \*

“Y ou asked me to be your girlfriend, then brought me to the strip club. Are you trying to tell me something with all this ass walking around here?” I asked, reading the message from Caya. She was letting me know she was on her way up the stairs.

“Nah. It’s my boy’s grand opening. Only ass I’m interested in is yours, Harlem.” He kissed the side of my face, eyes scanning the room. I didn’t understand why I was here, he could have come here without me. Fluorescent lighting filled the space while every six feet was a stripper pole. When he said we were going to a place called Donutz, I really thought he was taking me to a donut shop, but boy was I wrong. This was a strip club that not only sold donuts but was donut-themed. The stage below

each pole was shaped and painted like different donut flavors. Then the menu had donuts to order there too. Had this not been a strip club, filled with naked bitches, I probably would have ordered a donut.

“Good save. When we leave here I really do want to go to a donut shop.”

He laughed. “Try one of the ones in here.” His eyes had yet to land on me because his head seemed to be on a swivel. Even though we were in what was considered a VIP section, there was a lot of movement. After all, it was a grand opening.

I was about to respond, but a heavy voice filled the space. “You came. What’s up, my boy?”

My eyes followed the sound of the voice over the loudness and they landed on a handsome man walking toward a now standing Kinga. They embraced, all smiles, and talked for a minute before Kinga reached for my hand for me to stand.

“Rennix, this is my lady, Harlem. Baby, this is my boy Rennix and he invited us here.” I shook his friend’s hand and congratulated him just as Caya entered the section. She immediately came over to me.

Kinga introduced her to Rennix before they left to get drinks, leaving her and me in the section. I saw the spark between her and Rennix from the moment they shook hands and he asked what she was drinking.

“Girl you strong, ’cause ain’t no way I’d have my man or whatever you call him in here around all this ass.” She looked around, getting comfortable next to me.

I shrugged. “One, I didn’t even know we were coming here and two...shit ain’t no two. He’s supporting his boy.” I shrugged again because she was indeed right. No, I wasn’t insecure, but in a room full of displayed ass and breasts, I couldn’t help but

look his way every so often. The girls in here were stacked and definitely looking for somebody with nice pockets to dance for. Laid back or not, Kinga had better not be stupid enough to accept any type of dance. A bitch better not grind in his direction or anything.

She nodded. “Again, bitch you strong. His boy is fine though. Strong jawline and chocolate just like I like them. Too bad he owns a strip club,” she sort of pouted, confusing me.

“What’s the problem with strip club owners?”

“Too much easy access and purchasable pussy. I’on got time to be snatching hoes off poles. You laid back, but baby I’ma crash... straight the fuck out and ask for the details later.”

I cackled. “Like I don’t already know. Remember what you did to that man’s car when you were pregnant?”

“Yup. Took every fucking mirror he owned. Shit, even broke in that ho and took the visors.” She joined in on my laughter.

We talked back and forth for a whole before the men rejoined us. Kinga took a seat next to me with a small cake plate and a glazed donut. No lie, the donut looked good, but I wasn’t too keen on it.

“Just try it. Motherfucker tastes good and it’s fresh.”

I gave him a skeptical look before picking the donut up and taking a bite. He was right, it tasted so good and was moist.

“You just messed up.” I ate the donut with slow and deliberate chews, attempting to



savor its tastiness.

“How?” He looked confused, sipping from his drink.

“Because now I’m asking you to make me some donuts.”

He chuckled. “I’on know how to do that.”

“I don’t doubt you can learn with a little bit of inspiration.”

“Inspiration, huh?” He glanced over at me before his eyes went back to scanning the room. He was uncomfortable in this space and obviously didn’t want to be here.

I leaned in, pressing my face closer into his space so he heard me better.

“Why are we here if you don’t want to be here?”

“Support. You show up for the ones that show up for you.”

I nodded. “But you seem uncomfortable.”

He chuckled, serious eyes scanning the space once again. “What me and you do at our houses back and forth. Occasionally going out to the little restaurants and shit. That’s my speed. There is too much that can go bad in places like this.”

“And here I thought I was the only boring one in this relationship.”

“Nah, you ain’t. I mean you a lil boring, but so am I, baby.”

For the duration of the night he and I spent most of the time in our own world while Caya’s false flagging ass spent most of her night in the corner with Rennix. I knew

my friend, and even though she talked her shit, she was into that man. Either way Cay would give all that good conversation but by the end of the night be ducking the man. Her past trauma with her baby daddy and overthinking had put her into a constant state of distrust when it came to men.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:43 pm*

K inga

Days later...

The saying “don’t poke the bear” rang heavy in my mind these days. While I tried to keep my irritation at bay and focus on the money, folks kept trying me. All I wanted was a little peace and the fact that everyone kept trying to take it baffled me. I had never been the type to ignore shit, but now I did. That was until I looked up and my streets were burning...fucking literally. Right now I should have been laid up, but instead, at four in the morning, I was staring at the trunk of a blue Crown Vic I had backed in here. I had already given Kyro a pass at Maj’s begging since they were blood but he fucked up and Maj was about to pay for it.

“Open the trunk.” I looked from Big Jay to Ayden.

Ayden nodded then moved toward the trunk of the low level detective I’d paid to pick him up.

When he did that, I moved toward the driver’s side of the car and went into my pocket. I removed the envelope with Detective June’s payment in it and handed it off.

“Preciate you for looking out. Now do me a favor, get me everything you know on Alderman Memphis and that play for mayor he put in.”

“What are you interested in him for, West? He’ll be like all the others, claiming he can clean the streets before they toss him out on his ass too.”

“You probably right but he did something none of them ever did,” I responded, now standing up straight.

“What’s that?”

I gave him a quick glare before I nodded forward. “Get me what you can and be discreet about it.”

He nodded. “I’ll be in touch.”

Once his trunk was empty, he pulled out of the garage and the door was lowered. When I turned back to the festivities, Maj was seated on a stool in the center of the room, usually where Betty, my favorite oldie, sat. She was at the shop getting a good paint job for those summer cruises.

“I told you I’d handle him, Kinga. We didn’t have t?—”

“Shut the fuck up.” I walked up behind then circled him.

He glared at me, angry, but he knew it was best to just shut the fuck up.

“I told you if I had to see you about that nigga again it wouldn’t be pleasant, didn’t I?” I picked up the hexed wrench leaning against the tool shed. In one motion I swung the tool and it made perfect contact with his knee.

He groaned through the pain. “I don’t know where he is, Kinga. I swear.”

The need to put fist to flesh overtook me and I dropped the wrench. My fist made contact with his face several times before I felt a hand on my shoulder.

That only meant one person because nobody in this room was stupid enough to pull

me back.

“He can’t talk if you kill him, Kinga.” Sora’s tone was low and almost pleading.

“Probably not, but somebody who does talk will come to his fucking funeral, right?” I looked over my shoulder at my brother. When the hell had he gotten here?

Maj squirmed, then spit blood from his mouth. “He’s not doing it for himself. He’s loyal to Twan. He told me they got picked up a few weeks back. Agent Beck or something like that. Said to get off, Twan had to give up a big name. Kyro didn’t have anything to do with this. My cous?—”

“You’re still speaking for somebody who knew they’d get you killed. Your blood ain’t shit.”

Sora stepped in while I walked away, trying not to finish his ass off. “Where is he at, Maj? You really want him to get this over with and not prolong it.”

“That’s my bloo—” Maj started.

“And he’s mine. I know how this shit ends. Especially for you.” Sora was trying his hardest to talk some sense into a barely conscious Maj while I was ready to finish his ass off and attend his funeral.

Maj coughed. “My grandmother’s house. He’s hiding out there.”

I laughed, wiping his blood from my hands onto my sweatshirt. “See, I swear that’s all I asked for. None of this had to happen. You made this process longer than it needed to be. Jay, handle that and make sure B comes to pick it up.”

I turned on my feet and began walking toward my office. I heard my brother’s

footsteps behind me which meant he was about to hand off a lecture. “Oh and keep your eyes on Antwan,” I called out.

“Bet.” Ayden’s voice filled the space before I entered my office.

“You planned to kill that man with your hands, Kinga?”

“Probably. Won’t be the first. What you getting at, Sora?”

“You’ve changed. Don’t let somebody tryna bait you take you back there.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, but if I did, I’d agree with you.” I pulled my sweatshirt off and tossed it to the floor. “And this ain’t nothing but your rotten ass father. He wants my head because he thinks that’ll win him mayor.”

“So what do you wanna do about that?”

“Same thing I’ve ever done to any problem that arose. I don’t go picking fights. I handle situations as they arise as I always have.”

I could tell Sora was conflicted. Though Memphis had never been a father to us, in Sora’s eyes, he was still our father. I didn’t think he had ever even held a conversation with Memphis but Sora wasn’t built like me and I didn’t expect him to be. I accepted him for who he was just like he did for me.

“Aja with Harlem?” he asked, a big dumb ass smile indented into his features.

“Who else is she gonna be with? You tryna be funny.”

He laughed. “Maybe, but anyway, me and Blaze are coming over for dinner this weekend. So set that up.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, Blaze wants to meet Harlem and remember Aja is spending the weekend with us. Blaze promised to take her to get her toes and shit done.”

I nodded. “Bet.”

I left the shop a little later, mentally all over the fucking place. Though most of my anger subsided, I still had murder on my mind. Had this been last year, I would’ve gone on a spree, starting with Maj and dropping a body a day until this situation was cleaned up and on channel seven. I didn’t though.

I pulled into my driveway and sat there for a minute, navigating to the internet to find a recipe for doughnuts. I clicked the first one I found. It said homemade glazed doughnuts. I spent a minute reading through the directions, making sure I had everything before I went in and got to working on my dough. Kneading the dough helped me get through all the shit in my mind, all of the things I wanted to do but didn’t.

Three hours later the cake plate had doughnuts on it and I was ready to lay my ass down. Too bad I heard the shower going and decided to step in with her. It was Saturday so I knew for a fact Aja wasn’t up yet.

“I didn’t know you were back until I smelled you baking. Who pissed you off?” she asked as soon as I stepped in.

“Long ass night. You missed me?”

“Course I did. It’s no fun being in your bed without you. I texted you a few times, but you didn’t answer, so I figured you were busy.”

“I was, but I ain’t never too busy for you. Call me next time, baby.” My hands found her hips, pulling her frame against me before turning her around. “Show me how much you missed me, mama.”

“Mhmm.” She did just as I asked, bending over the bench just for me. This right here was why only one body dropped this morning. I was able to come home to heaven like this.

The sight before me was beautiful, so fucking mesmerizing that I couldn’t help but stare at her, gripping my dick.

“Tell me you on something, baby, because ain’t no way I’m a be able to pull out.” I damn near begged, knowing damn well even if she told me she wasn’t I was still finna shoot up the club.

“No, I’m not,” she moaned when I began rubbing my dick against her sopping center. That shit was so pretty my lip hurt from how hard I bit into it.

“You gotta pull ou—” she started but I pushed into her so deep her words became lost. Shit, I didn’t need no words, I was as close to heaven as I could get.

By the time we made it out of the shower, I was dead tired and Harlem had all the energy in the world. Not only that, I heard Aja’s feet in the distance. Shorty was looking for some breakfast and to get on my damn nerves.

“Go to sleep, I got her.”

“You sure?” I asked, pulling my briefs over on my ass, headed in the direction of the bed already.

“Yes, she’s fine. We’ll probably go get something to eat then check on my shop and



the puppies, if that's fine with you."

"Yeah. Call me if you need me."

"Go to sleep. I got this. Just don't get used to me cooking at your house."

I caught her around the waist and pulled her into my embrace. "Too late. I done already got used to you cooking for me. Also, check the cake plate before you go."

\* \* \*

I didn't know when I fell asleep, but my phone ringing against the side of my face interrupted that. I opened my eyes and the room was dark, letting me know it was late. Damn, I had slept the whole day away and something smelled good.

"Yo," I answered, not even thinking about checking to see who could be calling.

"What's up, baby brother? How is everything?" I pulled back and looked at the phone to make sure my ears hadn't been playing tricks on me. It was a number I didn't recognize but only one person called me baby brother even though I hated that shit with a passion.

"Where are you calling from?" I stood to my feet and stretched before moving to the bathroom.

"Around. What's up with you? Everything good?"

"Seems that way. Yo' bitch ass daddy on bullshit right now but nothing I can't handle."

"Memphis? The fu?—"

“Nothing conversation worthy. You wanna talk to your daughter? You know she's been asking me about y'all.”

“Damn I miss my baby. So much that it hurts my soul sometimes but I know if I ain't the best version of myself then I can't be around her. I can't give her what she needs.”

I was glad he couldn't see my face because that right there was a crock of shit. Maybe it made sense in his head, but in mine that shit was flaw... almost like our dog ass mama who ran off too. Now sure she didn't kill our father, but she too needed time to herself and left her kids with her sibling. “I ain't tryna tell you how to parent but at the end of the day shit happens and kids are resilient. I know you feel like you can't face her, but don't lose sight of the fact that this is your flesh. She's gonna love you regardless.” After taking a much needed piss, I listened to him go on and on while I brushed my teeth and washed my face. I was grateful when he settled on his last question.

“Do you think? After everything?”

“Yup. After everything. Now, do you wanna talk to her?” I finished taking care of myself then moved back to my bedroom to put on a shirt and sweats.

“Yeah. Where is she at anyway?”

“Probably in there fucking with Harlem.” I shrugged.

“Who is Harlem?”

“My girl. She spent the day with her because apparently I passed the fuck out,” I explained walking out of my bedroom.

“So you got a girlfriend? Somebody you actual?—”

“Get off that.”

When I entered the living room area, my eyes landed on my baby in the kitchen while Aja sat in front of the TV.

I walked the phone over to her and handed it off. “It’s your pops, shorty.”

She hopped off the couch excited, which brought a smile to my face. She had stopped asking me about them but I knew she missed them. Nobody could go from seeing and being around people they loved and not miss them. Her whole life had transformed, and though I tried to keep her life as normal as possible, I too knew it wasn’t normal.

After handing off the phone I gravitated to the kitchen where it smelled good as fuck. I hovered behind Harlem for a minute before I leaned down and kissed the back of her neck. “She didn’t drive you crazy, did she?”

“No, she’s a good kid and so sweet.”

“Yeah, when she wants something.” I kissed the side of her face.

She laughed. “Like her uncle, huh?”

“Damn, it’s like that? I’m sweet on your ass all the time.” I stepped back and leaned against the counter, taking her in. She had on a scarf type top with her back out and a pair of flared, bootcut jeans. Then her fucking hair. I loved them fucking locks on her, the way they encased her face. Who was I kidding? There wasn’t shit about this woman I didn’t like.

“Thank you for the donuts,” she said, interrupting my thoughts. “You wanna talk

about it?”

“Not right now. I just wanna watch you. Shit is mesmerizing.”

She turned around and looked at me. “Watch me what?”

“Cook. Just like you like cooking for me, I like watching you do it.” Who was I kidding? Err’thing in me wanted to say fuck this dinner and carry her back to my bedroom. We could worry about dinner later. Everything about Harlem made me insatiable. Even when I was dead tired, like this morning, I couldn’t not touch her.

“Stop looking at me like that and come taste this.” She held up a spoon for me to taste whatever was in the big ass pot.

“Can’t help it. I’m ’bout ready to get dinner ready so we can get to dessert and no I ain’t talking about those damn donuts.”

She giggled. “Down, sir, your niece is still very wide awake.”

“That’s cooking too. She has a TV and iPad in her room. You checked on your dogs today?”

“Yeah, they’re all fine. I’m probably gonna take them to the shop with me this week. Get their up to date weights and check in with everything necessary there.”

I nodded.

“Now are you going to come taste this or not?”

I did as she asked, watching her as she pushed the spoon into my mouth. I didn’t know what she put in my mouth, but at this point I didn’t give a fuck. It tasted good.

I leaned down and kissed her because that shit was sexy...so fucking sexy.

“Uncle, my daddy said he’s gonna call later.” Aja entered the kitchen, breaking up the eye contact between me and Harlem.

“Aight.”

“Uncle Sora is at the front door.”

Confusion swept my features as I looked down at Harlem and pecked her lips once more. “Let me see what he wants.”

When I reached the door I was expecting it to be just my brother on some hovering shit but at the sight of Blaze as well I was all the way thrown off.

“Told you we were coming by for dinner.” Sora walked in behind Blaze who I hugged immediately as they entered.

“You ain’t say today.”

“Oh, I didn’t? Well shit, we are here now and it smells good in here. What sis cooking?” Sora’s ass was loud which brought my niece running to where we were.

While she hugged her Uncle Sora, I walked Blaze into the kitchen to meet Harlem. When we got there, Harlem was lining shells up in a silver pan.

“Baby, this is Blaze, Sora’s fiancé. Blaze, this is Harlem.”

They smiled at one another, greeting each other in that way women did before Blaze scooted onto the stool in front of the island where Harlem was cooking. For a moment I just watched them talk back and forth. It happened easily, no force

necessary because their energies weren't the same but definitely similar.

"You're spoiling him. Like for real," Blaze said, sipping from the glass of water in front of her.

"And? She supposed to spoil me 'cause I'ma spoil the fuck outta her regardless." I looked up and made eye contact with an amused Harlem.

Blaze laughed. "Exactly what the hell have you done with Kinga? 'Cause you sir are somebody different. Gotta be. And when the hell did you start making donuts?"

The night went well. Even though I wasn't expecting my brother and Blaze, I was glad they came. I also fucked with the fact that Harlem easily fit into my family dynamic. Though things happened fast, it was what it was.

"I really enjoyed your family today."

"Good because they liked you almost as much as I do."

"Almost, huh?" she asked.

My hand found the base of her neck, savoring the feel of her skin under my grasp. Blaze was right over dinner. Harlem did have me spoiled, so fucking spoiled that ever since the first time I laid eyes on her I had been consumed with the need to own everything about her.

She craned her neck to the side. "Why is this so easy?"

"What?" I leaned forward, pressing my lips against the side of her face.

"This... me and you. Why is it so easy for me to be like this with you and you to be

like this with me? I may sound pessimistic but isn't anything easy too?—"

"Everything about this is new to me, but I want you. I ain't never wanted nobody the way I want you. Even though you came to my spot showing your ass. Shit, that made me want your stubborn ass even more."

"You have me...right?" She leaned forward, lips against mine. It wasn't a kiss yet, just contact.

"Tighter than I got anything else."

"Good. I like it like that." Her lips rubbed against mine with each word right before contact turned into a very heavy kiss. Before Harlem, I had never been the type to be putting my lips on anybody. However, with Harlem, I couldn't keep my lips from any part of her body. She was my favorite flavor, made especially for me.

"I wanna tell you something." She melted against me, face in my neck as she spoke. She didn't wait for me to respond but instead continued speaking. "I had an abortion before." Sniffles alerted me to her headspace.

"He knows?" I found myself asking without emotion. I didn't know why it affected me but it did.

"No. He doesn't. I don't regret it either. Toward the end, our situation was too toxic. I never wanted to bring a child into a situation like that."

I rubbed her back.

"Does that make you think differently of me?"

"Nah. I ain't never gonna fault you for what you did outta trauma. Just don't let that

shit affect how you make decisions when it comes to me and you.”

She lifted and looked at me with wet lids and puffy eyes. “I don’t worry about that because my former situation is not this one. They don’t even feel the same.”

“Good. He been contacting you since you blocked him?”

She laughed. “How would he do that, Kinga?”

“Shit, I don’t know. I’m ’bout my shit. You ever block me and I’ll send CashApp requests with unlimited notes. Sending a dollar a sentence.”

She chortled like I was cracking a joke but I was dead ass serious.

“You’re a mess.”

“Probably, but I meant that.”

“No, but honestly, I heard he has come by the shop a few times, but each time I wasn’t there. I was either home or with you.”

“Where you belong. Hopefully your boy gets the hint because I’ll trunk his ass out on Madison for a few days to help him.”

She continued to laugh but I still had yet to do so. I was so serious but I loved that innocence she had. She didn’t have to see me in the same light as everyone else because she wasn’t everyone else. She was where I found peace I didn’t know existed.



Harlem

I had never been one of those girls who stayed in their man's skin for days at a time, then I met Kinga. It was like overnight I transformed into the chicks I used to talk about. I didn't care though. The way I felt about Kinga sent shudders down my spine. He had an effect on me that nobody else could. With him I felt weightless in a world full of weight and responsibility. The problem was I was too obsessed with being in his space. So moments like this, when he was at work and I was at work, I missed him. We hadn't talked since earlier when he checked in. He was pretty busy then, I could tell by the way he was telling somebody to hand him a hex while also asking me what dinner was tonight. We got off the phone shortly after. For the most part I spent the day doing little things around the shop and also took some pictures of the puppies. There were five of them. Two were standard and the other three deep variations of merle. After this litter I was set to take a break before Tato's litter in the spring. I needed the break too, as I had finally unloaded the last two puppies from her previous litter. Besides the five puppies at my home, I also still had Bleu, Tato, and Tilly. I needed to get used to having three dogs before I allowed myself to take on another litter.

A knock at my office door made me look up from the puppy crate toward the door. I wasn't expecting anybody, and Elinor knew not to let anyone back here, or so I thought.

"Who is it?" I called out, irritated by the fact that I was caught off guard by whoever was on the other side of my door.

"It's me, Har." The door opened a second after the voice I knew all too well sounded

off. Shit, why was it him? What the hell was he doing here?

The door opened and in walked Zax. The very man I hadn't missed since I blocked him. He'd been an out of sight, out of mind thing.

He walked in with an expression just as sorry as I knew him to be. "Did you block me, baby?" I was grateful he kept his distance.

"Yeah. I think we both have to move on." I said that but was really hoping he got the hint that I was done... well, I had been done.

"Both have to move on," he repeated the last part of my sentence, crossing his arms over his chest. He seemed to be in disbelief.

I didn't respond. Instead I put the puppy back into the encasement with his mom and siblings. Today I only had Tilly and her pups with me today while Tato and Bleu were home.

"You've moved on?" he asked after too much silence had passed.

"What does it matter, Zax?"

"It matters because I still love you and I thought we were fixing this. Weren't we? Tell me I'm not imagining shit here, Harlem." He sounded defeated but I knew it was just an act. He was the type of man to play on emotions to make you feel what he felt or feel bad about your decisions if they differed from his.

"I thought that's what I wanted, but it isn't."

"What changed?"

“Everything. You asked for a break and made a baby. You let me know that this wasn’t what I wanted or needed. Then I met him. I can’t allow myself to be roped into what I don’t want. I don’t want this,” I responded honestly.

“And if we wouldn’t have taken a break, would you feel this way?”

“Probably not but not only did you manipulate me, cheat on me, and make a baby on me, you expect me to just take you back because you feel like you wanna be with me. Go to hell with all of that.” I shook my head.

“I never chea?—”

“None of that matters anymore because I moved on. And I’m happy. I wish the same for you.”

“Who is he? Somebody you been had around? You played with my feelings. You never intended to forgive me, did you?” He glared at me in a way I had never seen. His face was bunched up, brows knitted together tighter than a yarn sweater. He was pissed.

“I did. Then you had a baby. A constant reminder that I wasn’t enough for you. I wouldn’t dare allow myself to resent a child who didn’t ask to be here behind a man who didn’t think enough of me to wrap it the fuck up.”

“Harlem. This could hav?—”

“Yo, I have heard enough of this shit. My sister is done with your square ass, now let it go and keep it moving. From what I hear, you got a baby to be preparing for.” OA’s voice made me dip my head around Zax. There he stood, at six feet three, against the snug doorway with irritation radiating off his being.

Zax turned around and his attention went to OA. He then extended that sweaty ass hand of his. “Oh, what’s up, OA? How you do?—”

“Get your ass up outta here before I beat your ass in here. I told you if you hurt my sister that was what would happen.”

Zax jumped, pulled his hand back, and looked from me to OA. “It’s a misund?—”

“Get ghost. Now don't come back here.”

Zax did as he was told immediately, peeping that nothing he could say would calm OA down, and not only that, but I wouldn’t be calling him off. When it was just OA and me in the room, I felt his eyes, letting me know something was on his mind.

“Are you talking or staring? Mama taught you that wasn’t polite, didn't she?” I asked, hating to be under his heavy eyes.

He chuckled. “How long have you been messing with Kinga?”

“For a minute. Why? How do you know him?” Since we were in the questioning mood, I figured I’d get mine out there as well.

“In the business I’m in, I know a few people. How did you meet him?” He moved around my office, taking in the photos he had seen a million times before. This was his way of avoiding my eyes.

“Getting my car fixed. Why does it feel like I’m under interrogation? You wanna tell me what’s up?”

He finally turned to face me then shook his head. “Nothing to tell. I’m just tryna figure out how you went from one side of the spectrum to the other. Square to...

Never mind. Do you know what you getting yourself into?"

I shrugged. It wasn't a matter of knowing what I was getting into. Shit, I had already gotten into him and I knew my ol' infatuated ass wasn't going nowhere unless he gave me a reason to. "No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

He shook his head. "Ol' smart mouth ass. Ain't nothing I can say, just be safe and be aware of what you getting yourself into."

His eyes held what his lips wouldn't utter. OA wasn't the type to tell me what to do or not but he wasn't the type to say I told you so either. I saw many similarities in OA and Kinga, so many that I wondered what OA actually meant. Did he speak from experience, seeing as how he'd put Rose, his girlfriend before Toya, through so much between his street dealings and the other girls.

"Does he know you my sister?"

"Uh... I don't know. I don't go around throwing my brother's name out. What is with you men and y'all's names? Who y'all supposed to be?" I laughed my question off, knowing damn well names held weight.

OA laughed. "Yeah, aight. Anyway, Toya is throwing a party for your nephew. She wants us all to be there and claims my sister ain't responding to her messages."

"'Cause I ain't. That's your broad, OA. I'on much like her and she doesn't like me either, no hard feelings. For my nephew, I'ma show up, but she acts like I gotta chill with her or be friends with her to be in his life."

OA laughed. "You know how she is. Shorty just be tripping."

"Yeah, she does, and like I said, I love my nephew, but I'm not dealing with all that."

You said it yourself, she does too much. Talk to her, OA. I wanna be at my nephew's party but I'm not kissing no ass." I really didn't like Toya at all, seeing as how she started out as my brother's side piece while he had a girlfriend. The situation was so messy but I steered clear, because as much as I liked Rose, I didn't respect that she allowed him to have other women while they were together. She followed that dumb ass "he knows where home is" ideology, and in the end, it bit her in the ass. OA proved to have a few homes .

"Aight, man. I'll talk to her."

I laughed at the stress he displayed. This was good for him.

My brother and I talked for a while longer, him talking shit and being funny as always before he had to leave to take care of something. I had a few more hours at the shop, then I headed home. I didn't know if Kinga and Aja would be over but I knew what I had planned. I was going home, devouring that last piece of cake in my fridge, and dealing with the pups. Sis was exhausted...sis was me.

After making it home, I settled into my living room, deciding to lounge for the rest of the evening. I wasn't surprised when about an hour in I received a call from none other than Kinga. I half expected that much.

"Yo, you ain't sleep, is you?" he asked.

"No, I'm relaxing. Pups are fed and the dogs are asleep. Peaceful bliss. Why, where are you?"

"Leaving Sora's spot. Aja stayed, as expected. I'm tryna come and be a part of that peace you talking about."

I smiled. "You're welcome. As long as you're coming through to spread peace and

not be on that brute shit.”

He chuckled. “I’m going to spread a lot more than peace but we can align that shit when I walk in the door. Until then just talk to me on this drive though.”

I smiled at the request. “I can do that. How was your day?”

“Long but short at the same time. I’m working on a seventy-one Chevy convertible. Shit was smooth but ol’ boy went the cheap way rather than coming to me when he first needed the work done.”

While he talked about the car, I googled it so I’d at least have some sort of idea. “What do you mean?”

“He needed his steering column replaced. I gave him a price and I guess that price was too high for him, so he went elsewhere. Now that has him back in my shop with more problems than he started with.”

“Dang. You sound like you enjoyed it though.”

“I did, sit that’s my dream car lowkey. Hell yeah I’m up for working on it.”

“Then why not buy yourself one?”

“Because I wanna build it from scratch. That way I’ll know what’s under my hood rather than assuming and being clueless about what I have like some of these other fools.”

I nodded. I actually enjoyed hearing him go on and on about his cars and working on them because they were what made him happy.

K inga

Days later...

My eyes devoured the lilac, two-door, nineteen seventy Chevelle sitting in the middle of my garage. The owner was an older man who came to me every spring to get his check and make sure it was ready for the summertime cruises. He was like clockwork, getting his fabrication done during the winter and having the vehicle ready to speed through the streets before Easter. It wasn't a Chicago summer if the old schools didn't bring folks together with loud ass music and random meetups. When I was out in these streets crazy, I lived for a good meetup, but then motherfuckers brought the guns and it wasn't the same. The last thing I needed was to catch a bullet in my oldie. Then I'd have to get it cleaned, fix the hole, and get my damn self-stitched up. It wasn't worth it, not in my eyes. That was why I never kept the same car and made sure to keep what I was gonna drive on the low. I didn't trust niggas, that crab in the barrel mentality was real in the streets. Nobody ever wanted the next to do better than them.

"What are you gonna do with it, boss?" Ayden asked from the side of me.

"Tune it up, make sure everything is working. Also make sure the air system I installed last summer is still working."

"You think it ain't."

"Nah, not that all. You know how these old motherfuckers are though. They ain't made for the AC anyway. We forced it in there. I make it a habit of keeping that up to



date.”

Ayden nodded. “You’re a genius with this shit.”

I was about to respond to him but a knock at the door made me turn around. Upon doing so I saw a ghost, or maybe my brain was thinking too far in advance. He’d be a ghost at some point because in my life I was giving him an out.

“The fuck you doing here?” Deadly eyes sat on the aged fifty-year old. If I didn’t think this was a way to bait me, he’d be in the trunk of something. I threw my head to the side, telling Ayden to give me a minute.

He walked past my father, leaving the garage space and closing the door behind him.

“Good to see you too, son.” Memphis greeted me like we were just family members who hadn’t spoken in a while. He approached the car I was checking out and circled it. “You were always good at legitimate work. Good ol’ grease monkey work, like your uncle.” That was my indication he was indeed here to bait me.

“I don’t give a shit about your words. State your reason for being here before I have one of the niggas I pay throw you up outta here in that K&G ass suit.”

He tapped his tongue against the roof of his mouth like my words were a tipping point for him. “For years I have allowed you to exist out here in these streets, my streets, because of my affection for your mother. But now it needs to stop. I need my streets clean so I ca?—”

My laughter spilled from my lips, halting the rest of his statement. He stood there awkwardly, glaring at me like he was insulted. The laughter dried up and I stood up straight in front of his bitch ass. “So you can run for mayor? And think you somebody? Yeen shit but a country ass fool in a linen suit thinking you any better

than me. Do you want these streets? Take them from me, bitch.”

It was his turn to laugh. The laughter was different though. While mine was from pure amusement, his was rooted in anger he tried to mask. He then stepped closer to me, making sure I was the only person who’d hear what he was about to say.

“I will squash you. Every dime you’ve made in this city has been because I allowed you to, but watch. What father gives, father takes back,” he gritted.

“Then do that. You are doing too much talking for somebody with power, bro. Flex that shit and remember every action has a consequence. Now if you’ll excuse me, I got shit to do.” I moved past him, making sure to connect my shoulder with his.

Without another word, he left and I was fuming. To walk in here and try to threaten me was bold. He knew I wanted him dead, so he walked in here by himself. Dangling meat in front of the beast.

Just as fast as Memphis left the shop was as fast as he was off my mind. I wasn’t one to ponder over things. I knew what had to be done, shit I had a mental to-do list, and as time went on, I’d surely be checking some things off. In due time.

Ayden re-entered the area.

“Check in with June about that package I’m waiting on.”

He nodded, then turned to leave.

I spent the next few hours under the car, attempting to ease the irritation I carried. For the most part, being under the well-kept oldie did just that, but my mind kept going back to all of this mess that had seemingly come out of nowhere. Demi played both sides. When Maj said Demi’s last name the other day, I realized it. Everybody wanted

so badly to pull me back into the ways that almost landed me behind bars last time. What they didn't realize was that I was and would always be that nigga, but I was more strategic with mine than I used to be. I handled this shit cooler than the mob and hit motherfuckers where it really hurt. I didn't front my moves, instead I allowed all my actions to speak for themselves.

I was on my way to Harlem when I glanced down at the console of my car and saw she was calling me. I thought she was asleep considering I hadn't heard from her since earlier when she was complaining to me that she was exhausted. She had taken the puppies to get their shots.

"Yeah, baby?" I answered, ready to find my way between them thighs. Lately, for my anger to subside, I needed to bake then get between those pretty browns.

"Two people just broke into my house. I see it through Alexa, " she whispered into the phone and I heard her clearly. At the same time I mashed on the gas to get to her. I was right up the street.

"Where are you at?"

"The puppy room. I hear them moving around."

"I'm almost there. Stay on the phone. You got something with you?" I asked, hitting a left at the red light in traffic. None of that traffic shit applied to me right now. Hearing the fear in her voice gave me tunnel vision.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Good, I'm coming in." I pulled into her driveway and barely parked the car before I was hopping out with my piece in hand. I entered her crib like a skilled SWAT member. I caught the first goofy with his back to me, going through her purse she

always set on the counter when she came in. Clocking him upside his head, I dropped him quickly. Step by step I moved down the hall, checking the first bathroom, then her closet. It was at that moment I laid eyes on the second one. I didn't think, I just pulled the trigger and dropped him. To be careful, I checked the rest of the house before knocking on the door of the puppy room.

"You can come out, baby girl." As soon as I said that the door was open and she jumped into my arms. She was shaking, shit, so scared that it pissed me off.

"Go pack your shit. You coming with me tonight."

"What about Tilly and the pupp?—"

"Pack all that shit. We leave in thirty-five minutes." She allowed me to put her down and I turned around, thinking fast. My first move was to right the front door that had been kicked in. Then I called B. After running down the pickup, I went through her garage and opened it so I could back my car in.

A minute later I was backed in with the trunk open and the garage door lowered. I reentered through the kitchen and went to ol' boy out cold on her floor. I dragged him to the trunk and tossed him in. Before I closed the trunk, I checked his pockets. The only thing in them was his wallet, Harlem's wallet, and his phone. I pocketed all of that, then zip-tied his ass 'cause I didn't need any surprises.

I sent Harlem and her dogs to my house while I had B clean ol' boy up from her floor while I took the liberty of fixing the door. The entire time I did, I was itching to get to ol' boy in the trunk. I was about to take him back to the shop but I couldn't risk it. Memphis had already been there already, meaning somebody was watching it. That meant I had to visit old stomping grounds.

I was twenty-one when I bought a church. Maybe not the institution that opened

every Sunday for worship but a white brick building with the bell and cross above. To me it was just a building, but to this city it was one of the oldest religious buildings to exist. Of course I didn't own it in my name but under a few shell companies. It was supposed to be a youth center, to save kids similar to me, but I hadn't gotten around to it. The building became utilized for other things and the basement I called the tombs was where things and people disappeared. It was connected to a few different untraceable tunnels throughout the city.

“What are you gonna do to me?” Ol' dude I now knew as Mal asked. I'd gone through his wallet in the car while I waited on Big Jay to pull up. He was currently zip-tied in the corner of the old basement.

Laughter escaped before words could. “The fuck you think? You came at mine. You think you were 'bout to walk outta that with yo' life?” Anger pinballed through my being at the thought of what could have happened had I not gotten there when I did.

“I didn't know that though,” he growled, from the pain he was in. After I capped him, I just tossed him in the trunk. I wasn't getting him any medical attention because I had every intention of taking his life and making it painful.

“The fuck you mean you didn't know that? Who sent you to her crib?”

“Mannn. This fool named Hari. He said she was an easy mark. We weren't gonna do anything to her.”

“But rob her right? Get the fuck outta here.” The name Hari sounded familiar. I was willing to bet that was her nothing ass brother. When I had my phone in my hand, I found Harlem's contact and clicked it. By now she should have been settled in.

“Hello. Are you on your way now?”

“Not yet, baby, but soon. What did you say your brother on your pop’s side name was again?” I already knew about OA. Shit, me and him ran in the same circles at a point. Long story short, we both copped from the same connection at a point before I decided the substance game wasn’t my cup of tea.

“Hari. Why? Did he do th?—”

“Nope. I don’t want you thinking about this. Let me put it on my brain.”

“Okay.”

We spoke for a while longer before hanging up.

“I swear I didn’t know she was affiliated with you, man. I swear.” He bitched up when he saw me turn around.

“That’s cool too.” I pulled my piece from my back and ended life for him right there. I no longer wanted to inflict prolonged amounts of pain on him anymore. Hari had used him as a pawn in an attempt to hurt his sister. My fury would be directed at him.

“You want me to call Ayden?” Jay asked, attempting to see what I was on.

“Nope. I’ll have B pick him up.” I left the tombs with Big Jay in tow. I pulled ol’ boy’s phone out of my pocket when we got back to ground level. I easily found Hari’s number in Mal’s phone. He didn’t have a password on the cheap ass Android, which was stupid of him, because I could’ve easily touched his family from all the pictures of them he had in it.

When I made it to my car, I read through the messages, seeing Hari had given up everything he knew about Harlem to Mal and whoever the other one was. He’d even told them where her shop was if she wasn’t home. Suddenly it hit me that robbing her

was the last thing on either of their minds and that sent fire through my veins...even more than I already had.

I messaged Hari, asking where he was from Mal's phone.

Hari was quick to drop a pin. Dumbass.

"You need me to ride, boss?" Jay alerted me to his presence as I rounded my car to get in.

"Nah, you good. Call B. I'm on something." I was moving too fast, adrenaline-laced blood on a mission. It took me all of five minutes to ease onto the overcrowded block that just so happened to belong to me.

I messaged him, telling him to meet me on the curb because I was tryna unload the stuff I'd gotten from her crib and leave. After he responded okay, I looked up from the phone and looked for him. As soon as I saw his stupid ass step out, I stood on the gas. He didn't get the chance to step back on the curb. Because when he realized he was the target, he was already under the fucking car. Then, to make matters worse, I threw it in reverse and went back over him.

The car was in park when I hopped out, moving toward him groaning in agony. "Ouch, man, damn." Right now it was his turn to feel that adrenaline because I had crushed everything inside of him.

"Nah, bitch, what you do that for?" I asked, standing in front of him.

"Kinga, man what did I do?"

"You sent your homeboys after your sister, right?"

He could barely focus on me as he held onto his chest, adrenaline thinning. “Yeah. Bitch thinks she’s better than me.”

I chortled. “That’s because she is, bitch.”

His eyes tripled in size. “You know her?”

“Sure the fuck do. You sent your boys after mine, now I’m a make sure you feel that shit for the rest of your life. You better hope you die tonight, ’cause if you don’t I’m a kill you err’ time I see you. Harlem doesn’t exist to you or your father, if I find out either one of y’all reached out to her, I’ll paint this block with your plasma. That’s a promise too.”

Out of breath and probably dying by now, he attempted to nod but that failed him. He passed out a few seconds later. He probably had internal bleeding going on.

I noticed one of the dime boys that worked for me a few feet away.

“Ay, Keem. Call an ambulance for him.”

“Bet.” His phone was to his ear and I was climbing back into my car seconds later. The only thing on my mind now was getting home to Harlem. While I was doing everything, she was on my mind constantly, somehow reminding me to not go too overboard like I wanted to. I wasn’t used to things like this, considering somebody else in my actions. I started with Aja and now it was Harlem.

I half expected her to be asleep when I walked in the door. She wasn’t. Instead she was sitting on the sofa staring at the TV. She wasn’t watching it. Shit, it seemed like it was more so watching her.

Me entering made her jump slightly before she forced a smile in my direction.



“You’re back.”

“Yeah, I live here, beautiful.”

She nodded, blinking a few times. “I set the dogs up in their crates in your basement. I hope you don’t mind.”

I shook my head. “I’m on mind anything but the bullshit you allow to sit on your mind. Fuck everything you worried about ’cause I told you I’d handle it. Now come step in this shower with me.” I didn’t wait for her rebuttal. Instead I left the living room, headed toward my bedroom.

When I entered, my eyes landed on her duffle in the chair across from my bed and the hot hair bonnet she tried and failed miserably at trying to wear to sleep. My eyes landed on about eight things that weren’t mine in my bedroom and for some reason I found comfort in it. Seeing her things nearly integrated with mine let me know she wasn’t going anywhere, that I truly possessed this woman.

I made a pitstop in my closet to put my gun up and empty my pockets. In the distance I heard the shower water come on. Another smile indented itself into my features. Just like I knew I had her, she had me.

I opened the door and stood there for a moment, admiring everything within view.

“You gonna stand there and stare, letting all that cold air in here, or are you going to join me?”

Stepping into the shower, I closed the door behind me and pulled her back against me.

“What are you worried about?”

“You. What did you go out there and do?”

“Keeping it a buck with you, I went out there and did a lot, but it’s nothing for you to be worrying about. It’s me and you, fuck seeing where this is going. It’s already there. Now we are on this journey together.”

“Mhmm.”

I sat back on the bench and closed my eyes. I wasn’t lying when I said I went out there and did a lot. Thing was, I wouldn’t take shit I did back. As a matter of fact, I’d do it all again in a heartbeat because that was just what you did for those you cared about.

The feel of her hands on my knees forcing them apart made me lift my head and open my eyes. The sight before me had my dick bricked. She was on her knees, water dripping from her hair and body, putting those same delicate hands to my shaft. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t see it coming because I did when we locked eyes and she began to stroke me up and down with one hand while the other massaged my balls. Shit.

I watched her and she watched me while she took the head of my dick into her mouth, teasing me as she swallowed inch by inch. The way her eyes were locked on me was amatory, simply mind shattering. With methodic movements she pulled back then sent my shit right back down her throat, repeating this motion and swallowing around me until I was sending my kids down her throat. Shit, that was just the first one.

She was on her feet, smirking, when I finally caught my breath, probably thinking I was done until she watched me stroke my shit back to life with the sight of her body before me. “Get up here,” I demanded in a throaty tone.

She did as she was told, straddling my lap, while my hands now rested on her hips. She thought she was in control, but she wasn’t. She began easing down onto me,

trying to pace herself, but I pulled her down and buried my face in her neck, holding her in place. She fit me so fucking perfectly, so snug that I knew this was mine... Shit, she was mine!

\* \* \*

“What I’m saying is, if you keep doing reckless shit, at some point it’s gonna catch up with you, bro.” Sora had arrived at the house early to give me a lecture. I wasn’t even two hours out of the pussy when he called, talking about opening the door.

“It wasn’t reckless. It was retaliation. I handled mine for mine.” I occupied a seat at the island, eating the omelet Harlem had made for me before she left this morning.

“Bro, you know that’s not the point, but you hit that man with a car, then reversed and stood there. That’s some sadistic shit.”

“Almost as sadistic as sending people to his own sister’s place to do God knows what to her.”

“Who did that?” For once his know-it-all ass was thrown for a loop.

I glanced around my kitchen, eyes landing on the chilled bottle of water in front of me. I explained the situation to him only for him to be mugged up afterwards.

“I just know your invoice from B is a couple grand this month. You’ve had him all over the city.”

I chuckled because he was right. “Bout three more and I’ll go back to the unproblematic life.”

Sora laughed. “Yeah right.”

“I’m serious. I don’t make money when I’m beefing with random motherfuckers about bullshit.”

“I hear you, but bro, it seems like you enjoy this shit.”

“I do but I also know when to stop myself. I’m getting older, so I have less time to be out here reckless in the streets.”

“I hear you. I’m glad you are saying that. I’d love to stay here and talk to your grumpy ass but I can’t. Blaze is on her shit, talking about ordering food. I hate that shit with a passion and she knows it. When her and Aja get to talking about pizza and shit, it’s a done deal for me. I gotta head out. Be easy.” He was gone seconds later.

I laughed because he sounded like a man being bullied in his own home. I couldn’t laugh alone because that was exactly what I was going through on the days when Aja wasn’t helping bully him in his own home. At this point I realized shorty was a lil opportunist. I was getting back into removing the excess fluid from a fucked up job my customer called himself doing. He was liable to have fucked up his whole motor had he not brought this shit to me when he did. The fucked up thing was even though he’d brought it to me, I still had to not only drain it but also bleed his brakes. It was almost like this fool was trying to down his fucking car.

I was about thirty minutes into that when my cousin came to mind. Nine was the only person I could not only talk shop with but who, most of the time, understood when my brain went into its darkest corners. Well maybe not only him these days, because Harlem had become a safe space for me, even when I didn’t explicitly tell her about things. Though she assured me she would never look at me in a different way, I still kept shit PG for her, only speaking on business and obvious shit. I wasn’t giving her a reason to leave me alone other than the obvious. I had a lot with me, and truthfully I was a hood dude. With who she was, she could have done a lot better than me, but I was also selfish and not letting her go. Instead, I found myself looking for ways to

make sure she never felt the desire to go. I'd never admit it aloud, but that would fuck me up, and any nigga she tried to entertain wouldn't make it past the greeting. All forehead vents.

I pulled out my phone and called Blaze, since she was lowkey the closest thing I had to a sister. Out of nowhere I wanted to do something special for Harlem. She was the type of woman who deserved random moments like that.

"Good afternoon, Kinga. To what do I owe the pleasure?" she answered, her usual chipper self.

"Shit. I'm thinking about planning something special for Harlem. Need your input."

In true female fashion, she gushed on the phone. Gushed as in made a squealing sound followed by a whole bunch of dramatics. Gushed as in a word I'd learned from Harlem and saw the definition of when she physically showed me in an excited moment.

"Of course! Yes!" She was excited, so damn excited I should have known she'd have me running all over the damn world for two hours then bossing me around for the next three like I worked for her.

"This is so sweet. When did you have the time to plan this?" Harlem gushed when she got home. She was looking around the yard at my handiwork with the help of Blaze. Before she was stationary and pregnant, she did her thing in the realm of party planning. Though it wasn't a party, it was something. She had me prop my phone up on the patio while I put all of the shit out. I had never done anything like this in my life for anybody but when it came to Harlem a lot of things were first nature. They required no thought, just deliberate action on my part. That type of shit she could get out of me because she always deserved it. I wanted her to know I saw her and regardless of anything I was here and would do the necessary to ensure her world

remained perfect. After everything transpired at her crib, she was a lil fucked up, but I wasn't about to let her stay that way. I meant what I said, none of that belonged on her mind.

"It's just pillows and lights, Harlem."

"No, it's more than that. It's the act and the fact that you thought about me." She turned around and hugged me. "This means more to me than you know."

"Good, 'cause the way Blaze was talking crazy to me while I set this shit up had me second guessing." I led her over to the white picnic blanket. On it sat a wooden coffee table that held our dinner for the night. Baby girl might've hated eating out most nights but she loved a good deep dish, so I grabbed that and hot wings.

She giggled. "This is really beautiful."

I sat down on the blanket and pulled her down with me. I moved the pillows so they were positioned behind me.

"You do this relationship thing well for someone who doesn't do relationships."

"This ain't relationship stuff. This is just me seeing you and appreciating what I see."

She nodded. "Well thank you for that but speaking of seeing each other. I saw you earlier. You wanna tell me why you baked early this morning?"

"Nothing for you to be worried about." I shrugged it off.

"Nope. I'm not worried. I want you to talk to me. What's on your mind?"

I looked at her for a moment. I had never given a fuck about how anybody looked at

me but the way she looked at me mattered. I never wanted her to see me the way the streets did. “I start telling you this type of shit, you gonna look at me differently.”

“Not possible.”

“It is. I’m a dark nigga and I already told you what you are to me.”

“You’re not that dark. You care about people and you go the extra mile for those you love. You carry more than most.” Those big ass eyes of hers were on me, urging me to spill my mind.

“But shouldn’t I? I’ve done a lot in this world. Some shit I’ll never utter. I put too much bad shit out there to not d?—”

“Life is about choices. Nobody is perfect or without flaws. Maybe you have done some bad but I refuse to believe you did so out of malice or some evil heart. You don’t have that. You are a good man, Kinga. You may have a few YN tendencies, even though your age is spilling into big bro territory. I choose to believe your heart is in the right place with your actions.”

My eyes loved on her for a moment while silence filled the space around us. With her words and the way she looked at me, one thing was evident. “I’on believe in magic and all that other stuff, but you were sent to me. Had to have been because I’on think I ever had anybody look at me like you do.”

“How do I look at you?”

“Like I ain’t as fucked up as I know I am.”

“Cause you aren’t. You are perfect to me.”

“Nah, I’m not but for you I’m shooting to be damn near. Now eat this nasty ass pizza so we can gaze at these stars and I can get you in the house and gaze at that ass.” I winked in her direction.

She cackled. “You are so nasty. And I told you that you have the perfect view back here.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

As the night spilled over, she found her way into my lap, gazing up at the stars. Baby was corny like that, but because she was mine and I fucked with her the way I did, I was the same.



Harlem

I was at the shop minding my business when OA busted in the door like the damn police. Of course he couldn't be that but he had the demeanor though. Had he not chosen the path he did, he could have been a cop or even somebody's sergeant. OA was born with a natural type of authority which, when I was younger, got on my nerves. But as an adult I was somewhat grateful for it.

"When were you gonna tell me Hari's bitch ass tried to bring somebody to your spot?"

"I wasn't, because I handled it, O."

"You cursing his ass out isn't handling it, Harlem. Me going to put my feet on his ass is."

"But what would you beating him up solve?"

"He'd learn to stop fucking around with you, that even though y'all share the same sperm donor, you're my fucking sister and I don't play that."

I laughed. "Your sister, huh?"

"You laugh, but as soon as I see his ass I'm stomping his ears onto the same side of his fucking face."

I laughed and focused on my computer. "In other news, I heard through Mama that

your son's party was cancelled. What are you doing?"

"Hell naw. She was trying to be on some spoiled shit and I wasn't having it. How the fuck you tryna have his party and an adult hangout at the same time. That doesn't work for me. If it's about him, then let it be about him."

I nodded, listening to him.

"Anyway, when we were little it was none of this. Money and big ass parties didn't make a birthday. Things were old fashioned, cakes or cupcakes, family, pizza, and the same ass happy birthday song. Money and superficial shit doesn't mean shit to actually giving your child birthday experiences."

"True. You remember that year you put my cake in my face and Pops beat your ass?" I asked. I always referred to his father as my own because he treated me as his child and was truly the only father I knew. Joseph wasn't shit to me but a poor ass excuse of a man who only showed face after I was too old to need anything from him.

"Man, do I? He beat my ass every time he thought about it."

I laughed, thinking back to moments when things were much less difficult. Before Pops died, everything made sense. Of course OA tried to step up, but it was different. Pops had this way of silently being present. His death was felt, even though we all knew it was coming from the day he refused to fight the cancer looming in his body.

"I'm here, bitch. Now let's go because the last thing I need is to be late for my fill-in. You know Tanya don't play around." Caya's voice interrupted the moment and alerted us to her presence at the door. "Oh hey, OA, with your fine ass." She mumbled the last part but I made out what she said clearly.

"Caya," I said in a scolding manner. She extended her hands like she didn't know

why I was scolding her.

“What’s good, Caya baby?” he greeted, pulling her into his space before she could respond. “You finally gonna gimme a chance or keep playing it cute with my sister?”

“Nah, OA, you know I ain’t like that. You’re fine and all but I damn sure ain’t finna get into it with my best friend over your ho ass.” She squirmed out of his embrace, coming over to where I was.

He chuckled. “Damn that’s cold.”

“No hard feelings but I’ll end up busting all your windows and getting into it with Ms. Edna over her son.”

Now that made me laugh because I knew my best friend like the back of my hand. She was true to her word. I had gotten plenty of calls from her letting me know she’d busted either her baby daddy’s or whatever boyfriend at the time windows.

My brother stayed for a little longer while I prepared to leave with Caya. She and I left my spot about ten minutes later headed to get our nails done. Instead of driving, we walked since the shop was less than five minutes from mine.

“So, Rennix...” she started as soon as we were seated in the chairs being passed our mimosas.

“What about him?” I felt my phone vibrate in my lap.

“He’s fine as hell and a ho. Can’t do it.” She shook her head, which had me laughing.

“How do you know that?” While waiting for her answer, I checked my message and saw I had a text from Kinga.

Kinga: When you coming home?

Couldn't help but laugh at his mention of home.

Me: Home??

Kinga: Hell yeah.

Me: Hmm

Kinga: Don't send me that shit. Tf?

Kinga: Home is me.

I smiled at his last message, feeling all warm and flowy inside. Hell yeah I was trying to get home ASAP.

Me: Soon af.

“Bitch, did you hear me? You're over there grinning and shit, talking to your man while I'm tryna get my lil time in with you and tell you my woes.”

I laughed and pressed the side button on my phone to sleep it. “My bad, what's up?”

“I said I know he's a ho because he owns a damn strip club and the bitches be smiling in his face. I can't fool with that man, Harlem. I'll end up making him use that new business insurance 'cause I'm liable to burn that shit down.”

I couldn't hold my laughter because she was dead ass serious.

“Well I guess it's good you have some self-control.”

“Uhh... hello. I’m noting the red flags and staying the hell away from them. My therapist helped me see I was running toward those flags, because even though Charlie is and was a good father, the way he dealt with women is why I think those damn flags are okay.”

I nodded. “It’s not like I haven’t been telling you this already.”

“Yes you have but I had to come to the realization on my own. I also realize whatever man is for me will be for me and not just some red flag I’m attracted to at that moment.”

Her words made sense, so much sense, and I was extremely happy for her. Only problem was I found myself wondering if I had rushed into things with Kinga. There was seeing where this goes and already going where this was going. There I was, overthinking again, when honestly I should’ve just been going with my heart. Kinga hadn’t given me any reason not to, not a red flag in sight. In turn, I had every intention of giving him and me the chance we deserved instead of carrying around trauma from my past relationship. What was funny was I knew for a fact Kinga wasn’t going for it, even if I tried to hold back. With us, we didn’t have to talk about it, because what was understood didn’t need to be discussed.

\* \* \*

“W hy yeen pregnant yet? I be nutting all up in the pussy.” Kinga’s handsome face contorted into confusion. “I drain the whole nut in you.”

I nearly choked on the bread our waitress had sat down at our table, glaring at him then looking around to make sure the old woman at the table beside us hadn’t heard him. “Kinga.”

“What? I’m asking a question. You know how many girls tried to trap me in the past?

I never slipped up but with you I'm slipping and sliding. I don't even wear rubbers anymore."

I couldn't hide the annoyance I felt by him mentioning past women. "I hadn't realized we were trying."

"I mean... not intentionally, but shit happens, right? And neither of us has done anything to prevent it."

"A baby isn't shit that should just happen. How do you know you're gonna like me long enough to be my child's father? Shoot, how do I know I'ma li?—"

"Fuck outta here. I ain't going nowhere and neither are you." He gave me that look, the one that said his word was law.

"And how do you know that?" I tilted my head to the side, waiting for the answer.

"Because I'm a killer, Harlem. You ever try to leave me alone, I'ma turn your ass into a professional speed dater. Every time you think you getting close to somebody, he'd wind up missing or miraculously dead. They're gonna think your ass is a serial killer with no proof."

I couldn't help but laugh. He was so serious that I should have been scared but I wasn't. I was definitely feeling the me or nobody else vibe, though nutty as hell, it was sexy.

"You're laughing but I'm dead ass serious."

"I know, and believe it or not, that's what makes this funny."

"I'm glad you're laughing. Now you 'bout to tell me how you're dodging my junior or

what?” He sat back in his chair, peeling the fresh orange the waitress sat at our table. I think it was meant for fresh orange juice with the mimosa flight I had ordered but of course my man wanted to peel it. To make matters worse, I couldn’t help but watch him peel it, wishing I was that orange. Palmed in his hands and close to his mouth.

“I’m not dodging your junior. It’s probably God, because I’m not on anything, and I haven’t bought a Plan B. He knows we don’t need a child. We’re figuring out our lives together right now.”

“Nah, we not. It’s figured ou—wait. What you saying is you could be carrying my baby right now but you got your ass in here ordering mimosa flights?”

I laughed. “Since when do you want a baby, Kinga?”

“Since I realized you’re a light in my life and I gotta keep you being just that.”

“Getting me pregnant won’t guarantee that, it’ll guarantee you a conversation with my mother that I don’t think will be pleasant.”

“Nah, baby, your mama loves me.”

“She doesn't even know you. She met you through my phone, sir.” I laughed at that part because it was true. They met over FaceTime. I was in the washroom and she was calling to do her weekly check-in. The man not only answered my phone but also introduced himself to her. Imagine my surprise when I walked in and he was holding up my pink ass phone, smiling and laughing.

“Exactly, and when you get off that grumpy shit, we’re gonna go out to her house and have dinner. Fuck around and be telling her you carrying my baby while we at it.”

“Kinga.”

“Is there a possibility?” His eyes were locked on me like I was holding national security secrets.

“If you haven’t wrapped up and I haven’t taken anything, there is always a possibility. As reckless as it is.” I sighed at the thought. I didn’t need a baby and neither did he.

“Yeah.”

“If you are, would you keep it?”

I tucked my lips and nodded. That question was easily answered. I had no reason not to. If I was pregnant by him, I’d keep the baby. I didn’t know why I was so secure in that, but I was. I’d keep this lunatic’s baby, shit, even if I had a choice.

His eyes gleamed, going from my face to my midsection partially hidden by the table. “Good.”

“Good, meaning?” I asked, eyes feasting on him. Something about that damn bun always had me stuck on stupid staring at him.

“Means it was some shit meant to happen. If we made a baby, it was meant between me and you.”

His words were coated in something I couldn’t put my finger on, a sense of need I didn’t think had even registered to him. Understanding his background with his mother and father made it a no brainer as to why the need was so strong. He needed and wanted to be a better father than his father was. He needed to give something good to this world, especially since he felt like he had contributed so much bad. He didn’t broadcast it but I knew he struggled between light and darkness a lot.



“You want our baby, right?” His voice shattered my thoughts, making me blink a few times.

“Yes, why wouldn’t I?”

“You quiet.”

“It’s a lot to process, but if there is a baby, yes... I want him or her.”

“Her. You can’t give me a son just yet. I’m not ready to share you with the lil nigga just yet. I just got you.”

I couldn’t fight the smile that filled my features while warmth covered my entire being. Shit, was this what falling in love felt like?

We were on the way home to his place when he got a call. It was the type of call that had anger emitting from his body. He wasn’t on the phone for more than fifteen seconds before he busted a wild U-turn in the middle of the street, all while his hand was on my thigh.

“I’m on my way,” he said to whoever was on the line. He then dropped the phone in his lap and I felt his eyes. “Baby, I’mma pull up to the shop. I gotta handle something. You can take my car and go to the house. I’ll have some?—”

“No. I’ll wait in your office.”

He looked over at me, thinking about my request.

“I don’t want to be there alone.”

“Aight, but you gotta stay in my office. Don’t come out of there no matter what you

hear.”

“Okay.” I didn’t know why I agreed or why I didn’t take the car and go back to his house. Shit, I should have, but I guess I was going to his garage. When we arrived, it was late but you couldn’t tell by the amount of cars parked in the parking lot.

Kinga didn’t park in the lot with the other cars. Instead, he pulled into the garage. I didn’t get out of the car until he came around and opened the door for me. Before I could get out, he pushed between my legs.

“You ain’t gonna leave me or nothing, are you?” His hands eased up the sides of my dress and his lips pressed against the side of my face.

“Why would I leave you?”

“‘Cause you’ll realize I ain’t perfect.” The way he looked at me made my heart hurt. He never told me he had abandonment issues but in his eyes I saw something. The same thing I saw today when we talked about the possible pregnancy... then once, even before all of this.

“You’re still perfect in my eyes, regardless of what you think I’mma realize.” I wrapped my arms around his neck. He had still yet to realize that I truly wasn’t going anywhere at all. My ass was here...literally.

“Good. I’mma hold you to that.”

“I bet you will. When we leave here, I’mma need a double chocolate cake... no, make that a red velvet cake with cream cheese icing.”

He chuckled. “Aight, I got you. Long as you stay your ass up with me. Puppies with the doula and Tato is with Caya and Aja got Bleu. Your ass is staying up.”

I sucked my teeth. “Yeah, I’ll try.”

“Yeah right. Tighten up.” He patted my thighs for me to wrap my legs around his waist and I did just that. We were in his truck today, so he was enjoying helping me out of the truck.

He then picked me up and closed the door. He carried me further into the garage then unlocked the door to his office. Once inside, he set me down on his desk. “I won’t be long.”

“Okay.”

“Wait, before you go... Where is your phone charger?”

“Plugged up right there.” He pointed to the end table next to the sofa that I had every intention of curling up on. “Anything else?”

“Yeah, how many bitches you fucked on this couch?”

He chuckled. “None. The couch is new, Harlem. I did get some head in the office chair though.”

My face soured. “Go handle your business before you get into it with me here.” I unlocked my legs from his waist and looked off in another direction. I knew I couldn’t get mad, because that was before me, but I still didn’t want the visual.

He sucked his teeth and pressed his lips against the side of my face. “Stop asking questions you don’t want the answers to.”

“Whatever. Go ahead and han?—”

“Give me them lips before I go.”

I tried my absolute hardest to be stubborn but of course he turned my face to meet his and smashed his lips against mine. What started off as a simple kiss drew past that, raising the temperature in the room like a heater in somebody’s grandmother’s house. The man kissed me like he was going off to war, tongue all down my throat while I accepted. Yep, I was in love.

K inga

I left Harlem in my office, locking it so no one could get in. She could get out if she wanted but I told her to stay in there until I returned to get her. I didn't worry about her coming out because I could see the exhaustion in her face. Shorty was going to sleep, which meant I had time to handle what I needed to handle. We were on the way back to my house after dinner when Big Jay called. He said we had a situation, in so many words, but his sentence was simply, "mouse caught in the mouse trap." Though we never established codes or things like that, he still knew what to say over the line to get me to the shop or pique my interest.

"What's the situation?" I asked as soon as I entered the general area toward the front of the garage. My first stop was turning on the radio. I know I told her to stay put no matter what she heard but I still wasn't going to have her hearing somebody scream for dear life.

"We were getting ready to close when this fool ran in and held a gun on Ayden and Kayson, looking for you. He didn't know I was here, so when I knocked him upside his shit, he was out cold."

My eyes landed on who I now knew was Kyro, hanging from the ceiling by his arms, feet barely touching the ground. He was still out cold.

"So he came to us." I laughed aloud.

"Yeah, and also, June dropped this off for you." Ayden called my attention to the file at the workstation.

I nodded. “Wake him and let’s make this quick.”

Jay nodded, and before I knew it, lifted him all the way up then dropped him. He stopped him before he could fall and hit his head. He must’ve thought he was having one of those falling off a building dreams because his eyes opened immediately and landed on me. He looked like he’d seen a ghost, which brought an even bigger smile to my face.

“I heard you were looking for me, homie.” I stood there with my arms crossed.

“Fuck you,” he gritted out, like we had some type of valid beef.

“Damn, fam. I know you or something? You wanna tell me where all this animosity is coming from?”

He just glared at me, to which I nodded in Jay’s direction, who lifted him higher, making the man feel like he was... as Sora called it, dangling by his own body. Shit was kind of uncomfortable when you had a sick motherfucker like Jay in charge of setting you up. Attached to his waist was a chain dangling three eight by eight concrete bricks. By Kyro being so scrawny, that shit had to feel like he was being stretched.

“You wanna talk or what? ’Cause I ain’t got time to be having blinking contests and shit with you. They got families to go home to and I’m tryna go home with my baby mama, so what’s up?” Impatience lived in me at this very moment.

“You killed my cousin, then you came at my boy. I hope you get every fucking thing coming for people like you.”

“People like me? My man, I be minding my business, but fools like you think you’re on my level. So don’t bitch up on me now and talk about what I deserve. Tell me

what all this is about.”

“Nah. I’d rather you fee?—”

“Cool.” My piece was from my back in seconds, aimed in his direction.

He begged upon seeing I had no intention of going back and forth.

“Wait, wait... I was just saying.”

I nodded for Jay to lower him.

“You’re just saying what? You are mad about your blood. Okay, but remember you’re the reason your blood is dead.”

He screamed. “I was doing what I was told.”

“And what were you told?”

“To bait you. To get you to shed blood on the streets, but you never did. Twan said you’d play into our hands. Now he’s hiding and that fucking Agent Beckham is tucking his tail. They had this whole damn thing planned out, but you never played right!”

I nodded. “Good plan.” Then I turned and made eye contact with Jay. “Finish him off. Get me Twan. Make a mess too.” Then I looked at Ayden.

They both nodded and walked off. I heard a lone gunshot but I never turned around to see who or what it was. I had my mind on other things, so I grabbed the folder and left the immediate space. When Kyro said the last name Beckham, I knew exactly who that was. What was fucked up was I’d known Demi had a part in this; I just

couldn't put my finger on it. That ass whooping I had given him was the least I could do but what would happen next he had definitely earned... him and Memphis.

When I returned to my office, my baby was sleeping just like I thought she would be. She was curled up against the storm gray, suede sofa under one of my hoodies. It was then that it dawned on me I had indeed referred to her as my baby mama. Deep down inside I didn't need a test to confirm what I already knew. Harlem was carrying a child we'd created without intention and no prevention. I knew if we made a kid all my reckless ass ways had to simmer down, because the last thing I wanted to be doing was bringing a kid into this world and not being around to raise it. I couldn't raise my kid from the grave nor could I raise it from a cell. If we made a baby, then we'd raise it. There were no ifs, ands, or buts. I would be handling my shit as a man, the way my aunt and uncle raised me to.

By the time we made it to my house, she was knocked out again, which I was cool with. I had some shit to handle. So while I made that fucking cake she wanted, I handled that. I was mentally making my list, sure of who I'd hit first, so all this mess I was dealing with would be over before it fully started. While they handled Twan, I'd handle my blood. I didn't need help with that much.

I removed the deep red, round cake plates from the oven and set them atop two cool, wet towels. Then I moved to the edge of the counter and continued stirring the melted cream cheese and powdered sugar together for my homemade icing. I made my own icing and shit for things like this because it allowed me to control the sugar content. That was necessary when it came to Aja because I hated to have her ass hopped up on sugar if I gave her a piece of cake before bed.

While I beat down the loose form of the cream cheese, my eyes scanned the words on the paper. As soon as I walked in the door I cracked that file on Memphis. June had gotten me everything I needed, from his address to even the times of his security's shifts. What alderman needed security? A crooked one. His home address had been



burned in my mind from the day Sora had this bright idea to find him when we were kids. Neither of us knew our father lived so close. Thinking back on that day made my circular motions quicker and more intense. Memphis cursed us out, asking us what the fuck we were doing at his house, treated us like shit. I never forgot that moment. So when I had my second run-in with him at fifteen, I beat his grown ass. Call it retribution, shit I didn't know, but the state called it assault. I got a year, first offense, but he had friends in high places.

The sound of the overly whipped, custard textured icing brought my brain back to the present. I'd made a mess but also came to an agreement within myself that the last face Memphis would see was mine.

"Pretty sure you beat all the air bubbles out of that icing. Now would you like to talk about it?"

"Nope."

"Well I need you to talk about it because I'm worried about you." She was standing on the side of me in seconds.

I set the bowl down and looked at her. Then I hoisted her up on the island. I pulled the spoon from the bowl and held it to her lips for her to taste. She welcomed it, eyes still stuck on me, urging me to talk. Anybody else I would have told to mind their fucking business, but her, I couldn't.

"My father ain't never been part of my life. Though we live in the same city and know one another exists, it hasn't always been that way. I first met Memphis when I was a kid and he treated me and my brother like shit for coming to his home. Told us we were the ho's sons. Then again when I beat his ass. He deserved it and pressed charges. After that I ain't fuck with him, I promised my auntie I'd stay away from him. Then my shop gets raided and I hear I'm the name he's giving up so he can get

his name on the mayor's ballot. Then he came by the shop fucking with me and had niggas trying to pull me out.”

“So he’s messing with you?”

I squeezed her thigh. “I ain’t no victim, baby.”

“I didn’t say you were, but if somebody is messing with you, you have the right to react.”

I laughed. “You love me so much that you’d justify the fact that I’m a menace in these streets?”

“I didn’t think of it like that but I guess so. Yeah.”

“So you love me?” I asked, watching the way she squeezed her lips together, trapping the spoon between them.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t disagree either.”

She just looked at me, those expressive honey-colored irises boring into mine for clarity. “You can’t distract me with talk of love just to get out of telling me how you feel, Kinga.”

I chuckled, stepping between her legs. “I ain’t tryna distract you. Either you love me or you don't, that's simple.”

She sat back on her hands, feet swinging back and forth. “Yes. I do. I just don’t want to feel like we’re rushing anything becau?—”

“The fuck we gonna rush for? We’re moving at our pace, the one perfect for me and you. If it makes you feel any better, I ain’t never felt the way I feel for you about anybody.”

“So that means you don’t know how you feel about me.” That smile disappeared and she appeared almost sad at the thought.

“Nah, I love you. Shit probably too much, but I do.”

She tilted her head to the side. “How can you know you love me too much?”

“Because I do. Every experience I’ve had with you has differed from every experience I’ve ever had with anybody else. Never wanted to be in nobody’s space as much as I wanna be in yours. Shit’s our space at this point.”

She grinned. “You don’t even like people, baby.”

“You’re right but I like and love your ass, so get used to it.” I took the spoon from her and tossed it into the sink.

“I will. Now... are you gonna tell me how you’re gonna deal with Memphis?” she questioned.

“Nope, but best believe I’m a get his ass out the way.” I turned back around and faced her with a big, dumbass grin of my own on my face.

“Um, okay.”

“You trust me?”

She nodded.

“Then we good. Now lemme show you how to ice this cake with your real tired ass.”

\* \* \*

D ays Later

“I missed you, Uncle Kinga,” Aja mused as soon as she was in the back seat of my car.

I laughed. “Girl, yeen miss me. If you did, you wouldn’t have been gone so long.” I lowkey did miss her lil ass the whole time she was with my brother, but she wanted to stay, so hell nah, I wasn’t finna force her to come back home. Hell, the only time I did go that way was to pick up Bleu. Harlem didn’t play about that lil ugly ass dog. So while Aja spent the entire weekend, Bleu spent that one damn day.

“I did miss you, and Harlem. Plus I was tired of helping with the baby. I was ready to come home where I’m the baby and Bleu is the baby-baby.”

I chuckled. “You were being a big cousin, Aja. You gotta tighten up, shorty.”

“Nope, I don’t. At your house it’s just me, you, and Harlem, no screaming, crying babies.” The expression she made had me cracking up. Her ass really looked annoyed. That made me think about the conversation Harlem and I had a few days ago. We had yet to bring up the subject of her possibly being pregnant or confirm it. We just settled into this routine of me and her or me, her, and Aja.

“Uncle.” Aja’s voice broke into my thoughts.

“Huh?” I asked, eyes focused on traffic.

“Are we going to see Harlem and Bleu? I think she’s gonna let me have him.”

I laughed, unable to break her heart. That was the furthest thing from the truth. Harlem loved that damn dog. Shit, the other night she got mad with me because I told her that fucking dog wasn't sleeping in the bed with us another night. She was seconds from going to lay on the couch until I cursed her ass out and told her to put the dog in the bed on the floor and lay her mad ass down.

"Nah. We'll see them tonight."

"Oh, ok." She was quiet.

I was just about to turn the radio back up when I heard her voice again.

"Uncle."

"Yeah, Aja." This time I cut my attention between the mirror and traffic.

"Does Bleu, Harlem, Tato, and Tilly live with us now?"

I shrugged. "No."

"Okay."

I didn't bother thinking about turning the music up. I just waited for the next question because I knew it was coming.

"Uncle."

"Aja."

"Can they live with us? I like when Harlem is home. She does my hair and cooks for me. I play with the dogs and I just like them being there. Don't you?"

I laughed. “I do, but baby girl, Harlem has her own house.”

“Then can we move in with her?” she said, like it just made sense.

Long story short, my car ride with lil mama was filled with questions like that. Questions I truly had no answer for because it had indeed been a few weeks since they’d broken into Harlem’s spot and she was still staying with me. I had no problem with it, because not only did I enjoy her being there, but it felt like she belonged. I didn’t second guess her being in my space because she fit there. She fit into my life and routine like she was meant for it.

When we made it home, Aja went to her room while I migrated toward the living room. I had been waiting for a message from either Jay or Ayden. Today they were handling Twan after watching him for days and I wanted it done so messily that somebody’s agency had to investigate. I wanted a fucking message sent. I wanted to be left the fuck alone but that would be too much to ask for.

My phone rang, pulling me out of my thoughts. When I looked down to see who was calling, I chortled. Rennix was calling. I chuckled because I couldn’t get over him opening a strip club centered around donuts.

“Yeah.”

“What you on, fool?” he greeted.

“Shit, just made it in. Finna probably fall into step with this TV until Harlem gets here.”

He laughed. “The words of an old ass man.”

I chortled. “You damn right. I was under three cars today. The fuck you been doing?”

Staring at ass, right?”

“Probably.” I could hear the smile in his tone. “Not the ass I wanna see though.”

“Not even about to ask.”

“Don’t, instead invite me to dinner, bitch.”

“For what, Ren? What are you on?” I asked with more laughter in my tone because I had a feeling I knew what he was getting at. A few days after his grand opening, he asked me about Caya. Thing was, I didn’t know much about her besides her being Harlem’s girl. So I couldn’t tell him anything I didn’t know.

“Invite me over and make sure you invite Caya. I’m tryna see what was to that but she said I’m a ho. What type of work is that? I ain’t saying I’m not but where the fuck is her competitive spirit?”

I couldn’t hold back the laughter. “And that’s why I ain’t hearing anything you are asking. You think I’m trying to beef with my girl on the back end because you tryna slut out her friend? Hell nah.”

“Slut out in the best fucking way. It’ll be the best week she ever had. Tell sis to put that through for me.” He laughed at his own stupidity.

I was about to respond and tell his ass hell nah but I got a notification forcing me to pull my phone from my ear. It was a text from Jay.

BigJay: 7 o’clock news.

Me: bet.

I checked the time and it was almost seven, so I turned the news channel on early while Rennix continued with whatever he was damning about. Then, before I knew it, he was telling me he'd call me back. I was right on time because the reporter listed Twan's death soon after.

“ Antwan Davis, twenty-seven, was brutally murdered in the parking lot of a local westside grocery store. No witnesses or suspects at this time. This comes after the discovery of Kyro Johnson found hanging from a light pole in Night territory.”

Like a nut I smiled, because it was time I reached out and handled the rest of this mess, the snake's head that started it all.

My thoughts broke when the front door opened. I looked up and Harlem was walking through the door carrying that plastic crate with three dogs following her. I was impressed how she'd trained Bleu's ass so quickly.

I jumped up and moved toward her, taking the crate from her hands.

“I think it's time I go home. Not right now, but probably in the morning.” She set her purse on the counter and moved toward the fridge.

I stopped and turned around, glaring at her. “The fuck you tryna do that for?”

She looked confused. “Aren't I intruding on your space? I don't wanna feel like I'm taking up sp?—”

“You overthinking about the wrong shit. Ain't no need for you to be going back over there unless you pack some shit to bring back here.” I walked the dogs into the under-stair area I elected to put them in when I realized the basement was too cold at night.

“Overthinking the wrong shit. What does that mean?”



I turned around and she was facing the sink, getting water. “Means we have other things to be talking about and you think you about to go back to that fucking house. You ain’t. Now, what’s for dinner? Am I ordering pizza or are you cooking?” Just that fast my mood had gone to shit and I was irritated. The thought of her not being next to me or in my arms at night pissed me off.

She turned around and looked directly at me to respond but Aja’s voice filled the kitchen. “Harlem, you home!” she squealed, running over and hugging Harlem around the waist.

I stood off to the side, watching their interaction. Harlem was so into what Aja said, listening to her little babbling ass. It was cute and made me smile, even though Harlem had just gotten on my fucking nerves with that home shit.

“What are we eating, Harlem?” Aja’s hungry ass asked.

“I don’t know, baby girl, let me talk to your uncle and we’ll figure it out. Can you take Bleu to your room?”

I watched Aja’s happy ass take off with Bleu in tow, leaving me and Harlem in the kitchen.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked.

“Ain’t shit wrong with me. I’m going out to the garage. Let me know what you wanna eat, unless you cook.” I didn’t even wait for her to respond. I was already moving out the door to the garage. It irritated me to the fullest that she was talking about this going home shit but I wasn’t trying to argue with her about it. I didn’t want her going home, because in my fucking mind, where I was should have been home for her. Home was me, just like for me she was home. The thing was, with Harlem, I always had to say shit when I expected her to read my mind, no clairvoyant shit. I

expected her to see that here with me was where I always wanted her, regardless of if I said it or not. I didn't know why I was mad because Harlem was the type you had to voice all that shit to. Then again I was mad because I had never had to voice what I needed to anybody but her.

I spent a while under the car, fixing and fucking with shit I didn't need to, just so I didn't go in the house. I wasn't used to how I felt about Harlem because I meant that shit when I told her she was the only woman I had ever felt this way about. I meant it when I said I loved her too much.

"Are you still mad at me?" Her voice alerted me to her presence near the doorway.

I didn't speak at first. I stood up straight, staring at her. She was no longer fully dressed but instead wearing one of my shirts. It swallowed her frame and had me wondering what was under it. "What do you think?" I licked my lips.

She shook her head. "How can you get mad at me for wondering if it's time for me to go home?"

I closed the hood of the oldie and glared at her. "Because you act like you don't realize I'm your fucking home just like you mine."

She glared at me. "How am I supposed to know if you didn't sa?—"

"I shouldn't have had to. Harlem, you nine times outta ten carrying my child. The fuck you going somewhere where I'm not laying my head next to you." I moved into her space, pulling her frame against me. Then I picked her up and sat her on the car.

"Use your words, Kinga. Don't get mad and come out here. Don't shut down on me."

"I shouldn't have to. You should just know, like I do." My hands eased under the

shirt, sending a jolt down my spine when I realized she was bare underneath.

“Well, I ju?—”

“Well, nothing. This shit between me and you is what it is. Stop tryna have me yoke your ass up. Now open up and let me feel between.”

She smiled bashfully and looked off to the side.

“Pussy gotta be good. Got me about to fuck you on a fresh paint job.” I inserted two fingers between her legs and edged forward, pressing my lips against her chin and neck.

“It’s worth it,” she moaned breathlessly, sending all the blood in my body to my dick.

“Damn right it is.”

She freed me and opened her legs wide for entry, using my dick to massage her sodden center. She was ready for me and I was ready for her. My hands found her hips and I pulled her all the way to the edge of the hood, pushing into her and feeling that small hand of hers attempt to keep some space.

“Nah, move your hand. This is what you wanted when you came out here, right?”

“Mhmm,” she moaned, quivering in my embrace as soon as I pushed in further. She was so perfect... So fucking perfect.

I fucked Harlem so good I had to carry her into the house after our session in the garage. We showered then she crawled into bed and passed out. My intention was to go to sleep with her but I couldn’t sleep. I knew what I needed to do, which I could no longer put off. So I dressed quietly then kissed the side of her face and left the

room. On my way out of the house I was sure to check in and make sure Aja was asleep. Shorty was knocked out and Bleu was on his back next to her. I chuckled silently before leaving and turning the alarm on.

Once in my car, my mind went to the new address I had on Demi. I heard around the way in June that he'd moved from his grandmother's house to a home up north. On his salary I knew he couldn't afford it, but being paid by his uncle, he could. Fool betrayed me because he really thought Memphis would make it to mayor. Betrayed wasn't the right word to use considering I never trusted Demi's stupid ass anyway. I just used him to dirty his name... Meaning, he owed money to a friend of mine off some illegal tables and I paid his debt for a low price. It was nothing major, if anything. I just wanted to know when or if my name ever came up. It worked out for me until my name came up from the right person, huh?

When I pulled up in front of Demi's spot, I took it in. He lived along a quaint little subdivision that was probably so fucking quiet on a regular that you could hear a spoon drop from five houses away. The lights were all out and there was no car in his driveway, which meant he was still out working. I hadn't really thought about what I was gonna do though, considering I didn't even know if he was home or not. I just knew I needed to handle this and stop playing around. At what cost though? The last thing I needed was for my irritation with this situation to have me acting impulsively and fucking up my life. My thoughts ran a mile a minute, then I watched the white Chevy impala I knew belonged to him pull up. He didn't pull into the driveway but instead parked on the street. In that instant, the decision I needed to make was made for me. I turned the lights out on my car, making sure before I did anything IDing my car would be close to impossible. I had special paint, meaning in the day my shit looked blue while at night it looked black. Not only that but I had a reflective cover over my plates, front and back. I didn't worry much about anybody seeing anything because one thing about these little fake suburban neighborhoods was that they didn't have any type of surveillance. I paid attention on the way in. Nah, I wasn't new to this, I handled business whenever. As soon as he was standing outside his whip, I

smashed my foot on the brake, easing out of park. Then I shifted gears and went from zero to fifty in less than three seconds. Unlike Hari the other week, he rolled over the car, making a scuffle sound as he fell off the trunk. Then I reversed, this time rolling over his body in the process. I repeated the same motion a few times before I pulled off. One down...one to go.

Harlem

When I woke up this morning, Kinga was no longer in bed. I knew he had an early day at the shop and he had to take Aja to school. He woke me up talking this morning, but I didn't really hear a thing from his lips. I was so tired that nothing truly registered in my mind until I was getting ready to start my day and he sent me a text telling me my tire was flat and he'd fix it when he came in tonight. He instructed me to take his truck, even though I told him a million times that I only drove my own vehicle. I cracked though, and ended up driving it, because not only did the puppies have an appointment, but I had other things to do today. I hadn't been spending much time at my shop these last few weeks and I missed it. Even though I had a staff of four who handled day to day, I still missed how hands-on I used to be there. It always got this way after a litter of puppies were born. Between caring for them and their mother, I usually played it safe in the house, but this time I had really been relying on the puppy nanny. She was great and a big help for the tedious things. Puppy care was no joke.

The main thing on my mind was the possibility of a baby neither of us planned. It was finally time for me to see if I was pregnant or we were just overthinking recklessness. While Kinga comfortably played in the what ifs, I needed to know. I needed to be sure if I was pregnant or not. Yes, I loved him regardless, but we had to realize a baby would change everything entirely. It was more of a rush for us to not only get it together but to learn new things. Though I had a niece and nephew, I didn't change pampers or do anything necessary for dealing with a baby for real. With Aja it seemed easier because she was eight. Someone had already done all of the heavy lifting when it came to raising her. She was a good kid and the absolute sweetest. Last night Kinga told me she asked if I could stay with them. I thought it was cute, having

been somewhat privy to the fact that her mother was no longer in her life and her father was somewhere finding himself. Though Kinga didn't explicitly tell me the full story, he'd told me enough.

Instead of existing in the unknown, knowing Kinga would've liked to know if I was or wasn't, I bought a test before going to Caya's today for her to take my hair down. It wasn't until I hurled up my chicken salad that I decided to take the test. I needed to be sure and so did he. We were living in limbo because of me and he was trying to be patient. He didn't want to push and neither did I... Funny enough, he still pushed in his own Kinga way.

The test definitely confirmed what I already knew... Yes, I was carrying this crazy man's baby.

"I can't believe you thought you were pregnant and didn't tell me about it sooner." Caya sat across from me in the chair.

I laughed. "You know I had to overthink it."

"That you did. I bet you were running that man ragged."

"I feel like I was, but with Kinga, my unreasonableness is always overshadowed by his ability to either handle me or make me listen to reason. Last night I told him it was time for me to go home. No, I wasn't being crazy, but honestly I just didn't want to overstay my welcome." She immediately looked at me like I had two heads, almost like he looked at me last night. "Wait, let me finish before you jump on my ass."

She extended her hands, letting me know I had the floor.

"Anyway, he regulated me in a way I didn't think I could be regulated. He handles shit, making me feel secure and necessary. He makes me feel heard and seen in a way

I never felt with Zax. I swear I don't compare the two but with Kinga what I see is truly what I get. There isn't another side to the coin that I'm waiting for. He's him, through and through, and that's a breath of the freshest air imaginable."

"Ooh wee, bitch, you in love and you're pregnant," Caya squealed.

I didn't refute her statement, instead holding on to the fullness I felt at the thought of him. The silent vibration of my phone made me look down at it in my lap. Speaking of the devil, he was calling.

"Yeah." I mimicked the way he answered the phone.

"You fucking with me like that?" he asked, clearly amused by me mimicking him.

"I am, now how can I help you, handsome?"

"I could think of a few ways."

I grinned hard, so damn hard my cheeks hurt. "Kinga."

"But nah, you still at your girl's?"

"Yes, she just finished blow drying my hair. Why, what's wrong?"

"Fucking starving. You wanna bring me something to eat? Have your girl drop you off and you can take my car back to the spot since I know your difficult ass dropped the truck off at the house."

"I'll just bring you food."

"And eat it with me."



I smiled stupidly. Nope, I wasn't going to turn down lunch with my man. "Fine, but you're dropping me off at the house."

"Bet. Get me something hood, baby."

I knew him saying bet didn't mean yeah. It meant we'd see when I got there. When we hung up, I glanced at myself in the mirror and shook my head.

"Lemme guess. Baby daddy called and he misses you."

My smile gave it away without a verbal response.

"Course he did. Lemme ponytail you." She was on her feet in seconds, moving behind me. "You want me to drop you off?"

"Yes and can you take me to grab him something to eat? Something greasy and fried."

She laughed. "And you're gonna get it?"

"Uh yeah, because I know I'm getting a lot more when I get home tonight."

She cackled but she knew I was getting it before she asked. "I know that's right. I'm happy you're happy though."

She and I talked for a while, kind of giving updates from the time we hadn't really been together. It was refreshing and a gift to have a friend I didn't have to talk to every day but we both knew where we stood at the end of the day when we did talk.

It didn't take me long to pick up the food and get dropped off in front of Kinga's shop.

“Can I help you, sweetheart?” a guy asked as soon as I walked in.

“No thank you.” I was polite before bypassing him.

“You sure? You bringing food in here and shit, I could definitely help?”

“Nah but you can get your fucking skull cracked in here tryna spit game to her. He’s in his work room, shorty.” One of the guys I recognized as Ayden said, stepping to the side and allowing me past the counter to the back.

I continued in. “Thank you.”

As soon as I reached the doorway of the work room, I was smiling. The man looked so good, even when he needed a lining and had grease all over his clothes and hands. Especially when he sported that slight scowl.

“How come every time I look in your direction you look so mean?”

“‘Cause I’m not looking at your pretty ass. Not on purpose but I do be missing your fine ass when you gone for long periods of time.”

I smiled. “I miss you too but I know how to call you for something other than to tell you I’m hungry.” I moved in to where he stood over his car and held his carton of food out for him.

He ducked his head, sure to kiss my lips. “Nah. Lemme wash my hands.” He then motioned toward the sink in the corner.

I nodded and turned to admire the space. There were three cars, two not his and the black one a few feet away from me was his. He loved this car. I could tell by the way he always seemed to babble about it. Not only that but the screensaver on his phone

was this damn car.

“You look good, shorty,” he complimented from the sink.

“No I don’t. I look like I’ve been all over the place today. Between getting the puppies to the vet, then to the nanny, handling some shop work, going to the store, and getting my hair taken down, I look like I feel. Tired as hell.” Most of my day was spent in his blue Jeep before I took a rideshare to Caya’s. I didn’t want to overuse his truck, plus it drew too much attention. Long story short, I missed my own truck.

“What did you get from the store?” He was scrubbing his hands for dear life in the sink to get the grease off.

“The usual: snacks, a pregnancy test, and allergy meds.” His head whipped in my direction so fast but I kept going on and on like I didn’t know what part of my statement prompted that reaction. “My allergies are on the rise these days. It’s like everything feels like it’s setting me off. Like I fee?—”

“Harlem.” He was drying his hands and mugging the shit out of me at this point. Hell nah this man didn’t want to hear anything about my allergies.

“Yeah.”

“What did the test say?”

“What do you mean what did the test say? How do you know I took it?”

“Ay, Harlem.” The tone of his voice couldn’t be missed. I was getting on his damn nerves and I knew it.

“It said what we already know. I’m pregnant and my mother is going to kill you. Or

maybe she won't because she's been begging for me to make her a grandmother since my brother's bald headed ass baby mama started playing with my nephew." I was babbling, watching him move in my direction.

With the speed he moved to me I should have been afraid but I wasn't. I feared nothing he did because when it came to me he did everything out of love. I knew that because I could see it in his eyes.

"So I got a baby in there?" he asked, his hand against my flat-ish, fabric covered abdomen.

"That is what the test said. I have to make a doctor's appointment though, to see, and first I have to find out how to do th?—"

He swallowed up my words, then pulled back and looked at me. "My baby."

"Yes, your baby. Which I'm sure is hungry. So can we discuss your baby over food?"

He laughed. "Yeah, man, let's go to my office."

When we made it into his office, he peeled the jumpsuit down from his frame, revealing he only had briefs on under.

I set our food on the coffee table and took a seat, watching him get dressed. "You don't have any more work to do?"

"I do but it ain't every day a nigga finds out he has a youngin on the way. Where you wanna go, baby girl? I'm on your time." He pulled his pants up and moved around to take a seat next to me.

I cheesed hard, about to respond, but a knock in the doorway broke that up. When I

looked up, a dark skinned man with piercing eyes glared at Kinga. The room immediately grew cold and hate emitted from both men. Something told me this was the infamous Memphis.

“The fuck you doing here?” Kinga was on his feet fast.

The man laughed. “What am I doing here? Ask yourself.” He then looked away from Kinga to me.

Kinga moved in front of me, sure to block his line of sight. “Yo, you really wanna lose your life in here, huh?”

“That a threat, Mr. West?” he asked in a tone heavy with animosity.

“Nah, it’s a promise. Now, you wanna tell me why you just walked up in my shit like you're not at the top of a list?”

“Was my nephew on that list? There is no proof but I know it was you. You vile, scum ass nigga.”

Kinga laughed. “I don’t know what you talking about, but the only vile motherfucker in this room is you and you got about five seconds to get ou?—”

“You gonna let your girlfriend here see the real you? Because I’m sure she doesn't know you the way I do.”

I cleared my throat. “I do know him, enough to know you should probably be on your way instead of standing here antagonizing him.”

I could tell by the way he clenched his teeth my words irritated Kinga and the fact that Memphis didn’t move out of the way bothered him even more.

“You fucked up, Kinga, just remember I warned you for fucking with me.” He was gone seconds later, leaving me and Kinga alone in his office.

“I assume that was Memphis.” Well I knew that was Memphis because I’d recently seen his fake smiling ass on my TV as he announced his bid for mayor of Chicago.

He finally turned to me, and his expression said it all, but before he could open his mouth and speak, I was talking.

“Test confirmed we’re possibly having a baby. Handle your business before we confirm the news. I don’t want to be stressing about your freedom, or worse, your life.”

He just looked at me, probably looking for the words to say, but he settled on just nodding. There was honestly nothing he could say because though I didn’t know what was going on, I knew there was something. Nothing about me was naïve, I knew the type of life Kinga lived, not in depth, but I was aware of it. I knew most men with his hood status perished before thirty or found themselves chained and locked up like wild beasts. Kinga was different though. He was content with sliding back and forth under his cars rather than running the streets. He barely kept long nights, even with whatever was going on. He was a lover boy who kept his nose clean. So I believed that exempted him from the shit every street dude dealt with. Hate, envy, and deceit from those around... Those who wanted what he ultimately suffered to attain.

“You think you're running shit?” He was seated back next to me.

“Nope. I just know you love me enough not to let whatever is going on swallow you.”

“Yeah, you right. Only wanna be swallowed up by you, shorty. Now eat up so we can get out of here.”

\* \* \*

A few days later...

I hated that once again I felt like I was imprinting on a puppy. First Bleu, now this standard blue. I didn't need any more dogs but with the way I knew I was gonna let Aja have Bleu, my mind made excuses for the fact that I had yet to list the pup on my site. He was cute and cuddly, the type of puppy I kept in my arms even though I knew I didn't need or want his little ass to be spoiled. Because if I had any intention of keeping him, he needed to be capable of being alone and on the ground.

I moved through the shop, putting out the new items I stocked. That consisted of a few different colored bowls and doggie clothing. Even though I didn't dress my dogs often, that didn't mean others didn't want to dress theirs.

The bell on the door sounded, letting me know someone had entered. "Welcome in." I was aware that Emelie was in the front of the store while I was at the back. I was just so used to speaking to people that I did it naturally.

"It's been kind of hard to catch up with you." A familiar voice made me look up. Why was he here?

I hadn't heard or seen Zax since OA basically told him to kick bricks. The fact that he was here, let alone trying to catch up, had me baffled, because what for?

"Uh, hey." I looked around and prayed to God Kinga didn't walk his ass in here. He was supposed to be bringing me breakfast any minute now because according to him I didn't feed his baby adequately enough with the banana-nut muffin I'd eaten this morning.

"What are you looking for? I was coming by to see you. Wondering if we could talk."

“About what Zax?”

“Damn, you don’t even seem happy to see me. You’re acting like I’m bothering you.”  
He now decided to play confused. “I feel like we nee?—”

I held my hand up to stop him right there. “Please stop. You have absolutely no reason to come here or even come this way. I mean unless you bought a dog and wanna buy some accessories.”

“I miss you, Harlem. I fucked up and thought we’d be able to sweep things under the rug. I thought we could get past this and you’d love me past my shortcomings.”

I shook my head, about to speak, but a voice that wasn’t my own spoke up. I didn’t even hear him come in but then again I wasn’t listening for it.

“That’s fucked up, on your part at least. Thing is I’mma need you to stop coming here.”  
Kinga’s voice sounded so damn uninterested that I smirked.

“Excuse me, who are you?” Zax turned to Kinga with irritation in his voice.

“Zax, you should leave. I told you I have moved on and it’s not appropriate for you to come around.” I was trying to save Zax’s ass because the expression Kinga sported was impatience.

“I came in here to pou?—”

“You came in here to get fucked up, and baby mama is too nice, so I’mma give it to you straight. The next time you come in here and ain’t buying shit, I’mma knock your fucking head off your shoulders. ’Cause after a while you gotta get over this. You gotta realize that you fucked up and that right there ain’t no business for you. She ain’t never looking your way again.” He pointed down to Zax with his free hand. He



then turned to me, softening his stare. “Go ahead back there and feed my baby while I walk him out.”

I tilted my head to the side, about to give some lip, but decided against it when he blinked aggressively, extended the Styrofoam food container, and tossed his head in the direction of my office.

I did as he asked, deciding not to challenge him. By the time he made it into my office about five minutes later, he had his phone to his ear. I didn’t know who he was talking to but he seemed pretty into the conversation.

“Bet. I’mma meet you out there. Get this shit out of the way,” he said to whoever was on the line. Then seconds later he said bet again and dropped his phone into his lap. Those heavy eyes were on me like a hawk.

“You look good than a motherfucker. Got fools risking their lives to be in your face. He ain’t gonna do that no more.” He rubbed his hands together and took a seat on the couch near the dog enclosure. “I think I’ll buy him from you, so we can keep him around the house.” He picked up the puppy I had been doting over.

“Thank you.” I dug into my food, watching him play with the small puppy. “You know we have dinner with my brother and mother tonight at my place even though you refuse to let me go back. I figured I should break the news to them now even though we have an appointment on Monday.”

He laughed. “I know. You’re making it seem like I hold you hostage.”

“You ain’t?” I asked, just to mess with him.

He gave me a hilarious look before nodding. “Sure and I lure you in with pastries and shit.”

I cackled. “And you do, amongst other things.”

“Man, gone ahead with that shit. I gotta go handle something before tonight but I’ll meet you there. If you need something I’ll sto—” Banging on my office door interrupted what he was saying.

On his feet, Kinga put the puppy in the pen and rushed to the door. When he swung it open, I was shocked to see my mother’s baby father with a scowl on his face that turned into shock. He wasn’t expecting Kinga to open the door; he was expecting me.

“The fuck you banging on her fucking door for? You lost your fucking mind or something?”

“It was you! You put my son in the hospital and tried to kill him!” His voice carried but Kinga yoked him up quickly.

“Damn sure did and I see you didn’t learn your lesson by way of what he went through. So let me personally teach you this shit. You see her behind me?” he asked, hoisting that man up like he was a Walmart grocery bag.

It took everything in me not to laugh.

“Mhmm.” Joseph couldn’t even find his words.

“She is off limits to you and your fucking son. If I see either one of y’all around her, I’m personally pay for both of y’all to be buried in the same casket. You got that?”

“Mhmm,” he moaned, like a straight bitch.

“Nah, bitch, use your words,” Kinga demanded and I was soaked at the sight. Something about seeing him yoke Joseph up had me ready to go home... with him.

“I understand. We...won’t bother her anymore.”

Kinga then dropped Joseph and looked at me. “Now you heard him say that shit. If you see him or his pussy ass son again, I’m killing both of them. No more passes.”

I nodded, attempting to hide the amusement in my being. He looked so angry and I was thinking about something totally different.

Joseph scurried out and I licked my lips at the sight of the man before me. I wanted to do much more but had to remind myself I was indeed in my place of business. Kinga always made me feel protected, in and out of his presence.

“I’mma fuck around and put some security in here. Motherfuckers got too much access.”

I nodded, agreeing with him. “I see how I’m pregnant.”

“Oh yeah? How?”

“You just being you. You got this crazy way of making me feel so protected, so loved, that I know nothing will ever touch me...well, except you.”

He was all smiles and so was I.

We spent a while longer together before parting ways. He had to meet someone and I headed to the store to grab a few things for dinner, an easy pasta dish and rolls. I didn’t feel like going over the top, so this was it. By the time I left the grocery store, I was exhausted. But when I pulled up to my place, I spotted my mother’s truck in my driveway. I didn’t know she was coming out so early, but then again, my mother hated traffic. So of course she would leave early and get here earlier to avoid it altogether.

I pulled into my driveway and reached over to grab my bag. I was grateful I'd dropped the puppies off to the nanny before going to the store. The puppy nanny was a lifesaver because I needed a break most days and all I had to do was call her up or drop them off. She was worth every penny I paid.

I grabbed the bags I'd gotten from the grocery store and headed into the house, sure to lock my car behind me.

When I entered the house, I heard the sound of the TV in the distance. Not only had my mother come into the city early, she had made herself comfortable.

"Well hello to you too, mama dearest," I said loud enough for her to hear.

"Oh baby, I thought you were working. I didn't want to bother you," she mused, rushing into the kitchen and helping me with the bags. "However, when I got here, I also noticed your space looked barely lived in and there were no dog cages."

"Code for, you've been snooping around and found that I'm not here that often."

She shrugged. "Same thing. Now where is my future son-in-law anyway?"

"Future son-in-law. That's quick. You haven't even met the man face to face."

"Didn't have to but of course I'm still going to meet him. What I'm saying is, you spend a lot of time with him and you seem different with him."

I stopped and looked at her. "That's because I am. He makes me reckless in a good way. A way where I'm not overthinking everything or feeling like I should be keeping my guard up. After everything with Zax, I had my guard up pretty high, trying to get over what he did as well as trying to not to be like that in anybody's eyes. That was my intention, then Kinga found his way into my life. I'm happy, Ma."

“I know, and that makes me happy. I love you and your brother with everything in me, so the thought of either one of you being unhappy bothers me. But you’re happy and so am I.”

I smiled hard. “Thank you.”

“Now where are my grand puppies?”

“With the nanny. I’ll be picking them up in the morning. I’ve been tired lately and in need of some rest. After dinner tonight, I’m going to sleep and I don’t want to be up early. I’m glad after this litter I’ll have a little break. I don’t foresee myself going as heavy as I have been going for the last few months.”

“So... I was wondering... since you decided to keep Bleu and from the pictures you may be keeping that other one.... Can I have Tilly? She plays well with Judah since technically that’s her mother.”

“Ma.”

“Don’t Ma me. If I didn’t take them from you, I know your home would be filled with dogs. I know I’m not getting any two-legged grandkids any time soon so I have to make do with what I hav?—”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” I turned around quickly, realizing I had already said too much.

“Um, excuse me? Don’t turn your narrow ass around now. What does that mean? Wouldn’t be so sure about what?”

“Mama. Please. Nothing. I need to get dinner started.” I tried my best to get away from her but I had already messed up and I was no liar, so I wasn’t even good at it.

“Don’t Mama me, Harlem Ariel Bleu.”

I turned around and my eyes landed directly on her. “I am pregnant. So you will indeed get that grandchild you’ve been speaking into my uterus.”

She giggled. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not. I’m pregnant. Well, according to the test in my purse I am.”

She pulled me into a hug, holding me like I was gonna disappear . I wasn’t. If anything I had a better chance of expanding.

K inga

Harlem was likely about ready to murder my ass by now because I had texted her for the fifth time that I was on my way. I was on my way but had something I needed to handle. I knew the only way I'd be able to rest easy was if I finished this shit fully. I had already called everything in with a friend of mine up for the game I was playing. I had sat up all night wondering how I'd finish this shit, then it hit me. I didn't need to because I knew a guy. Somebody who would drop Memphis at the drop of a dime while I was standing right in front him. I wanted his ass to feel that heat, and me to be the last face he saw, but I wasn't willing to risk my freedom doing it right in the open. I had more to lose now.

I was standing in the middle of a grassy field overlooking the long forgotten industrial parts of Chicago. Money was funny in these parts so it was miles of open uninhabited space and abandoned buildings. The perfect place to be unseen for a meeting.

A black on black Range pulled up in front of my car and stopped, leaving the lights on and the car running. We wouldn't be out here long.

“Yo, the fuck we meeting up in dead man land for, youngin'?” Aroyal asked, walking up and leaning back against his truck.

“Because I need a man dead.”

He nodded for me to continue and I explained what I needed and what I was willing to pay to have it handled tonight.

Aroyal shook his head after I finished speaking. “You sure?” he asked, eyes now searching mine for any inkling of uncertainty. “That’s your blood.”

I spat onto the ground before correcting his statement. “Blood doesn't make you shit in my book. Memphis has been a dead man since Sora found out where he lived all those years ago.”

“That’s a long time to hold a grudge.” Aroyal’s stare was intense. He was up for the job but didn’t want me to regret my request. Not many were privy to the tainted history between me and Memphis. It was no secret. I just didn’t broadcast it and neither did he.

“First time I met Memphis, he called me and my brother the ho’s sons. Unlike my brother, I didn’t give a fuck about him. Sora did though, he wanted to know the nigga, so the next time we saw him he had shown up to a basketball tournament at the gym. Sora was trying to get a word in with him and Memphis treated him like dirt. I beat his ass so bad, they arrested me and he pressed charges later on, doing a press conference and calling me a fucking monster. Maybe I am but I didn’t go picking this fight. Weeks ago my shop was raided. I found out he gave my name to the feds because he wanted to clean his streets and put in a bid for mayor. Blood don’t make a nigga shit in my book, so if you wondering if I’ll regret this? You are wrong. Death has been his legacy since he came for me. It just took me a minute to figure out how I wanted it to happen. So why not die on the very streets you call yourself cleaning?”

Aroyal nodded. “Then you want it loud, also sending a message to whoever he gave your name to.”

I threw my head forward in agreement.

He chuckled. “You young niggas sure know how to make it happen.”



I chuckled. “Making sure the retribution is just as loud as the initial act.”

Seeing somebody like Aroyal laugh was a foreign sight. As a matter of fact, anytime I had seen him, he was always frowned up, always serious. “I’m sure. But at a ceremony to the opening of a park he was supposed to have revamped? That shit is cold.”

“It’s genius because I’ll be standing in front of him.”

Aroyal shrugged. “Genius and cocky. When you nod, I’ll take the shot. Simple nod.”

Aroyal and I parted ways, both headed to the same address, just different spots in it. Memphis had an unveiling of a park he allegedly renovated near my blocks. Son of a bitch had even named the park after himself to commemorate the work he claimed to have done. He hadn’t done shit but piss people like me off and risk his life for cameras that wouldn’t save him in the end.

It was an outdoor event, people dressed in black tie attire standing in the middle of the hood with fucking champagne flutes and their good diamonds. Loitering on the streets where the usual fiends and winos got their fix or a forty. His words made these random uppity folks think they were safe out here at seven in the evening on a Saturday. The only reason these spaces were empty was because police had blocked off the streets, only allowing access to a few early in the day. Memphis had to be a cocky son of a bitch to think this would fly. I wasn’t the only one gunning for him after his latest news appearance. He called himself declaring war on all YNs on his streets. Who died and made the streets his?

I laughed aloud at the thought as I walked up the three steps toward the porch in front of the new fieldhouse where he stood proudly, dripped in gold. Nigga thought he was a prophet or something. He was talking to two other suits, also standing pompously with champagne flutes in their hands. Everything was decorated for this phony ass

event, him and everybody acting like they gave a shit about these parts when they really didn't.

I approached him, not giving a damn if he was in the middle of a conversation. The two men excused themselves, leaving us alone. He glanced around to see who was looking before he gulped the champagne.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

I chortled. “You look like my presence scares you.”

“It doesn't, you fake ass thug. I've faced tougher problems with a much better way of protecting what's important to them.”

“Is that a threat, Memphis? See, you thought you'd pull me out of character and probably get me arrested again, but nah, not again, Pops.” I said that last part with venom spewing from my lips.

“I'm not your father. Never have been. Yeah, I married yo' mama but she couldn't see a good thing if it hit her in the face. She had to sleep with scum. That hood shit runs deep in your veins. She didn't think I knew she was fucking Ortega, a motherfucker with a rap sheet as long as my achievements and a slew of fucking chop shops. I knew every fucking thing. Bitch was ungrateful and so are you. I let you breathe out here for long en?—”

His words shocked me, but none of them moved me. I was never looking for a father, so him saying he wasn't my father did nothing for me. The man who raised me was my father, my uncle. “You let me breathe?” I laughed. “Maybe... but I'm done letting you breathe.” I nodded, and before he could ask what I meant, a single shot pierced the air and his skull at what seemed like the same time. His body dropped instantly and chaotic screams filled the streets. For a minute I stood there, watching

the blood seep from behind his head as he lay on his back staring up at the sky.

I finally pulled myself to walk away, moving in slow motion while everybody else panicked and ducked like more shots ensured. They didn't, the only target here was him.

By the time I made it to the car, my phone was going off in the center console. I pulled it out and saw Harlem had texted me three times, back to back.

Harlem: The food is getting cold.

Harlem: If you're busy just say that.

Harlem: Don't say you're coming and not be coming.

Me: I'm coming right now. I promise.

Harlem: Don't lie to me.

Me: I'm not.

I left the park in less of a hurry than anything but knew I needed to speed up my pace. I told Harlem I'd only be an hour and had been gone at least three. From her earlier messages, I knew her mother was there with her, so yeah I had to speed. I eased through the city, mind completely focused on the vehicle sitting in my garage. I was doing some sound system rewiring, a young nigga wanted to blow the streets this summer. I wasn't mad at him; I just had to wire it so the speakers fit under the floor and in the trunk, leaving some trunk space. Those thoughts disappeared when the sound of my phone ringing filled the car. I expected it to be Harlem but it wasn't. The console read Aroyal Ortega. Memphis's words replayed in my head.

She didn't think I knew she was fucking Ortega, a motherfucker with a rap sheet as long as my achievements and a slew of fucking chop shops. I knew every fucking thing.

I dismissed the thought from my head and answered Aroyal's call. "Yeah."

"I hope that shit brought you peace."

I nodded as if he could see me. "Not as much but it lifted a weight off my shoulders. I'll drop that off in the morning."

"Nah, keep it. Just take care of yourself, young nigga. There's a lot to these streets. Don't get too caught up in them, especially when you know the world is much bigger than them. Stay up."

When we hung up, I was exiting the freeway about three minutes from Harlem's house. Shit, it wasn't really her house since I had lowkey strong armed her into staying with me. I didn't regret it either because I wanted her as close as fucking possible at all times.

By the time I pulled into her driveway, I peeped another car pulling in as well, a silver BMW coupe. I watched as OA got out and laughed. Apparently I wasn't the only one late to this dinner.

"Damn, nigga, it's been what? Three years? Then the next time I see you I find out you done wifed baby sister?" OA was the first to speak as we shook hands at the stairs.

I chuckled. "Shit happens, you've been good?"

"Hell yeah. Keeping my head above water if you know what I mean. You serious

about my sister or i?—”

“Dead ass serious. All due respect, she grown and so am I. Harlem is my fucking heart, hurting her would be me hurting my damn self. Hell nah I ain’t going out like that.”

He nodded. “Respect.”

We made more small talk before getting into dinner. For the first few minutes she gave me her ass to kiss but for the most part dinner was good. She had already broken the news to her mother, so when she said she was pregnant, the only shocked one at the table was OA.

\* \* \*

A Week later ...

“Uncle, my daddy said he may be coming home soon.” Aja entered the kitchen dressed in school attire with a fresh bun and a smile. Harlem followed in a sweatsuit so similar to mine we probably got it from the same store. My baby looked like a fucking boy this morning, with exhaustion in her eyes. She was so tired this morning I got up and took the dogs out. I felt like that was the least I could do since I knew it was my baby making her tired like that. We had gone to the doctor last week and they indeed confirmed she was carrying my baby, as if either of us had any doubt. We knew what was up.

“Yo, did he say when? ’Cause I’mma need some funds on your expenses, shorty. You’re expensive,” I joked, just to mess with her.

“No, but he said I could stay with you for as long as I want. He’s gonna get a house close to yours so I can just go up and down the street.”

I laughed at her dramatic nature. “Up and down the street, who's giving you a key?”

“Harlem.” She smiled in a teasing manner, then turned to hug the zombie that was Harlem this morning. She had gotten up, made breakfast, took care of the puppies, and went back to sleep.

“Won’t you, Harlem?” Aja asked, still hugging her.

“Yeah, baby girl, whatever you want.” She hugged her back with one hand and went to grab her purse.

“Yo, you sure you don’t want me to tell Blaze another time?” I asked, eyes locked on her holding the fawn-colored puppy Sora and Blaze wanted to buy. It was about that time for the puppies to be leaving and my baby was ecstatic because she knew she needed a break. Two litters back to back was enough to wear anybody out.

“No. We can go there, then I need to stop by my house. I look like a little boy because I’m running out of things to wear over here.”

“Then just like I told your ass last week and last month, move in.”

She kissed her teeth. “And I told you I don’t want to break my lease.”

I shook my head. “Then you’ll be packing a fucking bag every week until that motherfucker is up. That is, unless you want me to go see them for you.”

Her eyes bulged briefly, then she shook her head with a quickness. “Nope.”

“Good, then handle that shit before I do, baby.” I stood up from the arm of the couch and moved toward her to take the puppy. “I’ll meet y’all in the truck. We’re taking the Range.”

“Thank God,” I heard Harlem say behind me. She hated my Jeep because she said it was flashy and too fast. That was funny to me because though the electric blue was a bit flashy, it was possibly the slowest thing I owned.

Harlem and Aja met me in the car ten minutes later. Aja holding her bookbag for school and Harlem just holding her purse.

On the way to Sora and Blaze’s spot was lil mama’s school, so that would be a quick drop-off if I was lucky and not behind the bitch in the chocolate Odyssey with a kid for every fucking grade. I questioned if her ass even had cable. Being behind her made my drop-off an extra twenty minutes every time, because why the fuck did she have to kiss all her kids on the cheeks as they got out of the car? She had about eight kids, meaning by the fifth those lips were dry as fuck and scratching the fuck out of those kid’s faces. I honked at her ass every time.

For the duration of the drive, I couldn’t help but take Harlem in. Any time she was in the car with me, or near me, I couldn’t keep my eyes off her. She was my whole fucking heart and didn’t even know it.

“I see your best friend is behind us.” Harlem’s voice broke into my thoughts as I pulled into the drop-off line.

“Man, fuck that lady.” I pulled into the drop-off spot to get out and let Aja out.

Harlem laughed and I was about to get out when Aja’s door was opened for her. I looked out the back window, and of course it was Sabastian, smiling and grinning.

“Good morning, Aja.” He greeted her which had me about to get out of the car and grab his little ass by his head. “Good morning, Ms. Harlem. What’s up, old school?” See... the lil nigga was testing my gangster and didn’t even know me. The fuck type of shit was this? I was about to get out of the car when Harlem grabbed my arm.

“Bye, guys. I love you.”

“Leave them alone; he’s just helping her out of the car.” Harlem had the nerve to have a smirk.

I side eyed her then looked in the mirror and saw Sabastian throw his arm around Aja’s shoulder as they walked into the school.

“I’m a see his little ass.” I nodded, knowing I was gonna catch his little smooth ass during pickup.

Harlem laughed just as the lady with the chocolate Odyssey honked behind me. I had half a mind to flip her off but I didn’t feel like hearing Harlem’s mouth.

“What are you gonna do if we have a daughter, Kinga?” Harlem asked on the way to Sora and Blaze’s house.

“Fuck you mean? She’s going to an all-girls school. I don’t even have to worry about that.”

“And when she gets older?”

“What do you mean? She ain’t dating until she’s at least thirty-five. No earlier. Just like Aja isn’t either. That lil nigga Sabastian keeps trying me, but it’s cool, I’m a yoke his ass up.”

Harlem laughed. “Bye. They’re just kids.”

“Hell nah. That lil disrespectful motherfucker knows what he’s doing. Gonna call me old school. I’m a show him old school.”



Harlem's hand found the back of my neck, fingertips easing between my locks. "I'm sure that's not necessary, baby."

"Yeah it is."

She continued to massage my scalp. "Sure," slid from her lips as we went in the direction of Sora's crib.

"Ain't no sure. You either with me or against me, Harlem Bleu."

She giggled. Exhaustion evident. "I'm with you baby. Always."

Several Months Later ...

Harlem

I was fat. I was also standing in the middle of an all-you-can-eat restaurant wondering if the two plates I had just inhaled were enough. Why the fuck would Blaze have Aja's birthday here in the first place? Did she not know I had lost all control when it came to food months ago? Now I was pregnant, big from the midsection on up, and feeling it all in my stature. Back aches, thigh aches, every ache and I was always hungry... I'm so hungry ! Fat, a state of existence and mental turmoil... Now I saw how my dogs felt waddling around carrying babies, ready for it to be over.

"Why the fuck you standing here looking constipated? What's the problem?" Kinga's impatient tone filled my eardrum.

"I'm fat and it's your fault."

He chuckled. "What I ain't finna do is get into this with you in here. Gimme the fucking plate so I can walk it back to the table for you."

I side eyed the shit out of him. "I wouldn't be up here if you would've gotten me more meat."

He sucked his teeth. "That's that shit. C'mon, 'fore I fight your ass in here for having my kids stressed out while you stand there acting stubborn." Yup, kids. The fact that I was currently six months pregnant with twin girls was enough to have me ready to fight their father every night. Then I stopped at the thought of the turmoil he'd go

through. Twin girls when he was already going through shit with Aja and little Mr. Sabastian.

It was my turn to suck my teeth. “I wish you would.”

He chortled. “I would. See me when we get home.”

That one statement had me biting into my bottom lip in anticipation.

Once I was seated again, Blaze laughed while Kinga’s rude ass set my plate down. He acted like I was getting on his nerves but still kissed my forehead before taking the seat next to me.

“What are you laughing at?”

“You, him, and the fact that you’re stressing his ass out.”

He leaned forward, his massive hand landing on my rounded belly. “Harlem ain’t stressing me out. Nope, not at all. Harlem just be talking and I let her talk.”

Once again, I was cutting my eyes in his direction.

Blaze giggled just as Sora called her name. He was holding their daughter out like something stunk, meaning she needed a diaper change and he wasn’t up for it.

“Are you letting me talk?” I asked when it was just him and me.

“Yep, I do. ’Cause I know when I get you home this dick is gon’ shut you up.” When he said that last part, he was sure to face me, daring me to disagree or give any lip. I didn’t because I knew what I was going home to.

“Right. Now gimme them lips to hold me over till I get home to the other ones.”

I leaned forward and mashed my lips into his before pulling back and just looking at him, our eyes locked for that moment in time.

“I love you, Harlem, even though you’re always trying to fight me for no reason.”

I smiled back. “I love you too.” Looking in his eyes was all I needed most days because even when I was off, he was on, and vice versa. He was my constant in a world of uncertainty. He kept me grounded when everything had me feeling like I wanted to fly off the handle. He was my protector... my man.

“You better.” He leaned forward and pecked my lips.

“Now what the fuck am I seeing? ’Cause ain’t no way this is baby brother, ’specially not mine.”

I heard a male voice in the distance. When Kinga pulled away from me and stood, I saw the anxiety in his stance. He would’ve called it something else but I knew better. Then I looked down at the man standing slightly shorter than him but just as tight featured with the broadest shoulders.

“You finally brought your ass home,” Kinga boomed.

“Was about time, wasn't it?”

Kinga finally cracked a smile and so did the man. Their smiles were nearly identical and that’s when it hit me. This was their brother, Aja’s daddy. This was Oden .

They embraced lovingly before pulling apart from one another. My man was happy and that made me happy.

Kinga introduced me proudly. “Harlem, baby, this is my brother Oden. O, this is Harlem.” After introductions I could tell Oden was taken aback at the change in his

brother. It was in the way he kept looking from me to him as they spoke.

“Damn, I feel like I been gone forever. You done fell your reckless ass in love and you got a baby on the way.”

I chuckled.

“A baby? Nah, this fool got twins on the way. Girls.” Sora’s voice made him turn around. They then embraced. “What’s up, big bro?” They weren’t embracing for long because Aja’s voice could be heard from afar as she squealed the word, “Daddy.”

She was so happy, I smiled. She had missed her father, and from the way he held her, he’d missed her just as much if not more.

We were hours into Aja’s birthday get together when Kinga pulled me into his embrace, holding up a piece of cake for me to try.

“No, I’m good.”

“Nah but you're tired. I see that shit all in your face.”

“I’m not tired.” I wiped my eyes, knowing damn well I was tired.

“Yeah aight, c’mon. We are about to raise up.”

“I’m good. I promise. If I wasn’t, I’d tell you.”

He gave me one more look, to make sure I wasn’t just saying I was fine, before he nodded. “One more hour and we will take it home.”

I nodded in agreement.

I was glad I'd walked into that garage that day. Glad I didn't leave when who I now knew as Jay said they'd call me. I was glad I'd taken the unprofessional ass mechanic food because I found my home. My home that would always be there... My constant.

K inga

We spent the rest of the evening at that expensive ass Brazilian steakhouse then I knew it was time to get my baby home. She was tired as hell and I could see it. What I thought was me and Harlem coming home was actually everybody coming back to my crib. Niggas was damn sure not invited but I wasn't gonna end the night like that, so I let it rock. Funny thing was, as soon as we got there, the ladies were out. Aja talked to her daddy until she fell asleep, then Harlem helped Blaze get herself and the baby situated before turning in herself. I was left in the basement with my brothers in the middle of a game of pool.

"So, Memphis. You did that?" Oden asked.

I shrugged. "He was a problem that needed to be handled."

Sora laughed. "Always talking in riddles. Either you killed the man or not." He had asked me these same questions when the news first broke but I shut him down, not willing to talk about it.

"I didn't. I was standing right in front of him, Sora."

Oden laughed. "But you got your ways. Just 'cause yeen walk up blasting doesn't mean you didn't do it."

I shrugged, focusing my attention on the pool cue in my hands. After Memphis's murder I didn't go around broadcasting my part in it. Of course I was questioned by two of Chicago's finest but they had nothing to put on me. Being pictured having a whole conversation with the man cleared me since he was shot at long range.

“What did he say? You know, since I know you had to have the last word,” Oden said, because he knew me.

“Nothing worth carrying or remembering,” I lied but didn’t feel the need to have them wondering who and what he really meant by telling me Ortega was our father. The only Ortega I knew besides Aroyal was his uncle. I copped through him for years and he never mentioned shit about knowing my mother. If he hadn’t brought it up, I damn sure wasn’t about to be a grown ass man walking around looking for a nigga to be my father.

“Now that that’s out the way, who the fuck is Sabastian?”

Sora and I both looked at one another before bursting into laughter.

“The lil nigga Kinga got a lil beef with over your daughter. He’s ten or eleven, called Kinga old school and niggas been beefing ever since.”

Oden looked confused. “From the new school?”

“Hell yeah. Every time I see him he is smirking and shit. Just wait till I catch him.” I shook my head. I’d told Harlem I was gonna let it go but hell nah. I was getting a belt on that ass. “His pops is Primal with the freights.”

Oden nodded.

“I already told him I was gonna put hands on his youngin over my niece.”

Sora laughed and so did Oden.

“Y’all think it’s funny because y’all didn’t see how disrespectful he was.” I didn’t like the way they kept playing me crazy when we all knew how little boys thought.

Oden shook his head with a smile. “If this is how you move over a ten or eleven year old, I can only imagine how you’ll move behind them twin girls. Bout to be bailing yo’ ass out.”

I chuckled. “Never been caught, the hell you mean bailing me out.” I smirked and drank from my glass. We talked for a while longer, just kicking shit like we used to before it was time to turn in. Oden decided to take the couch in the basement and I handed him blankets, knowing it got cold down here at night, while Sora went up to the room with Blaze. Before I went to get into bed, I took the dogs out. It was late as fuck but the last thing I needed was for all three of those dogs to be waking up a whole house. Harlem’s mama took Tilly after all the puppies had sold, so that left her with Tato, Bleu, and Faux. Faux was from Tilly's last litter. Harlem never ended up selling that one.

When I finally climbed into bed with Harlem, I was beat. To get comfortable, I pulled her body into mine, grateful for everything she was. I had never been the type to take anything for granted, and Harlem, I wasn’t taking for granted at all. Having her in my life was a blessing I counted twice because she belonged to me even when we were just seeing where this went. Still going on a constant ride, one I never needed to get off. Harlem showed me so much in such a short amount of time, and for that I’d be whatever she needed me to be for the rest of our lives together.

“Baby, are there some more doughnuts?” she asked in a sleep-laced tone. Midnight to wee hours of the morning cravings were normal with her ever since she hit her second trimester. I hated that shit, because it was so much sugar, but most nights I couldn’t tell her no. Tonight, I was tough.

“Hell nah, it’s too late for you to be eating that shit.” I kissed her temple and closed my eyes.

She sucked her teeth in her sleep, making me smile with my eyes closed.



“Love you too, shorty.”

“Mhmm.”

\*The End