



Bully (The Protectors #7)

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Trembling fingers gripped Bully's arm. Her eyes leaked as she pleaded with him to remain still. She had to know what would happen when she told her brother the truth. She had to know what Bully would do.

"P-please, big bro. I don't want anything to happen to you. You have too many good things going for you."

"You think I give a fuck about that shit?" Bully snarled, jerking his arm away from his sister. "That nigga violated you... so he gon' pay."

"Yes, but do you have to be the one to collect?" Gabriella stood in front of Bully as he assembled his AR-15. "Can't you let someone else handle it?"

With a sigh, Bully shook his head as he squeezed the back of his neck. Born Gabriel Thompson, he earned the nickname Bully on the court long before he was drafted to the NBA. Years later, Bully had led the Memphis Grizzlies to four championships, winning three. He did have a lot to lose—his career, his freedom—but those things meant nothing knowing a man had raped his baby sister.

"Nah. I'ma handle it myself."

"Bully, please!" Gabriella gripped his wrists as best as her small hands would allow. "There has to be someone you can call."

The left side of his mouth lifted into a grin as he looked down at her. "Of course there is, but I want to handle this myself."

“Gabriel!” She never called him by his government name. No one did—not even his parents. “I will never forgive myself if you handled this and went to prison, or worse. I know you want to take care of this for me, and I will forever be grateful to you for that. I’m begging you, big brother. Get somebody else to do it. Don’t risk everything for me. For this.” When Bully didn’t respond immediately, his sister continued. “You’ve come such a long way. If people found out what you did to him, it would destroy your image and your life. I will appreciate you just the same if you gave this mission to someone else. I would actually respect you more if you did. Please, Bully. Please.”

“Aight, aight,” Bully grumbled, removing himself from her hold. “Let me make some calls and see what I can do.”

Relief washed over Gabriella before she gave her brother a tight hug. Instead of calling Asylum or Merc, Bully called someone who wasn’t in his inner circle. Now that he was thinking logically and not through hazy anger, he knew it was best if he made sure he had an alibi and asked someone to handle this that he wasn’t close to. That way, he’d never be considered involved or a suspect.

As Bully made his way outside of his sister’s home, he pulled his phone out and dialed Rocco’s number. He answered on the third ring with, “Don’t tell me you won’t be in tonight’s game, young blood.”

“Nah it’s not that.” Bully inhaled and took a deep breath. “I need a favor.”

* * *

Three Months Later

Bully had led the Grizzlies to their last championship, and he was glad they won, because it was time for him to announce his retirement from the NBA. It hadn’t been

his intention to retire while he was still in his prime, but it had become necessary.

Asking mob leader Rocco to take care of the man who raped his sister had led to more harm than good, even though it brought peace to her. Up until that point, Bully and Rocco had a healthy relationship. Rocco had made multiple six figures betting on Grizzlies games and Bully's stats specifically. Now, in exchange for the favor, Rocco had become greedy. He wanted Bully to throw games, so he'd win even more money. With too much integrity and love for the game, Bully refused.

Rocco warned him that if he didn't return the favor in that way, he'd have no choice when he approached Bully again. Bully was cool with that. His sister was safe and at peace, the man that violated her was chopped into pieces, and he'd played in the NBA for five years. He'd never tell Gabriella the reason for his retirement because he didn't want her to feel guilty. His dream had come to fruition, even if for only half a decade, and Bully was content with that.

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Bully

Five Years Later

Wedding Day

This kind of shit didn't happen to men like me. When you came from the hood I did, you didn't get to live your dreams. You didn't get to marry the good girl. Shit, you didn't get to live past twenty. I'd not only gotten out the hood and made something of myself, but I met and fell in love with the perfect woman for me and had a beautiful baby girl in the process.

Surrounded by the men I loved and trusted, I prepared to make Innvy my wife. I didn't believe in love at first sight until I laid eyes on her. Maybe it wasn't love—maybe it was an innate need that connected me to her and told me she was the one. Regardless of what it was, I'd been locked in because of it and didn't plan on that changing any time soon.

When someone knocked on the door, I expected it to be the wedding planner coming to make sure we were good to go. My heart damn near dropped to my feet when PJ walked in. It was like seeing a ghost from my past. A past I wanted no one in this room, and for damn sure not Innvy, to be involved with. He gave me a crooked smile and bob of his head. I shifted through the bodies, seeing lips moving but not really hearing what anyone had to say.

“The fuck are you doing here?” I asked quietly once we were face-to-face.

“When Rocco granted your favor, he told you there would come a time that he’d call upon you to return it—”

“Not right now,” I pleaded. “I’m about to get married.”

“It was an offer you didn’t refuse, in exchange for a favor you wouldn’t be able to deny,” PJ continued, massaging his chin. “He wants to see you. Now.”

“You good?” Merc checked, making his way next to me.

“Yeah, brother. Everything is everything.” Running my fingers down my mouth, I tried to contain the rage that was building within me. “I need to walk him out, but I’ll be back.”

Without waiting for PJ to follow, I headed out of the room. Once we were outside, I turned to face him.

“I need fifteen minutes,” I said. “Fifteen minutes to marry my girl. Then I’ll come.”

PJ’s head shook. “You got two to say goodbye.”

“Fuck!” I swore through gritted teeth, punching the wall next to me.

As much as I hated agreeing, I didn’t have a choice. If Rocco was requesting that favor, it wasn’t an actual request. PJ was the calm before the storm. I couldn’t risk anything happening to anyone in this banquet hall because of me. So as much as I didn’t want to, I nodded my agreement and headed to Innvy’s dressing room.

All I could do was pray she was understanding and gave me grace instead of hating

me for this. My angel didn't know about my past and the things I used to be into, and this wasn't the way I wanted her to find out. Still, I knocked on the door and decided to be as honest as I possibly could be without telling her details it would put her in danger to know...

After I knocked on the door, I stepped back and took a deep breath. Innvy's mother, Bianca, poked her head out and lit up at the sight of me. I didn't know how I was looking, but whatever my expression held made hers sadden.

"Is everything alright, Bully?"

"I need to talk to Innvy."

Bianca chuckled nervously as she stepped out into the hallway. "Is this absolutely necessary? She's getting ready to walk down the aisle to you."

"I need to see her, Mama B. Now."

Without waiting for her to agree, I walked around her and into the bridal suite. Ignoring Innvy's gasp, I took her by the hand and gently led her outside.

"Bully, what is this? Are you okay?"

Gripping her shoulders, I swallowed hard as my eyes watered.

"I don't have the time to explain, but I have to go."

She stared at me for a few seconds before laughing. "You're joking right?"

"No, Angel. I'm not."

“What do you mean you have to go?” she whined as her eyes watered.

“I did some shit back in the day that I’m having to pay for now. When I come back, I promise I’ll fix this. We can get married and forget about this little hiccup.”

“It’s time,” PJ said, causing Innvy to jump as she looked back to see where the voice was coming from.

Her arm wrapped around me as she asked, “Who is he?”

“I can’t talk about it, Innvy. Just know I’m really sorry this is happening on our wedding day. I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“Now, Bully,” PJ said.

“It can’t wait just a few minutes?” Innvy asked, grabbing my hands. “We can literally just run down the aisle and say I do.”

I clenched my jaw as I cupped her cheek, willing my tears to dry. “You deserve better than that, Angel.”

“Bully—”

“Aight, nigga, damn!” I roared louder than I’d meant to when PJ called my name.

“Bully,” Innvy gritted. “Tell me what the hell this is about. Now.”

I tried to kiss her, but she mushed my face. “I have to go, baby. I’m sorry.”

“Bully, if you leave this wedding, I will never speak to you again!” Innvy yelled as I jogged toward the door where PJ had just exited.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’ll fix this shit. I promise!”

“You don’t have to worry about fixing it because the wedding and marriage will be off.” When I didn’t respond, she yelled, “Bully!”

The sound of her yelling my name had me squeezing my eyes shut. I knew I’d hurt her, but I couldn’t focus on that. Not right now. Whatever Rocco wanted me to do would require my full attention, and the quicker and more efficiently I handled it, the quicker I could come back and fix things with my girl.

* * *

A Short While Later

As soon as I made it into my home to pack a few bags, my brothers made their way over to me. I shouldn’t have been surprised to see them waiting for me. If I could depend on nothing else, I could depend on them to be loyal. Shame made it hard for me to look any of them in the eyes as I headed down the hall. I hated that I owed a man anything—even a favor. While I didn’t regret taking care of the nigga that violated my sister, I regretted not handling it myself. For the past five years, this moment had been hovering in the back of my mind and heart. I didn’t know when Rocco would pop back up or what he’d want, but I certainly wasn’t expecting it to be today.

“What the fuck is going on?” Karrington asked, charging over to me.

“I can’t talk about it.” I brushed past them all, and they followed me to my bedroom.

“Fuck you mean you can’t talk about it?” Beethoven repeated.

“Exactly what I said. I can’t talk about it.”

“Aight, everybody calm down,” Asylum said. “Are you in danger?”

My head shook as I grabbed my duffel bag. “No, not really. It’s a long story, and I don’t really have time to discuss it. I owe Rocco a favor, and he’s calling it in. If I don’t do it, then he will come after me and my family, and y’all know I’m not going to let that happen.”

“What about the wedding?” Merc asked.

My shoulders slouched as I grabbed clothes out of my drawers. “She called it off.”

“Until when?” Karrington asked. If anyone knew how things could play out when your woman found out about a lifestyle you tried to hide from her it was him. He and Luna Ray were proof of that. His love shared with Eyela was inspiring, but my heart wouldn’t allow me to consider doing life with a woman other than Innvy.

I shrugged. “Until she can get over what I told her earlier. That might not ever happen, and I can’t think about it right now. I have to make sure she and my baby will be safe. After I do this favor, I can try and salvage our relationship.”

They all remained silent as I packed. As I headed out, Karrington asked, “What can I do? Maybe I can go to Rocco on your behalf for a sit down.”

“Stay out of it, brother. I got myself into this, and I’m going to get myself out.” My hand covered the doorknob, and I looked back at them. “Y’all look after my girl. I’m going to try and be back before she goes into labor but if I’m not...”

“We got you,” Asylum assured me quickly.

With one bob of my head, I left my home and my life behind.

Each step I took toward the town car where PJ waited for me, I felt more conflicted. Should I have told Innvy about the situation sooner? Would she hold this against me forever? Was there a chance she wouldn't want to marry me when I came back? Only time would tell that truth.

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I envy

Hours After the Runaway Groom

There was nothing anyone could say to make me feel better or get me to talk. My family had a million questions, and so did Bully's. I had no answers, and not having answers only frustrated me more. Thankfully, Neo and Merc took control of the situation and got me out of there before I could completely combust. They'd been assuring everyone that I was okay and just didn't want to talk.

Regardless of how much I wanted to be left alone, that wouldn't be happening any time soon. I couldn't get rid of my best friend and Bully's crew easily. When I felt strong arms wrap around me and pull me from my fetal position, I knew exactly who it was. My tears immediately began to fall as Merc pulled me into his chest.

As I sniffled, I heard Karrington ask, "Is there... anything we can do, sis?"

"Can you bring Bully back?" Neo asked on my behalf as she rubbed my back.

Karrington released a hard sigh, but Asylum was the one who answered.

"I promise I wish we could."

"Then there's nothing you can do for me," I replied, burying my face in Merc's neck after he wiped my tears. "Why did he leave me?"

“We don’t know,” Beethoven said, “but if we hear from him before you do, we’ll tell you. You’re staying with Neo and Merc, right?”

Even with me shaking my head, Neo and Merc said yes simultaneously.

“I just want to be alone ,” I expressed, sitting up and trying to scoot away, but there was nowhere for me to go. Neo was on my left, Merc was on my right, and the rest of the guys were at the foot of the bed. As frustrated as I was, all I could do was chuckle because they didn’t play about Bully, which meant they also didn’t play about me. My hand rested on my belly as I sighed. “I appreciate you all being here but I just... need some time to process everything.”

“Then we’ll stay here,” Neo said, gripping my hand.

“Go home, best friend. I’ll be fine. I promise.”

“Nah—” Merc rejected with a shake of his head, but I gently cut him off.

“I need to be alone. If I need anything, I promise I’ll call.”

“Are you sure?” Karrington confirmed.

“Positive,” I replied, forcing a smile as my eyes watered.

“Aight, we’ll leave, but none of us will be far away,” Asylum agreed.

Neo gave me the saddest puppy dog eyes before we embraced. I thanked them all for making sure I made it home safely before they left. It appeared Bully had been here and gotten some clothes before they came to get me from my parents’ house. So whatever he was doing, he planned for it to last a while. I didn’t know if I was more hurt, angry, or confused.

What could have been so important that he'd leave me on our wedding day?

It was my pride telling him never to talk to me again if he left, because as soon as he did, I ached for him. I called him and got no answer. Eventually, the calls started going straight to voicemail. At that point, I decided I was done and that when he wanted to talk, he'd have to come to me.

In the silence of my solitude, my thoughts finally settled. Regardless of the questions I had, Bully was gone. What was supposed to be the happiest day of my life had been ruined. I had no grace to sit in my feelings because our baby girl would be here any day now. Even if he didn't want to be my husband, I hoped he'd still show up to be her father. If he didn't, I'd have to take it as a very unexpected loss and make sure she never felt the lack of his presence, though I knew I'd feel it every day... for the rest of my life.

* * *

The Next Morning

My plan was to sleep the day away. My heart was hurting, and I wasn't ready to deal with how I felt. Knocking on the door made it clear someone didn't plan to let me sleep and sulk. I wanted to tell whoever it was to go away, but since I was hoping it may have been information about Bully, I checked the camera before getting out of bed and heading toward the front door. As soon as I opened it and Gabriella saw me, she burst into tears.

The random display of emotion caught me off guard, but when I came to myself, I hugged her and gently pulled her inside.

"This is all my fault," she said through a sob as she clung to me.

“Shh... What are you talking about, Gabby?”

“This... He left because of me.”

“Bully?” She nodded. “Okay, talk to me.” I pulled back slightly and wiped her cheeks, but fresh tears coated them again. “Why do you think this was your fault?”

Sniffing, Gabriella wiped her face as I closed the door behind her. We walked toward the living room hand in hand, and she waited until we were seated on the cream colored couch to answer.

“The guys said PJ came to get Bully. If this has to do with Rocco, I’m 100 percent sure it’s because of me.”

“How so?”

Her head hung as she twiddled her thumbs in her lap. “A little over five years ago, I was raped.” A quiet breath escaped me as I clutched my chest. “Bully wanted blood. I begged him not to go after the guy himself because I didn’t want him to lose his career or freedom, so he got someone else to handle it. Though he never told me the exact details, I had a hunch Rocco was involved.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

Her head shook. “No, but that’s what my gut is telling me.”

“You can’t take responsibility for this, sis. Even if Rocco did handle it, we don’t know for sure this has anything to do with that. I would think if that was the case, Bully would have told me.”

“He wouldn’t have,” she said with an adamant shake of her head. “The only people

who knew I was raped were our parents. I didn't want people to know that and look at me or treat me differently. I made him promise not to tell anyone, which would also explain why he left without telling you why. This is all my fault, Innvy, and I am so, so sorry."

Gabriella's tears started falling again, forcing me to pull her into my arms. Focusing on her emotions made me feel less consumed by mine. It broke my heart to hear that she'd been violated, and it didn't surprise me to learn Bully handled it. If this was why he left, I couldn't help but wonder what one had to do with the other.

If Rocco was holding this over Bully's head, what did he want in exchange? And if this wasn't the reason but Bully had deeper mafia ties... it made me question who the hell I was about to promise my future to.

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Bully

Nine Months Later

I'd never been scared of anything in my life, but I was scared to face the woman that was supposed to be my wife. She'd given birth to our baby girl and named her Innah, which, in its Indian origin, meant God is perfection. We knew that to be true, and so was the love He gave us through each other. I didn't think anything would stop that love. Now, I wasn't so sure.

From the moment Innvy and I met we were inseparable. Rarely did more than a day go by when we weren't in each other's presence, so going these past nine months without her had me on the brink of insanity. While the time apart further assured me that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, a part of me feared it helped her move on from me. Because we hadn't just not seen each other—we weren't talking either. Worse, I missed the birth of our baby girl.

How would she ever forgive me for that?

Pushing those thoughts out of my head, I kept my feet light as I walked toward the back patio. It was the beginning of spring, and my parents were taking full advantage of the warmer weather. Low music played while they worked the flat top grill. While Mama worked on what looked to be fajita chicken, Pops flipped burgers.

“Y'all got enough for me?”

While Gabriella's eyes widened as she covered her mouth, Mama yelled about her baby as she rushed over to me. A sad smile lifted the corners of my mouth as I held her close. Regardless of the time away, she was the one person I knew for sure would care less about why I left and would just be glad I was back home.

"My baby, my baby, my baby!" Her entire body shook as she clung to my neck.

"It's aight, Mama. I'm back home for good."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

She kissed all over my face before finally releasing me, and Gabriella wasted no time taking her place. After I held her for a while, I walked over to Pops. He alternated between frowning and blinking back tears before taking me into his arms.

"I should beat your ass for leaving my daughter and little princess. Innvy has—"

"Please , Pops. I ain't ready yet."

With a huff, he released me. "You ain't got to be ready. It's been nine months. My grandbaby has been on this Earth for six. It ain't a damn thing you can say to justify not being here for her."

"I left to make sure I could be with her for the rest of my life. Trust me on that."

Our gazes remained locked for a few seconds before he nodded his agreement and pulled me in for another hug. After that, the energy shifted. We caught up but I asked them not to show me any pictures of Innah or give me any details about my baby girl. I wanted to experience her in real time for the first time.

Being away from Innvy was hard enough, but after her due date passed, I started to get physically sick from the thought of Innah being here without me. When Rocco realized the effect not having my girls was putting on my body, he adjusted the terms and agreed to release me. After what I'd just spent the last nine months doing, I considered us even, and he'd better too.

About an hour into my visit, I could no longer ignore Gabriella's silence. She didn't appear to be her normal bubbly self. As I sipped my beer, I walked over to the egg chair she was seated in. I plopped down on the space next to her and rocked us with my left foot.

"What's up with you?" I checked as she stared at her phone.

"Have you seen Innvy and Innah yet?"

"Nah, not yet. It's my first day back in town, so I wanted to decompress first."

Gabriella sighed as she finally looked at me. "You had to leave because of me, didn't you?" My head shook and she shoved my chest. "Don't lie to me, Gabriel. I've felt like shit since you've been gone, so telling me the truth won't make me feel any worse. I just... I need to know."

I'd always been my sister's protector. Not just physically but emotionally and mentally too. If there was ever anything I felt could hurt her, I wanted to keep it from her. With Gabriella, I didn't subscribe to the narrative that she had to suffer or struggle or experience unnecessary pain to prepare for the real world, and I felt like that was how I'd be with Innah too. Life would be hard enough for them. I wouldn't be hard too, but I would, however, be the rock that crushed anything and anyone for them and kept them steady. But for the first time, I decided to be completely honest with my sister... even if I knew the truth would hurt her.

“Yeah, it was because of that situation. I can’t say it was because of you because you didn’t ask for that to happen.”

“How did we get to this? What did he want with you? He...” Her mouth snapped shut and she looked over at our parents who were in their own world before continuing. “He killed Andre, right?”

I bobbed my head. “Right. In exchange for the favor, I agreed to do whatever he needed me to do because he handled that. At first, he wanted me to throw games, but I said no.”

“That’s why you retired?” she asked with watery eyes.

“Yeah. And before you start blaming yourself for that, that was my choice. I didn’t want him to think he could use the court against me. I won’t allow any man to have that kind of power over me. I chose to retire; I wasn’t forced to.”

“Oh God. You gave up your dream because of my bullshit. I’m so sorry, Bully.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Sis. I’d do anything to keep you safe.”

With a shaky breath, Gabriella wiped away a quickly fallen tear. “Is it over now? Whatever he asked you to do... it’s over, right?”

“Yeah, it’s over.”

Relief washed over her face as she hugged me. “I’m sorry you had to miss your wedding and the first six months of your baby’s life. Had I known me telling you the truth would have led to all this—”

“Hey, don’t even go there.” I cupped her cheek and forced her to look at me. “You

can come to me about anything. There was no way for me to know he'd wait five years to ask for his favor. It's done now, and I'm going to focus on restoring what my time away has fucked up. But I need to know that you know this isn't your fault."

Even though she nodded her agreement, I could tell she was still holding the weight of what I'd just said. Hopefully time would release her of it, because I didn't know what to say or do. And I honestly didn't have the capacity to. My sole priority now that I was back home would be getting back on good terms with my girl and establishing a relationship with my baby girl.

I chilled with my family for a little while longer before emailing my business manager and the managers for my athletic store and shoe store. After setting up meetings with them to get updated on how business had been, I sent a text to my crew's group chat.

Me: I'm home.

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I nnvy

“You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

Releasing a shaky breath, I looked around the backyard. It was my bright idea to move into a small three bedroom home in a quiet cove, and I felt like today, God was punishing me for it. Staying in Bully’s home made it hard to move on because of all the memories. The crew wanted me to get a large starter home because they were sure Bully would return soon and we’d continue with our life plans. Stubbornly, I opted for something small enough to feel cozy and be big enough for my daughter and me, and now... I regretted it.

The small home didn’t have enough room for a full backyard, but I had a gated-in square of concrete next to a small patch of grass behind the house. I had to walk through the gate to put the garbage and recycle bins on the curb for pickup. This morning, it was so windy the gate slammed shut and locked me out. I hadn’t taken the time to set up the garage code, so that was no help, and I didn’t know any neighbors yet.

On top of that, I’d literally just gotten up, so I only had my robe on. Completely naked underneath, I hadn’t even bothered to grab the tie. All I did was slip into my slides and rush downstairs to make sure I didn’t miss the garbage pickup. Now I didn’t know what to do. The last thing I wanted to do was explain to my neighbors how I’d gotten locked out of my own damn house while my baby was inside. I didn’t know how long it would take a locksmith to get here, but I didn’t want to leave her

inside for too much longer.

Deciding the only thing I could do was hop the gate, I climbed up the garbage can and did just that. My landing was horrible, so I scratched my arm, legs, and chest. All I could do was laugh because in the process of me climbing, my robe opened. I'm pretty sure my neighbor's camera caught the whole thing.

As I walked back into the house, my laughter immediately fizzled out at the sound of Innah's cries. I rushed up the stairs, not even bothering to tend to my cuts. I took the time to wash my arms and hands before going into her room to scoop her up. At the sight of me, her tears stopped and she smiled.

"Hey, mama's baby. I'm sorry I wasn't here as soon as you woke up."

I sat on the rocking chair and grimaced as stinging pain shot through me. After drying her face of its tears, I changed her and started her morning routine, then did mine. As I dried off, my doorbell rang. I wasn't expecting anyone, so I hesitantly made my way downstairs.

"Who is it?" I asked, leaning against the door.

"Moore... your next door neighbor." He paused briefly. "I uh... saw you on my camera and I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Shit." I smiled as I unlocked the door. It was too funny of a situation for me to be embarrassed. And besides, I was just happy to be back inside with my baby girl. As I opened the door, I greeted him with, "Hi."

"Hey, you good?" My smile widened as I leaned against the door. He was definitely attractive, but I had no time to be looking at a man these days. Between Innah and work, my hands were full. Plus, my heart still wanted Bully, regardless of how dumb

that made me. I wasn't waiting for him, but the love I'd reserved for him wasn't interested in being given to anyone else.

"I'm fine. How much did you see exactly?"

Moore's chuckle was sexy as he lowered his gaze down my frame. "Enough." Licking his lips, he returned his eyes to mine. "Your man can't take the trash out for you?"

"I don't have one."

"Can I handle that for you then? Otherwise, please make sure you put a chair or something in front of that gate door, beautiful. You could've gotten seriously hurt climbing over that gate."

"I know, I know. I wouldn't have done something so extreme, but my baby is here and I didn't want her to be alone. Lesson learned though, and if you want to handle it from here on out, I would really appreciate that."

"I got you. I can reach the lock from outside the gate, so I'll take care of it when I do mine."

"How can I thank you?"

Moore smiled. "By being careful and taking care of you and your baby."

"I can do that," I agreed softly.

"Good." Our eyes remained locked for a while before he added, "Have a good day..."

"Innvyy," I offered, extending my hand for him to shake.

“Innvyy,” he repeated, slowly enunciating each syllable. “Have a good day, Innvyy.”

“Thank you, Moore. You too.”

I watched as he crossed the yard and walked away, unintentionally planting his features in my memory. He was definitely my type—tall, dark, handsome, and tattooed. But that didn’t matter. I didn’t suspect the ghost of my relationship with Bully would let me entertain another man any time soon.

I made my way back upstairs to finish getting me and Innah ready. Since I had a long day with six clients, I would drop her off with my parents. My tribe made being an unexpected single mother as easy as they could have, but I tried not to take advantage of their willingness to help. At the end of the day, Innah belonged to me and Bully, and just because he wasn’t here, that didn’t give me an excuse to pawn her off on anyone else.

She was dressed too cute in a jean dress and gold jewelry ensemble, so I took a few pictures, got her settled in the car, and then we headed out. I noticed a dark car across from my home, but I didn’t give it a second thought since the house across from mine was for sale. Maybe someone was about to tour it.

My parents’ home was about a twenty minute drive from mine, and the whole ride, I thought about my encounter with Moore. He was the first man I’d admit to being attracted to since Bully left. He also made me blush. It didn’t matter. The man hadn’t even expressed interest, but if he had, I would have turned him down. I decided to call Neo and check in to get my mind off him, and we talked until I pulled up to my parents’ home.

I wasn’t able to get Innah out of her seat before the front door was opening and Daddy met me halfway. He gave me a side hug and kiss on the cheek before taking a grinning Innah out of my arms. She loved both of my parents but she gravitated

toward my daddy. That made my heart ache because it made me believe she would have been a daddy's girl if Bully was around. It was always bittersweet watching her interact with Daddy. He and the crew did everything they could for her and me, and I was eternally grateful for that.

Since I had a long day, I didn't plan to stay long, but I did want to speak to Ma. She was standing at the door ready to slather Innah's face with kisses. The sound of Innah's giggles made my heart light. Life wasn't all cupcakes and champagne, but I had a happy, healthy baby, and that's all that mattered at the end of the day.

"Hey, baby," Mama greeted me as she gave me a hug.

"Hey, Ma. How are you?"

"Good. You look nice."

"Thank you."

"You got time for breakfast?"

My head shook as Daddy looked back for my response. "Nah, busy day."

"Can I at least make you a quick smoothie or yogurt bowl?" Daddy asked.

I opted out of telling him I planned to stop by Starbucks and told him I'd take the yogurt bowl since I could have that later for lunch. He wasted no time getting Innah set up in her chair before starting on it, which gave Ma time to ask me about my morning. I told them about the gate slamming shut behind me, and while Ma was as amused as I was, Daddy was furious.

"From now on, don't even bother with that shit, V. I'll do it," he offered.

“You don’t have to. My next door neighbor said he would. He saw the whole thing on his camera and came to check on me shortly after.”

“Well that was nice of him. Is he single?”

“Ma.” My eyes rolled as I shook my head. “Please don’t start.”

“It’s been nine months.”

“So? I have a thriving business and a six month old. I’m not thinking about no man right now.”

She sucked her teeth and crossed her arms over her chest. “You need to be. I don’t want to see you turn into a shell of yourself. You never do anything anymore. Even when you don’t have my grandbaby you spend your free time cooped up in that house.” Her voice softened when she added, “I just... want to make sure Bully didn’t... break you.”

Gritting my teeth as my eyes watered, I nodded. I understood and appreciated where she was coming from. She was right. Since the wedding, I hadn’t really done anything fun consistently beyond play around the house or park with my baby. It wasn’t an intentional shrinkage, and I certainly wasn’t trying to let the darkness of that day dim my light. But it was easier said than done when you had to move on from what you thought would be your forever. Bully wasn’t just my fiancé—he was my person. My soul mate. My best friend.

We did everything together, shared everything together.

I didn’t know how to do life without him in it now, and this was the only way I knew how to adjust. It wouldn’t last forever, but for right now, it was what gave me peace.

“I’m not broken, Ma. Maybe just a little bent. I feel like I have to grieve a relationship, a person, that’s still alive. My method might worry you, but I’m doing what’s best for me. I’m okay. Really.”

“If that changes, there’s a nice young man working at the clinic now,” Daddy said. “He has a three year old daughter. The mother is in the picture, but they have a healthy coparenting relationship.”

All I could do was smile and shake my head because they were impossible. I sat around for a few minutes more until he was done with the yogurt bowl. I gave my baby all my love in hugs and kisses before saying goodbye to my parents and heading out. When I made it to my spa, I could have sworn that same dark car from earlier was outside but that was impossible. Shaking my paranoid thoughts off, I headed into my spa for what I needed to be a smooth and successful day.

* * *

That Next Morning

I underestimated the fall. My body was sore, the cuts burned, and my leg was killing me. I was in so much pain I got me and baby girl dressed then got right back in bed. The last thing I wanted to do was cancel my appointments for the day, so I planned to take some Advil and hoped that made the pain go away. At the sound of the gate opening, I tried to shoot up as quickly as I normally would and instantly regretted it. Limping over to the window, I smiled at the sight of Moore pulling my bins back into the gate.

There was no way I’d be able to make it downstairs before he left, so I lifted the window and called his name. He looked up at me and smiled. Unlike the dressed down version of him I saw yesterday, Moore was dressed in a black suit that made him look twice as good.

“Up!” I turned to see Innah holding her arms up, wanting me to pick her up. I wobbled over to the bed and grabbed her then returned to the window.

“Good morning,” I spoke.

“Good morning, beautiful. Y’all good up there?”

“Yes. I just wanted to thank you again for taking care of that.”

“No problem at all. Your daughter is a cutie pie. Those chubby little cheeks!”

I beamed in pride as I looked at Innah. She was truly all the good things about her father and me wrapped up in one. She had Bully’s skin tone and eyes, but everything else about her face looked just like mine.

“Thank you, Moore. The cheeks definitely have the power to help the little one get away with anything.”

“I bet,” he said through his chuckle. “You have a good day, aight?”

“You too. Um... I usually cook dinner around six.”

Confusion covered my face as I pouted, unsure why the hell I’d just told him that. Moore licked his lips as they spread because of his smile.

“Is that an invitation for me to join you?”

“I’m not exactly sure.”

Moore’s head bobbed. “Well... when you are... I want you to let me know. I’d love to join you, but only if you’re sure.”

Nibbling my bottom lip, I considered his words. Quite frankly, it was nice talking to a man that wasn't attached to Bully. Still... I wasn't sure I was ready to have a full conversation over dinner with a stranger.

"I'll let you know."

"Good." His eyes shifted in Innah's direction. "Bye, pretty girl."

"Bye bye!" Innah yelled with a rapid wave, bucking against me and making us both laugh.

After closing the window, I walked back to the bed and climbed under the covers, hoping the pain would leave soon and that I wouldn't have to cancel any appointments for the day.

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5

Bully

Four Nights Later

It took everything inside of me not to get out the car when I saw Innvy's neighbor putting some shit on her porch. I didn't see what all it was, but I could recognize roses and a red gift bag. The more I reminded myself that I'd been gone for nine months, radio silent, and had no real claim to her... the harder it was for me to remain seated. What little discipline I had left fizzled away as I got out of the car.

"Aye," I called out as he headed off the porch. Motioning toward the shit he left behind, I told him, "You can take that wit'chu."

He looked back on the porch, then at me. "I'm sorry?"

I waited until we were face to face to speak. "The flowers and shit... she don't need that."

His arms crossed over his chest as he looked at me with amusement. "Last I checked, Innvy was single."

"I'm not sure why my wife said that, but like I said, she don't need that."

"She obviously doesn't need you either, seeing as she out here climbing gates and shit because she accidentally locked herself out of her gate taking out the trash." He

scoffed and eyed my frame. “The fuck was you at then? I see why she said she was single.”

I wasn't sure if the rage came from the truth of me not being present, knowing that had happened to her, or him actually trying to check me. Regardless, I sent a two piece to his mouth and eye. Stretching out my leg behind his, I tripped him when he stumbled back. Seeing as he was knocked the fuck out, I looked around to make sure no one was watching as I tossed him over my shoulder and carried him back to his house.

The whole time I did, I grumbled under my breath. I really couldn't believe this shit. Did she call herself dating this clown? The more I thought about her trying to move on from me, the more irritated I became. I sat his ass against the wall by the front door then closed him inside before going back to Innvy's place. It was like pulling teeth to get Neo to tell me where she'd moved to and getting her to promise not to tell Innvy I was home. All I'd asked for was a week to get my affairs in order, so that when I went to Innvy, nothing would need my attention.

I'd checked on my businesses and Asylum didn't expect my help at any of his asylums any time soon. The high schools I normally mentored at told me I could start fresh for the next schoolyear, which I appreciated. It was my plan to pull up on Innvy so we could talk tomorrow, but seeing him leaving that shit for her almost thwarted my plans. As I pushed the wrapping paper aside, I felt my face twist into a scowl at the sight of the little bear that I was sure was for my baby girl. There was a card inside.

No pressure. Just wanted to let you know I'm sure.

I had no idea what that was in reference to, but Innvy wouldn't know either way. I grabbed the bag and roses and tossed them in my car to throw away when I got home. Regardless of how long I'd been gone or what happened during my absence, Innvy

and Innah were mine, and no one was going to take my place.

* * *

The Next Afternoon

I watched as Innvy talked to her receptionist. She looked radiant and just as beautiful as she did on our wedding day. It didn't matter how much time had passed—I'd never forget her face, and I'd never find a woman more beautiful than Innvy Smith.

She had cocoa brown skin that covered a flawless tall, lean frame. No tattoos or piercings. Innvy had a dancer's body and probably would have become one if she had the discipline and desire to take it seriously. Instead, she went a safer route but still took a risk with owning her own business as an esthetician. Before I left, she was planning to start her own skincare line, and I wondered if she'd launched it. A part of me hoped she hadn't. I'd already missed the birth of our baby. I didn't want to miss the birth of her dream too.

After taking a deep breath and popping a piece of gum into my mouth to try and calm my nerves, I got out and headed across the street. There was no doubt in my mind that Innvy still loved me, but I didn't have the confidence to believe love would be enough—not right away at least. My grip on the bag tightened the closer I got to the door. I hoped lunch from one of her favorite places would make my presence easier to take.

A bell chimed as I stepped inside, and both women looked at me. While the receptionist smiled, Innvy's mouth fell open. Her body swayed as she gripped the glass desk.

“Hi, welcome to Innvious Spa. I'm Cierra, and it will be my pleasure to serve you. Are you here to make an appointment?”

My head shook as I closed the distance between me and Innvy. As I set the food on top of the desk I said, “Nah, I’m here for my wife.”

“Oh. Is she having a service performed tod—”

The sound of Innvy’s palm against my face cut ol’ girl’s words off. It stung, but it wasn’t shit I couldn’t handle. In fact, I wouldn’t have blamed her if she tried to do more. Innvy’s jaw tightened as she grabbed the bag from Venice Kitchen and tossed it into the trash before storming away.

I didn’t know if I should go after her or give her time to process the sight of me. Knowing Innvy, it would be impossible for her to hear me while she was angry. So as much as I didn’t want to, I left. Now that she knew I was here, I’d give her time to calm down and process that. But we were going to talk... today.

6

I nnvy

My entire body shook, and tears streamed from my eyes as I paced. Had I not slapped him, I wouldn't have believed Bully was actually here. And then he had the nerve to show up with Venice Kitchen. I could tell by the smell it was my favorite thing on their menu—chicken parmesan. Damn! Had I not been so upset at the sight of him, I would have thoroughly enjoyed that food.

“Are you okay, Innvy?” Cierra asked. “Who was that?”

“Just leave it alone,” I pleaded, wiping my face. “I need you to reschedule the rest of my appointments for the day. I have to go.”

“Sure. Anything you need.”

With a nod, I mumbled a quick thanks before grabbing my purse and keys and heading out of my office. My thoughts were so discombobulated I drove to my parents' house on autopilot. As soon as I arrived, I grabbed my baby and held her as I cried. My mama's words were going in one ear and out of the other. I'm not sure how long it took me to calm down and be able to focus on what she was saying.

“Please, baby. Just tell me what's wrong.”

I looked down at Innah who'd cried herself to sleep. It hadn't been my intention to put my feelings on her. In that moment, she was the only person who could make me

feel better, but I wasn't thinking about how seeing me cry would make her cry. I gave her a few kisses before carrying her to the bed in the guest bedroom she napped in then whispered to Ma, "Bully is back."

Her eyes blinked rapidly and frame grew rigid before she grabbed my hand and led me outside.

"You've seen him?" she asked as we walked down the hall.

"Yes. He showed up at the spa today."

Mama scoffed. "He's got some nerve. What the hell did he have to say?"

Her anger made me smile. "He didn't really have a chance to say anything. I slapped him and threw the food he had away before leaving his ass standing there."

"Good," she replied, chin jutting out defiantly. "He's got another thing coming if he thinks you're going to fall for some cute little gesture. You've worked hard to get him out of your system. Don't you let him back inside now."

Sighing, I ran my fingers through my straightened hair. "I can't even think about that right now."

"You need to. You need to make up in your mind right now what you want and what you want to offer him. Now I won't blame you if you let him be in my grandbaby's life, but when it comes to you, you need to deny him access. Only God knows why he left and what he's been doing for the last nine months. He can't just come back and act like nothing happened."

I didn't know what to say to that. He did say he'd come back for his wife. And as hurt and angry as I was, I couldn't act like a part of me wasn't happy to see him. Instead

of saying anything, I sat down and palmed my face as I rocked back and forth. This was not how I saw my day going... at all .

* * *

That Evening

I hid out as long as I could at my parents' home before going to mine. That same black car was outside, and now, I knew it belonged to Bully. How the cove was situated, I had to make a slight turn to get into the garage and back of my home, which I was grateful for, because I didn't have to see Bully when he got out of his car. In fact, the only reason I knew he got out was because I heard the door close.

I grabbed Innah and her bag and headed inside through the garage. By the time I was heading upstairs to get her settled, the doorbell rang. With a groan, I continued upstairs to put her in bed. Since I stayed later than expected, I fed and changed her there. All I'd have to do was get her out of her clothes and washed up for bed and she'd be good. She was a heavy sleeper, so I should be able to get that done without her waking up.

The doorbell rang again, and she breathed harder, making me smile. I ran my fingers over her wavy hair before leaving the room. The closer I got to the door, the harder and faster my heart beat. Earlier when I saw him, it caught me so off guard I could do nothing but lead with my anger and cry. Now, I felt a bit more in control of my emotions.

Opening the door slightly, I looked at him but left no room for him to come inside.

Damn.

He looked good.

Tall, athletic build. Milk chocolate brown skin that was covered in tattoos. Square head and tapered fade. Skin colored, soft, juicy lips. Bully had perfect white teeth, but my favorite part of him was his eyes. They were slanted and syrup brown with an intensity that always made me feel like he was looking through me... not at me. My daughter had those same penetrative eyes. I cried every time she looked at me for the first three weeks of her life, because they reminded me so much of him.

Bully had a beard now, and I couldn't lie... it made him even sexier. The thirty-three year old looked more mature—buffer too.

What had he been doing?

“Can I come in?” he asked softly with that gruff voice I'd fallen in love with the first time I heard it.

“No.”

He smiled, and as much as I didn't want to, I smiled as well.

“We need to talk, Angel.”

“You're nine months too late for that, Gabriel.”

His eyes closed and nostrils flared. “Can I at least see Innah?”

That made me chuckle.

“Oh, now you want to see my daughter?”

“She's our daughter.”

“No, she’s my daughter,” I clarified, pointing to my chest. “ I’m the one that gave birth to her. I’m the only parent on her birth certificate. And I’m the one that’s been taking care of her.”

Bully’s tongue slid over his teeth. “You’re right,” he conceded.

I had no reply to that.

I wasn’t expecting him to actually agree.

“Can I see her? Please?”

He stepped close—too close. I inhaled and held, trying to make space for him. I didn’t want to touch him. Couldn’t touch him. If I touched him, I’d crack. Nodding, I swallowed hard and opened the door wider. It wasn’t until he was inside and a few feet away from me that I felt like I could breathe.

“She’s asleep.”

“That’s fine. I just want to see her.”

I led him up the stairs, acutely aware of his closeness. The warmth of his skin... the unique scent combination of the soapy and oriental cologne he wore. Chills covered my arms and my pussy leaked without my permission. When we made it to the top of the stairs, he wrapped his arms around me from behind.

Gasping, I tensed immediately.

“Bully...”

My voice shook as his beard and lips grazed my neck, making me shiver. “This is the

first time I've felt my heart beat in nine months, baby. I missed you so fucking much."

For one very, very brief moment, I allowed myself to relax in his embrace. It didn't matter how many people hugged and held me, no embrace felt as good, warm, and safe as Bully's. Unfortunately, the man who had become the safest place for me felt foreign and unsafe because of his disappearing act, so as much as I didn't want to, I pulled away.

We walked into her room, and I intentionally stayed a few steps away from her crib. He took small steps toward it. I heard the intake of breath that filled him when his eyes landed on her. For a few seconds, he stared at her. When it seemed he couldn't take it anymore, Bully picked her up and rested her against his chest. Tears slipped down his face as he laughed quietly, then hummed. Holding the back of Innah's head, he rocked her and kissed her over and over and over again.

Her eyes fluttered open, settling on him long enough for her to smile before they closed again.

"Hey, Princess. Hey, baby girl." She whimpered and squirmed before looking at him again. She smiled—again. "Daddy's home, and I promise, I'm never leaving you again." He sniffled. "You hear me? Only God will be able to take me away from you."

Innah looked his face over for a few seconds more with a tilted head before going back to sleep. The moment somehow felt intrusive, so I turned away and wiped my own tears. Hearing him promise to never leave her again did something to me... something I didn't want to feel for him. Not this soon at least. Regardless of how things ended between us, Bully had always been a man of his word. If he promised to be here for her, he would be.

“I’ll uh... give you a moment.”

He gave me a distracted thank you as I left the room, unsure what the hell to do with myself. I decided to shower and try to clear my thoughts, hoping he’d be gone by the time I was done. Once I was dressed in a two piece short set, I went back to her room, and he was still there... holding her... looking at her as if he’d never seen a more beautiful sight. I understood his reaction to her because it was the one I had too.

“How long did you plan on staying?” I asked, gaining his attention.

“I guess I can leave now since she went back to sleep.”

Nodding, I watched as he stood and put her back in bed. Then, we went back downstairs. I avoided his eyes as he opened the door but made no effort to leave.

“I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but I hope we can talk soon, Innvy. There’s a lot that I couldn’t tell you then and I really shouldn’t tell you now, but I will. I will because I love you and I want to be with you and our daughter. So if you need time and space, I can give you that—” His hand gripped my chin and tilted my head in his direction. “But I am not giving up on us. Do you hear me?”

“You don’t get to come here and—”

“Aye, fuck allat shit.” He tightened his grip on my chin as I huffed and tried to push away. “Now I know I fucked up but everything I did was for a reason. I just need you to trust me, baby.”

“Trust you?” I repeated with a laugh, smacking his hand away. “You left me on our wedding day. You weren’t here for the birth of our baby! I haven’t seen or heard from you in nine months, and you expect me to just... trust you?”

“Yes, because other than that, I’ve never done anything to make you feel as if you couldn’t trust me.” My eyes rolled and head shook as I took a step back, but he gripped my shoulders and pulled me forward. “Innvy, you know it had to be something drastic to make me leave you. All I’m asking for is the grace and space to explain what and why. If after that you don’t want to be with me... I’ll give you that.”

“Fine,” I agreed, willing to say just about anything to get him out of my house so I could think and breathe.

“Are you free tomorrow?”

My head shook as I reached around him to open the door fully. “No.”

“Wednesday?”

“That won’t work either,” I declined, pressing my palms together. “I have a really busy week and I don’t want to have this kind of conversation after dealing with clients all day.”

“Then this weekend?” he confirmed. “Saturday evening?”

I thought it over, and when I was unable to come up with an excuse, I agreed with, “That’s fine.”

“What time do you want me to come over?”

“Can you just meet me when I take Innah to your parents?”

His jaw clenched and I could tell he wanted to say no but he agreed. When he left, I got mad at him all over again. How dare he give up on me so easily? All I could do

was groan as I headed toward the kitchen for a glass of wine. While I washed my sleeping beauty up, I drowned in thoughts of her father. One minute I wanted him to leave me alone, and the next I wanted him to fight for me. Regardless, as long as he was consistent with Innah, that was the most important thing.

7

Bully

That Weekend

From Tuesday to Friday, I stopped by and saw my girls every morning. Innvy would roll her eyes and rush me out, but I saw her smile when she didn't think I was paying any attention. I always brought her and baby girl something because I didn't feel comfortable showing up empty handed. I knew gifts wouldn't make up for my absence, but giving them something made me feel like I was offering more than my presence until it was enough.

Innah was my heart in human form. She was my joy. My princess. Such a happy baby. Innvy and our tribe had been doing well with her, and I was grateful for my brothers stepping in while I had to be away. Her room had a princess theme, so I'd been bringing something new for the room or her some princess themed clothes every day.

For Innvy, it was always Starbucks, flowers, and a card with a handwritten note that expressed my gratitude for her giving me the chance to see my princess even with things being up in the air with us. I told her if she didn't want me after the talk that I'd leave her alone but that was a lie. The first one I'd ever told her, and I was sure it would be the last too.

I was supposed to meet up with the crew tonight, so I needed me and Innvy to make progress today. I needed the time away to be worth it. I needed to be able to look

them in the eyes the with confidence that came from knowing I hadn't destroyed my family.

As I left the house, I shot Innvy a text to confirm she was still good with us talking. I knew she wanted to talk at my parents' house, but I didn't want them there as a buffer. Pops would want to protect her from me and Ma would want her to forgive and forget.

When my phone vibrated, I paused starting the car to see if it was her.

My Wife: Yeah tonight is still fine.

Me: Can I meet you at your place after you drop baby girl off? Or for dinner somewhere?

My Wife: Don't push it ??

Me: ??You gotta eat. Can I at least bring something?

Her dots bounced around for a while before she finally agreed. Innvy was a foodie. A good meal with good company was comfort for her. If I could feed her, that would automatically relax her for our conversation.

I could say even with her being distant we'd made progress this past week. We agreed to me spending time with Innah with her and our parents for the next couple of weeks just to make sure our princess was comfortable with me. She was still in that clingy stage and preferred her mother and people she was comfortable with, but when I had her, she was always in good spirits. I didn't want to be cocky and think if I had her alone for hours it would stay that way, so I was cool with being with her around others while we continued to learn each other's temperament.

She was a goofy little baby and loved to laugh. Innah could roll around and sit upright. She could say Ma, bye, and other one syllable words. When she couldn't outright ask for something, she pointed and babbled until you figured it out. If you were wrong, she'd say no, and when you got it right, she would say yes and clap and cheer. It was the cutest shit I'd ever seen. I loved that little girl before she was born, but being in her presence now... all I could say was she was literally my heart in human form. I didn't think there was a love that could mirror the love I had for Innvy, but the love I had for our daughter was certainly it.

It made me get teary eyed when I found out my parents were showing Innah pictures of me and telling her I was her daddy. That explained why she smiled when she saw me. Now, I was trying to get her to call me Daddy because her petty ass could say Ma. But she would say Ma and laugh hysterically. The closest we'd gotten was Duh and I was cool with that. At this point, I felt like she thought it was a game and wouldn't say it even if she could because I would toss her in the air and tickle her when she said Ma.

My thoughts and affections for my girls carried me for the drive to Innvy's favorite sushi spot. I grabbed two different kinds of sushi and the chicken katsu she used to eat once a week then took the short drive to her home. I saw her bitch ass neighbor checking his mail and chuckled. Apparently, he told her what happened between us. She was upset but he said it was his fault because he wasn't prepared for the verbal sparring to turn physical, so he didn't have a chance to defend himself. I respected his admission and would gladly give him the chance to square up again if he wanted to... though the end result would still be the fucking same.

I pulled into the driveway and chuckled when I noticed him lingering instead of going right inside. After cutting the car off, I grabbed the food and looked in his direction.

"Wassup?" I asked to check his temperature.

“You tell me.”

That made me smile. “All is well as long as you stay your neighborly ass away from my wife.”

He chuckled and rolled his tongue over his cheek. “She told me y’all got some shit to work out so I’m falling back, but just to let you know, if you leave again... I’m taking her and your baby.”

“Gabriel.”

The only thing that stopped me from responding was Innvy calling my name. “Bully,” I corrected, unsure why she felt the need to call me that shit in front of him. Maybe because she knew that would be the only thing sharp enough in my ears to get me to respond. Either way, I headed toward the front door. As much as I wanted to punch the cocky grin off his face, I couldn’t blame him for wanting Innvy. He’d never have her, though, and I was very firm on that. “Fuck you call me that in front of him for?” I asked with a frown as I stepped inside.

She chuckled as she locked the door. “That’s your name ain’t it?”

“Nah. You call me Bully or bae. Matter fact, just call me bae.”

“Whatever, Bully.”

“Wassup with you and him? You fuck him?”

Innvy’s eyes rolled as she smiled. “So what if I did?”

I shoved the food in her chest and turned to go back outside, but she grabbed my arm as her laughter floated in the air.

“Get back in here, crazy. No, I didn’t have sex with him. I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

“Did you want to? Did you kiss him? Y’all go out on dates?”

“Bully, I know that’s not what you came here for.”

“I came here to tell you the truth, but if he or anyone else has you, that’s something we need to talk about too.”

Her head shook as she headed toward the living room, which felt like just a few steps in comparison to the large home we once shared.

“I haven’t dated him or anyone else.”

“Good. I’d hate to send a few bullets into Mr. Rogers because you cheated on me.”

It took her a second to catch the reference but when she did, she cackled. Me singing the first few lines of “Won’t You Be My Neighbor” made her laugh harder. Her eyes watered as she cupped her cheeks.

“I missed you,” she whispered.

“I missed you too.”

Pulling in a shaky breath, Innvy focused her attention on the bag of food.

“Technically it wouldn’t have been cheating because you left me.”

“You mine, and you gon’ always be mine. The sooner you accept that, the sooner we can get back to us.”

Her head shook as she opened her chopsticks. She didn't reject what I said, so I would accept that. We ate the sushi in silence, and I thought it was cute that she felt the need to grab a bottle of tequila when it was time for us to talk. As nervous as she seemed to be about hearing the truth, that made me wonder what scenarios she'd been thinking about while I was gone. I felt bad for making her worry and wonder, but that was over now, and I hoped she'd let me fix what I fucked up.

"Where do I begin?" I asked myself more than her as she took a shot of the tequila.

"The beginning is always nice."

"To make a very long story short, Rocco made a lot of money betting on me and the Grizzlies when I played. Because of that, we established a relationship. We weren't friends or no shit like that, but when we were out, he would always take care of the tab for me and whoever I was with. If I went to any of his businesses, whatever I wanted would be free. Shit like that." I paused and pulled in a deep breath. "When my sister was raped, I was going to kill the person who did it. She begged me not to, so I asked Rocco to handle it. He told me he would and that since he was doing me a favor, the day would come when I would have to do one for him too."

"Oh, so she was right then? Gabriella came to me the morning after the wedding sure that was why you'd left but I didn't believe her."

I nodded as I looked into her beautiful eyes. She had the prettiest doe shaped, dark brown eyes. Innvy was beautiful and sexy but she was also pretty as fuck. She had classic doll like features—doe eyes, heart shaped face, pointy nose, round and pouty lips. Her natural hair was longer now, reaching her waist. It was pulled up into a high ponytail, giving me the perfect view of her face.

"Yeah, apparently Rocco heard through the underworld that I was going to be Karrington's underboss temporarily. He decided to capitalize and use me

professionally since he couldn't use me on the court anymore. A while back, he wanted me to throw games so he could have a seven figure payout when he bet. That was why I retired. So much time had passed I thought he'd forgotten about Andre, but clearly I was wrong."

She leaned forward. "What did he ask you to do?"

"He wanted me to operate as an enforcer while his team set up shop in Mississippi and Rose Valley Hills. The Nahtahn Cartel has a very heavy presence in Rose Valley Hills, and they weren't making it easy for him to take over any territory."

"I don't mean this disrespectfully, but I'm ignorant of what you do and who you are in the streets," she admitted. "Why would he ask you to do that?"

With a smile, I took her hand into mine. "I don't take that as a disrespectful question at all. You don't know who I am, or who I used to be in the streets, because I never wanted you to. I didn't think I'd make it playing ball, so I sold drugs. I got a lot of bodies under me, Angel, and I'm not proud of that, but it is what it is. When I was drafted, I went legit. I started offering protection and security with Asylum and Merc to clean up my image. But my reputation is my reputation. He knew what I was capable of, and hearing that I was going to work under Karrington was like a green light for him to use me."

"Did he... make you kill people there?"

"I don't want to lie to you," was all I said.

With a nod, Innvy pulled her hands out of mine. "So you've spent the last nine months working for a mobster in a city that's just a few hours away? You... what? Were a bodyguard for his people who killed his enemies or competition when you had to?"

“Exactly, except he couldn’t move in on the Nahtahn territory, so we were working on territory in Nashville and Jackson, Mississippi instead. I guess he didn’t want his main enforcers to be away for as long, so he used me.”

“And you got the job done,” she said with a bitter laugh as she poured another shot.

“I didn’t really have a choice, Innvy. I did what I had to do to protect my sister then and the rest of my family now. Rocco has a reputation of making what he wants to happen by any means necessary. He’s known for going after the families of those who cross him. The last thing I was going to do was say no and risk him coming after you or anyone else I love.”

“Why didn’t you tell me!” she stressed with a quiet, urgent tone. “You didn’t trust me with all of you? Why didn’t you warn me? That would have made the last nine months a hell of a lot easier.”

“I promised her I wouldn’t tell anyone. I should have asked her permission to tell you, but so much time had passed that I honestly wasn’t expecting him to ask me to do anything. Looking back now, I should have told you the day of our wedding, but I didn’t want to share that part of myself with you.”

“Why not?”

“That’s not the version of me you met. You met the retired NBA player with legal businesses who mentors students and helps high school coaches. I didn’t want to tell you I used to be a drug dealer who killed people. How would I explain that?”

Her eyes watered as she smiled with one side of her mouth and cupped my cheek.

“Like you just did. I loved you unconditionally, Bully. I wouldn’t have judged you.”

“Loved?” I repeated, heart dropping. Past tense. Loved . Her mouth opened and

closed. “You loved me? You saying you don’t love me anymore?”

“Of course I still love you. It’s just...” Twiddling her thumbs, she avoided my eyes. “I spent almost a year wondering where you were and why you left me. I’ve worked hard to get you out of my system and—”

“I didn’t tell you to do that.”

“Bully,” she said with a smile.

“If you got me out your system, I’ll make my way back in. But something tells me I’m still inside, even if you don’t want to admit it.”

“This is a lot,” she whispered. “Um... We can set up a schedule for you and Innah. Maybe you can start taking her to my parents when I have to work and yours on the weekend. When you feel comfortable, you can have her for a few hours and eventually overnight.”

My head shook as she stood. “I mean... that’s cool... but you talking like we separated and won’t be living together soon.”

“Gabriel—”

Standing, I grabbed her wrists and pulled her into my chest. I wrapped her arms around me. The hold was weak but when she finally surrendered, Innvy clung to me. She was significantly shorter than me, so I kissed the top of her head and her temple as I held her close.

“I love you, Innvy. Walking away from you was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. I did that to keep you and our princess safe. Now that I’m back...” I cupped her cheek so she would look at me. Her eyes watered as she tightened her grip around

me. “I apologize for not communicating, but I will never apologize for doing whatever I have to, to keep you safe. But I can promise you, if you let me back in, I will never willingly leave you again.”

Licking the corner of her mouth didn’t stop her tears from falling. Her arms dropped and she took a step back.

“I need some time, Bully.”

“Okay. Can you just... tell me if we have a chance?”

Her head shook as she took another step back. “It’s not that simple. I don’t... trust you anymore. I don’t feel like my heart is safe with you anymore. You just... left me.” More tears fell. “You made me have our baby alone.”

“Angel...” I tried to hold her, but she lifted her hands and took another step back.

“Your friends, our family, they couldn’t replace you, Bully. I conceived her with you . She was our love child. I’ve had her for the last six months alone. Do you know how hard this has been for me? To feel alone in a room full of our loved ones just because I didn’t have you?”

My hand wrapped around her neck and I pulled her into my chest, whether she wanted me to or not. Her fists swung wildly until she tired herself out, then she held me again as she sobbed. I picked her up and carried her to her room, where I held her until she cried herself to sleep. As much as I didn’t want to leave, I did.

She wouldn’t want to deal with the vulnerability of the moment in front of me after she woke up. When I made it to the car, I sent her a text so she wouldn’t think I abandoned her.

Me: I'm gone but I'm only a call away if you want me to come back. I'll pick princess up tomorrow and bring her home. If you want to talk more I'll be ready but I can also give you space. Just know I'm not giving up on our family. On you. I will earn your trust back and be the man you once felt safe and secure with. I love you baby and I want you and you alone. Please don't ever doubt that.

After sending the text, I pulled out of her driveway. We'd made some kind of progress but it wasn't as much as I wanted us to. I'd take things slow because she was worth it—we were worth it.

That I was sure of.

8

I nnvy

Brunch with Neo wasn't going as expected. She admitted to telling Bully where we lived, and I didn't fault her for that. I was sure he and Merc hadn't taken it easy on my girl. Learning that he'd taken a week to get his professional affairs in order so he could devote all of his attention to me and Innah was kind of sweet. I wasn't expecting to break down in tears last night but what I'd said to him was true. Unfortunately, I didn't trust him anymore. I knew he was a man of his word, but there was a part of me that was waiting for the day he'd disappear again.

Maybe it was my ego or an unhealthy, dependent version of love, but I couldn't understand how he'd been able to go nine months without talking to me. I'd just said that to Neo, and she carefully considered my words before responding.

"Well... men aren't wired like us. We use time to detach and communication to gain clarity. Men use solitude to find clarity. The less they have us, the more they want us. I would imagine not a day went by that didn't make Bully want you more. While you, on the other hand, spent that time trying to want him less."

There was no denying that, so I didn't even bother to. Instead, I took a sip of my mimosa.

"If it makes you feel better, Merc said he spent their guys' night last night pouting and looking at pictures of you and Innah."

That did make me blush. “He did?”

“Yep. They stayed out for like an hour before they all went home to their women. Bully was pissed because he didn’t want to hang with the wild ass single men after they left.”

I could only imagine. Karrington and Eyela had a new baby boy and Aspen and Malaysia had a little girl. Beethoven wanted to have a second baby with Whiskey but now that he was working in Memphis with Karrington, they decided to hold off on expanding their family. Asylum and Dauterive were content with True and Shiloh for now, and Neo was ready to get the rest of her babies with Merc out of the way. That had been my plan too—to have my babies with Bully back to back so they could grow up together and so I could enjoy traveling and living my life without having to take so many breaks because I was pregnant.

Now, I wasn’t sure what the future held for us. I heard Bully when he said he wanted me and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want him too, but I didn’t want to feel like I made it too easy for him to come back. I didn’t want him to think he could do something like this again and I’d take him back. If there was no fear of losing me, what reason would he have to treat me right?

“I wonder why he didn’t call me. Well, I guess because I never texted him back.”

“Any why didn’t you?”

I shrugged and fought my smile. “Just... not trying to fall back into that habit with him.”

Neo sucked her teeth as she sat back in her seat. “Girl, bye. You know you want that man. Ain’t no point in you playing hard to get.”

“I’m not trying to play hard to get,” I said through my light laughter. “I just don’t want him to think what he did was okay. I don’t want him to think he can treat me any kind of way and there will be no consequence. That I will just accept it.”

“Have you told him that?”

“No. Last night was the first time we really talked about anything other than Innah. Usually when he pops up she’s all we talk about.”

“So maybe you should tell him that. There’s no point in punishing yourself if you want to be with him just to prove a point.”

“Who said I want to be with him? What makes you think not talking to him is me punishing myself?” The skeptical look she gave me made us both burst into a fit of laughter. “Okay, okay, so maybe I do want to be with him. But I can’t make it easy, Neo. I just can’t.”

“Then don’t but be mature and communicate. Make him work for you but actually let him work for you. He can’t apply pressure if you keep him at arm’s length.”

“Trust me, he’ll find a way,” was what I said, but that didn’t stop me from pulling my phone out and finally responding to his text. All I did was heart it and not even a full two minutes passed before he called.

“Hello?” I answered, biting back my smile.

“Where you at?”

“Having brunch with Neo.”

“Where? I’m a pull up.”

“Uh... no. This is girl time.”

He chuckled. “Neo talk to you every day and see you almost every weekend. Let me reclaim my time.”

“How about you just stay over after you pick Innah up?”

“Ugh,” he groaned, making me laugh. “Fine. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Okay, Bully.”

I disconnected the call because I didn’t want him to hear the smile in my voice. Because the truth was, I wanted to see him just as much as he wanted to see me. Maybe even more.

Neo and I continued our brunch, taking some time to plan her upcoming trip with Merc. They would be kid free, and I was sure they’d start working on baby number three. By the time we were done, we both were tipsy and feeling the mimosa tower we’d gotten to share. I was glad we didn’t drive, because though I wasn’t drunk, I was sleepy as hell and didn’t trust myself behind the wheel.

Our arms were linked as we walked to the town car Merc reserved for us. As soon as we were buckled up, we cuddled against each other. I wanted to call and check on Innah but decided to do so when I got home so I could take a nap. If I was going to see Bully tonight, I needed to sober up.

* * *

The sound of Innah’s laughter was like a balm for my soul. She and Bully had been home for about an hour and she was having the time of her life playing with him. Innah was a friendly baby, but she didn’t take to people quickly. She was shy until

she felt comfortable, then she got attached. From the first time she saw her daddy, she'd been attached to him. I could leave them alone for any length of time and she never cried like she did with other people.

A part of me felt she remembered his voice from how much he talked to her while she was in my belly. And maybe it was his love that made her feel like she was safe with him. Either way, I was glad they were getting along so well. I let them play for about an hour longer before it was time to start her nighttime routine. Bully wanted to handle it, so I let him. I told him what he needed to do but kept my distance unless he asked a question or needed me. Seeing him be so present brought tears to my eyes.

Since he popped up at the spa, this man hadn't taken a single day away from us. Every morning he showed up that first week, and now, he was here every night as well. It was getting harder and harder for me to not touch him, kiss him, treat him like the man I'd prepared to spend the rest of my life with.

After Innah went to sleep, we went to the living room and watched sports recaps silently. I felt shy with him and that had never been the case. From the first day me and Neo met him and Merc at that bar on Valentine's Day, me and Bully talked and got along like best friends. I didn't know how long it would take for us to get back to that, but I was sure we would.

"Did you start your skincare line?" he checked, and knowing that he remembered made me smile.

"Not yet. I had to increase my staff because I went viral on social media, so balancing my schedule and getting everyone into a groove has been my focus. It's going to launch this summer."

"That's great, Angel. I'm really proud of you, and I was hoping I hadn't missed it."

“Thank you,” I muttered before twisting my mouth to the side and looking away.

Bully covered my hand with his on my thigh. “Hey...” Slowly, I looked over at him. “We’re still us. Nothing has changed that.”

“Can I be honest?”

“Always,” he agreed, sitting closer to me. I flipped my hand and linked my fingers with his.

“I want to be with you. I’m just scared to let you in easily. I don’t want to act like you leaving and not telling me why was okay. I’ve never felt so abandoned, and for you to have been the one to do it...” I paused and pulled in a shaky breath. “Gabby’s truth wasn’t yours to tell, and I honor what you did for her, but that secret coupled with you leaving... Bae, I’ve spent the last nine months unsure of where you were, if you were okay, if you wanted me anymore. I didn’t know if you’d ever be here for Innah. That was a lot. So I wish I could just act normal around you but it’s hard.”

“I am sorry for not being there for you when you had Innah, and I hate I missed the first six months of my princess’s life. There’s nothing I can say to change that. All I can do is show you going forward that I will never leave the two of you again. If you can tell me what to do... how to fix us... I’ll do it. Other than that, I’m willing to put in the work myself. I just need a way in.”

My head shook as I pulled my hand from his. “So you want me to just turn my hurt and anger off and act like I don’t feel how I do?”

“Not at all,” he rejected, pulling my hand back into his. “I’m saying I want to love you and regain your trust so those feelings will go away. If you tell me we have a chance, I will build the bridge to get to you, baby. All I need is confirmation that we will be together in the end.” Bully lifted my hand and kissed it. “Just say yes, and I’ll

earn you, Innvy. All over again.”

My heart raced. Pounded in my chest. Licking the corner of my mouth, I released a shaky breath. As hard as I wanted to be, as difficult as I wanted to make this, I couldn’t. I couldn’t deny how much I missed my man. How much I loved watching him and our baby girl build a bond. We had a second chance to get our happily ever after, and I didn’t want to stand in the way of that.

“Promise me you will communicate with me and never abandon us again. If you ever have to go on one of these mafia missions again—”

“I promise I will never keep a secret that effects our home and relationship again. I promise to always communicate and let you in. No one will ever come before you and Princess. And I will never, ever abandon y’all again.”

His declaration eased my nerves instantly. My heart rate steadied, and the slight tremble running up my spine ceased.

“Okay. Yes.”

“Yes?” he repeated with a smile as he sat up in his seat.

“Yes.”

“Innvy,” he muttered, pulling me in for a hug. I melted against him, allowing myself to relish his closeness. Squeezing my eyes shut, I inhaled a deep breath. Finally, it felt like I could rest. Like I could breathe again.

9

Bully

That Weekend

“I’m ready to go home,” I grumbled, feeling my eyebrows wrinkle.

“Brotha, us coming here was your bright idea,” Asylum said.

“Right,” Merc agreed. “How you ready to go and you brought us here?”

They all laughed as Beethoven said, “Y’all know he can’t be away from his girls . I told y’all he wouldn’t last the whole weekend. Pay me my mothafuckin’ money!”

“ Hell nah,” Karrington said with a shake of his head. “I said I ain’t wanna do the bet because I knew he wouldn’t last.”

“Wait.” I chuckled as I lifted my hands. “Y’all actually bet on me?”

“Yeah, and I’m the only dumbass that had faith in you,” Asylum complained.

“Well, I had faith in you too, but I bet against you because I didn’t want to lose,” Merc added, and we all laughed again.

I’d brought the crew to Vegas for the weekend to thank them for looking out for my girls and my businesses while I was gone. They said it wasn’t necessary but I wanted

to put something tangible along with the words of gratitude. I paid for everyone's flights and suites and had given them each six figures. We were on day two of the trip but I wasn't sure I would make it until tomorrow night. Innvy had sent me videos of her and Innah a little while ago and I was missing them like crazy. The only reason I'd been able to get through nine months without them was because it was no contact.

"Fuck all y'all, man. I can't believe this shit," I said, pulling my phone out to see if Innvy had texted me back. "When Aspen, Blaze, and Dejvi getting here?"

"This evening at five," Karrington answered.

"Aight, I'ma stay today, but I'm leaving first thing in the morning," I told them, not caring how amused they found my desire to get home. Now that Innvy was warming up to me again, I wanted to take full advantage.

* * *

Monday Afternoon

It was a rare day that Innvy didn't have a lot of clients. She only had three facials and some kind of lash appointment, so she was done by three. Since I had taken princess to her grandparents, I convinced Innvy to let me take her to the spa too. When she walked out and saw me leaning against the white G-Wagon I'd copped she squealed.

"Ooh I love this, Gabriel! You know I wanted one of these!"

"I know... that's why it's yours."

Her mouth dropped, shoulders slouched, and eyes watered. "What?" she whispered, taking a step back.

“We both need something bigger for Princess, so I got you this and me a black one. Here.” Since she was frozen, I chuckled as I sauntered over to her and gave her the keys. “Let’s go.”

“Wait, Bully! You bought me this?”

“Yeah. You like—”

“Ah!” She jumped into my arms, and I moaned as I held her close. “I love it! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Innvy was about to kiss me, but she tugged her bottom lip between her lips instead. That was cool. Hell, her hugging me and letting me hold her was progress.

“You’re welcome. We got a lot to do before we go pick up baby girl.”

“Like what?”

“Shopping. I wanna get her room ready at the house. As much as I want y’all to move in now, we’ll go at your pace. So if I have to just have her there alone without you until you’re ready...”

Cupping the back of my neck, Innvy rested her forehead on mine. “Thank you, bae.”

“You know I’ll do anything for you. This is one time as a man that I’ll let you lead.”

Sniffing, she licked her lips before brushing them against mine. Mine parted, but I didn’t kiss her yet. I let her control the pace, but the second she kissed me, I took control. Slipping my tongue into her mouth, I lowered my hands to her ass. When she moaned, I groaned. Pressing her against the Wagon, I tilted my head and deepened the kiss.

Inhaling her exhales strengthened me—gave me life. As good as it felt to kiss her, I pulled away when my dick started to get hard. Putting my forehead against hers, I assured her, “We won’t do nothing you don’t want to do, but we gotta stop this because I’m starting to want more.”

Innvyy giggled and ran her fingers down my chest as she stared into my eyes. “That’s fair. I love you, Bully.”

For a second, I was speechless. I wasn’t sure when I’d hear her make that declaration again. A soft laugh escaped me as my heart skipped a beat.

“I love you too, Angel.”

* * *

After the Shopping Trip

We went overboard but I didn’t regret it at all. We didn’t just shop for Innah’s room. I got them both some jewelry too. Innah was a princess, so she needed diamonds and a tiara. Of course I had to shop for the queen. She still hadn’t put her engagement ring back on, so I secretly bought her a new one. I planned to give it to her when I felt like I’d earned her trust back. I also got her a fifty-four carat, white gold tennis necklace and bracelet along with a pair of diamond studs.

After that, we had an early dinner, then went to get baby girl. I damn near cried when I got her settled at home and she reached for me with tears in her eyes. I did cry when she yelled, “Da-da!”

Clutching my chest, I quickly swiped my tear away and walked over to her crib. “Can I stay tonight?” I asked Innvy as I picked Innah up. “Please?”

“Sure. Let me get my phone and see if she’ll say it again.”

I laughed as I held her close, hoping we could capture the moment so I could watch the video over and over again.

“Okay, let’s see,” Innvy said, holding her phone up. “Innah, who is this?” she asked, pointing at me.

Innah looked at me with her gummy smile. She had two tiny teeth coming in at the bottom and it was so fucking cute. It was really just two little white nubs, but it was so adorable. I was glad I was able to at least be here for that.

“Is that da-da?” Innvy continued.

“Da-da.” Innah squirmed against me, her small hand patting my face. “Da-da!”

Every time she chanted it, that shit warmed my heart more and more. More tears fell, and I didn’t even give a fuck. All I could do was laugh heartily and spin her around as she giggled.

I held her a little while longer before starting her nighttime routine. She ended up falling asleep on my chest, and I held her until I started to get sleepy myself. After that, I put her in bed and went to Innvy’s room. I considered telling her I was about to head out, but since she told me I could stay, I decided to take full advantage. I took a quick shower then climbed into bed with her. It was still fairly early, but since she tailored her schedule around Innah’s, it didn’t surprise me that she was already in bed.

She had some show on Netflix playing as I climbed into her bed. I wasted no time pulling her into my chest. Innvy released a content exhale and tossed her arm around me. Her leg slipped between mine as she snuggled against me. As I rubbed her back

up and down with one hand, the other squeezed her ass.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Phenomenal. I can’t believe she said it.”

“She loves you already. I can tell.”

I released a shaky breath and kissed the top of her head. “She knows me, Angel. Princess knows who I am. I just... I’m in awe.”

Innvy looked up at me and smiled. She cupped my cheek and lowered my lips to hers. I didn’t think anything could make hearing Innah call my name a more perfect moment, but falling asleep with her fine ass mama in my arms did just that.

* * *

One Week Later

I thought I was seeing things, but I couldn’t have been. Me and Innvy had gone out with Neo and Merc, and I was pretty sure I saw the capo of the Nashville mafia Rocco had us move in on. The only reason his face was memorable was because of the scar on his right cheek. He looked at me but his face and body remained relaxed. After what we’d done to them, I expected some kind of reaction. Maybe I was seeing things and that wasn’t really him...

“You good, brotha?” Merc checked, making his way next to me.

“Everything is everything,” I replied, pulling my eyes from the group he was with. If it was him, I’d keep a casual eye on them to make sure he wanted no static. I could admit we embarrassed them and made them look weak as hell before moving in on

their territory. If his ego caused him to want to retaliate, I needed to be ready for it. “Just so you’ll be prepared,” I continued, shifting slightly to look at Merc, “I think ol’ boy over there is a part of the Grisham Mafia from Nashville. I can’t say for sure because he’s so far away, but if he is, I walked him and his brother down.”

“So we need to be on alert?” he confirmed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“If it’s him, yeah. Last I heard, his brother was still in the hospital. That ain’t the kind of shit you let go easily.”

“Say less.”

“Eee, I’m so glad we got to spend some time together before your trip,” Neo said, hugging Innvy.

“Trip? What trip?” I asked.

“Oh, well I have a vendor event in Dallas that I have to leave for this weekend.”

“Why you ain’t say nothing about it?”

“It’s been scheduled for like three months now so I didn’t really think about it. My parents already agreed to keep Innah, and my flight and hotel suite are booked.”

“They don’t have to do that. I can keep her.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t worry, sis,” Merc said. “We’ll be on standby if he needs anything.”

My eyes shifted toward the group as I chuckled and he was gone. Maybe it wasn't him after all.

10

I nnvy

Later that Night

“I told you not to let her try to feed herself. Now you got a mess to clean up,” I teased, taking pictures of Innah. She was practically covered in the pureed food Bully was supposed to be feeding her. She kept reaching for the spoon and his ass let her have it. She’d tossed the food all over herself, her chair, and the floor before he was able to get it out of her strong baby grip.

“It’s cool. Lesson learned. Come help me clean this shit up though.”

“Absolutely not,” I said through my laugh. “I’m about to take a shower and get ready for karaoke live.”

Before Bully could respond, the sound of glass shattering gained our attention. His expression turned serious as he walked hurriedly toward the front door. He told me to stay back with Innah and I did, unsure what the hell was going on. When I heard him curse, I went to see what was going on. Someone had written RIP on his Wagon and tossed a brick through the windshield. I’d never set my camera up outside, but I offered to go and see if Moore’s camera might have caught anything. Unfortunately, Moore wasn’t at home.

What started as a fun evening turned slightly stressful. While he handled his car being towed, I cleaned Innah up. She got a little fussy because she wanted him, but I

distracted her with singing and dancing until he was done. Bully's mood had shifted, and I wanted to question him about what was going on, but I also wanted to see if he'd be forthcoming and transparent about the situation.

To my surprise, once Innah went down, he told me he wanted to talk before I joined the karaoke live on TikTok.

"So..." Bully pulled me onto his lap on the couch. "I don't want you to be alarmed, but I saw someone that I may have had a run in with while in Nashville earlier. If that was him and he followed us here, you and Innah will need to stay with me until the situation is handled."

"What kind of run in?"

His head tilted and he squeezed the back of his neck. "I beat his ass and put his brother in the hospital."

"For a reason?"

Bully shrugged. "We needed to show our power before we moved in on their territory. We offered an easy way to do the transition and they declined, so I did what I had to do."

Sighing, I massaged my temple. "I don't want your shit with Rocco putting my baby in danger, Gabriel."

"Do you think I would have done it if I thought this would happen? That was the whole reason I didn't tell you about it in the first place. I only agreed because it was shit for me to handle outside of Memphis. I don't know what he was even doing here, if that was actually him. Though, at this point, I doubt seeing someone that looked like him and then someone doing this was a coincidence."

“Why didn’t he approach you then?”

“He wants to taunt me and get in my head first. He probably thinks this is where I live and plans to pop up when I least expect it.” Bully casually pushed me off his lap and onto the couch. “I’m gonna get Asylum to put some cameras up here and at your spa, and I need you to start sharing your location with me again. You and Princess can stay with me until this is handled. I don’t know what he’s doing here, but I’ll have Merc find him, and I will take care of it ASAP.”

“Fine,” I agreed, as if I really had a choice.

I stood to pack our bags, but he stopped me and pulled me into his arms.

“Trust me to handle this, Innvy. I’m not going to let anything happen to you or our baby girl.”

“I trust you,” I assured him as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

He lowered himself to my lips and we shared a deep kiss before we went our separate ways.

* * *

I had been pouting since we made it to Bully’s house. It was crazy that this was once my home and now I didn’t want to be here. It was more so the reason behind us being here. The car situation destabilizing me and my baby didn’t make my return to the beautiful home easy. Regardless of how many good memories and fun times we’d had, I hated having to come under these circumstances.

It wasn’t my intention to take my attitude out on Bully. This wasn’t a situation he’d knowingly put us in. I believed him when he said he agreed because the favor wasn’t

in Memphis. Had it been, I truly believe Bully would have said no. That didn't make me feel any better, though, so I'd been avoiding him for the past hour.

While he did his thing, I sat in the rocking chair in Innah's room. He shuffled in, shirtless with his pajama bottoms hanging, and I couldn't stop myself from licking my lips. Bully had to have put on at least ten or fifteen pounds, and the muscular build looked damn good on him. Before he left, he was lean and slim. Now, his muscles bulged and signified the healthy weight he'd stacked up. My eyes focused on my name written in big, bold letters on his neck.

I still remember the day he got it. It was our third date and he told me he was in love. Of course I didn't believe him, though I felt like I'd experienced love at first sight with him. He asked me how he could prove it, and I told him to get my name tatted. Bully did that same night, and I got his name on my inner left thigh. Swallowing my desire, I ran my hand down my neck.

"Why you in here hiding?" he asked quietly, but I didn't expect Innah to wake up.

"No reason," I muttered, chin almost in my chest from my head hanging so low.

"If you don't stop playin' with me, Innvy."

Bully used my hand to lift me from the seat and out of the room. He led me to the game room downstairs. When we walked inside and I saw what he'd been up to, my eyes watered. Here I was being mad that we had to stay here, and he was doing everything he could to make me feel comfortable again.

"Now I know you my big baby," he crooned, wrapping his arms around me from behind. "But it ain't no reason for you to be up there pouting."

"You did all this for me?"

“I’ll do anything for you. You know that.”

I knew, but it was nice to have this reminder. Mood lights were on and flickering. Candles were lit. Pizza and wings were on the table. Weed and tequila were waiting to be consumed. The karaoke machine was cut on and ready to be used. I didn’t even bother getting on TikTok live to do the weekly karaoke like I wanted to. Turning in his arms, I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“This was really sweet, bae. Thank you.” I stood on the tips of my toes and he leaned down to kiss me. “I don’t want you to think I don’t want to be here. I just don’t want to be here because of this situation. Uprooting myself and Innah to avoid danger...” My head shook. “I trust your judgment and I know you’ll keep us safe. I just thought this shit was over.”

“It will be soon. I promise. For now, I don’t want you worrying about that. I want you to enjoy yourself. Now are you sure she’s not going to wake up?”

With a giggle, I headed toward the table to open the boxes of pizza. “Positive, but we can keep the mic low just to be safe.”

And that was exactly what we did.

For the next four hours, we smoked, drank, ate, and had a good time. I ended up going live, and our friends joined in to sing and dance too. It was the most fun I’d had since before he left, and things finally felt normal between us again. I hated what happened to get us to this point, but I loved Bully taking the initiative to make sure we made the most of it.

11

Bully

Thursday

“She ain’t even acknowledging the phone. It must be in the house, or she don’t care about feeling it vibrate,” Merc said.

I didn’t bother responding. It didn’t matter to me whether she answered his call to warn her or not. I’d specifically told her to wait for me to go back to her house, but she insisted on going by herself. We were supposed to be meeting with Mr. Rogers to get access to his camera footage. I wanted to see if we could spot the license plate for the car Jo was in.

Since Asylum had installed cameras at her house and spa, I was able to pull up the live feed when I saw her friendly ass neighbor walk over. Now, Asylum was trying to convince me not to crash out, and Merc was trying to call Innvy and have her get him away. My speed accelerated as I turned onto the main street of her neighborhood.

“I’m just saying, Innvy. Things in your life and the neighborhood were peaceful until he came around. Is that really the kind of man you want to be with?” Moore asked.

“I appreciate you letting us see the camera footage, but my personal life isn’t any of your business, Moore,” she said in a calm tone. I could tell she was trying not to anger him for whatever reason.

“You’re right, and I’m not trying to disrespect what you have going on. I just want you to know there are better options.”

InnvY smiled and rubbed her palms together with a shake of her head as I swerved into the cove.

“And what better option is that, Moore? You?”

He may have thought she was entertaining the idea, but I knew my girl. The flaring nostrils, straight spine, syrupy smile—all were indications that her anger was brewing.

“I mean... yeah.” Moore took her hands into his and kissed them.

“Fuck,” Asylum groaned, taking off his seat belt.

“Shit,” Merc muttered, tossing his phone into the cupholder.

“I can treat you and Innah so much better if you’ll let me.”

“Let me make this clear—” InnvY started, yanking her hands from his.

But she didn’t have to make shit clear. I was about to be her glass cleaner in this bitch. Not even bothering to cut the car off, I put it in park and grabbed my Revolver. I loved an old school Revolver for unexpected issues instead of my Glock because I didn’t have to worry about shell casings. Merc grabbed the Glock from the glove compartment as I hopped out of the car. I appreciated the backup, but it wouldn’t be needed.

“B-bae,” InnvY whispered with wide eyes, stepping in front of Moore and trying to push him into the house for safety.

“Move,” I commanded, tugging her toward Asylum with one hand and using the other to slam the butt of the revolver into Moore’s mouth. “Didn’t. I. Tell. You. To. Stay. The. Fuck. Away. From. My. Wife?” I gritted, enunciating each word with a hit to his face and mouth. His teeth were flying every which way, but I didn’t give a fuck.

“Bully, stop!” Innvy yelled, clawing at Asylum’s hands as she tried to get out of his grasp.

“He sleep,” Merc announced as I cocked the gun and put it on his temple. “That’s enough, brother.” His hand wrapped around my wrist, lowering it slowly as I stared at an unconscious Moore.

As he removed the gun from my grasp, I turned to face Innvy. “Didn’t I tell you to wait for me?”

“I didn’t want to hold him up! He’s been working a lot of night shifts.”

Chuckling, I ran my fingers down the corners of my mouth as Asylum released her. “So you care more about him than what I told you to do?”

Her eyes rolled as she released a hard breath. “I was just trying to be considerate since he was helping us out with the footage, Gabriel. Please don’t turn this into something it’s not.”

“You wanna be with this nigga?” I confirmed, pointing at his still body.

“No!” she yelled, pushing me. “I don’t even know why in the fuck I want to be with you ! Look at the shit you do.”

“I’m not going to let you make me feel bad about handling a man who chooses to

disrespect me by going after what's mine. I warned him."

"I don't care about that!" Her tears finally started to fall. "If he decides to press charges on you, you're going to leave us again. You promised me you wouldn't abandon us again! If you go to jail over this..." When she started to shake and hyperventilate, the weight of the moment finally hit me. She wasn't mad at me for beating his ass—she didn't want me to risk my freedom over it.

That instantly made me feel like shit.

I didn't care about being sat down... at all.

I did, however, care about being away from my girls.

Pulling her into my arms, I closed my eyes as she cried. Merc told me he'd handle Moore, which I appreciated, while Asylum went through his phone to see if he could access the footage. I held Innvy until her sobs turned into sniffles. When they did, I pulled her face from my chest and cupped her cheeks.

"Baby, I am so sorry I scared you," I told her, remorse dripping from my tone. "When I saw him touching you and trying to convince you to leave me, I saw red. I wasn't thinking about catching a charge because you know that don't put no fear in me. I also wasn't thinking about how that would trigger you. That wasn't my intention."

As I wiped the tears from her cheeks, I kissed the center of her forehead.

"I told you I would never do anything to intentionally leave you again, and I meant that," I continued before kissing her nose, lips, and cheeks. "I won't go to jail behind this, I promise you. I'm so sorry for scaring you."

Sniffling, she nodded and wrapped her arms around me tightly.

“I just got you back, Bully. I’m not going to lose you again.”

For some reason, her declaration made me smile. I held her close and kissed her neck.

“You won’t, baby. I’m not going anywhere .”

I held her for a little while longer and made sure she was straight before going to get several stacks of cash out of my trunk. It was enough to take care of his mouth plus some extra to make sure he didn’t snitch. If he did, my connections within the Memphis Police Department would keep me from being charged.

Asylum was able to pull up the camera footage from the other night, so after I wrote the license plate number down, I gave it to Merc so his team could track it. Ideally, I wanted to take care of Jo before Innvy left for Dallas tomorrow so she could be at peace and not have to worry about any threats at home.

* * *

2:00 AM

I sat in the darkness, waiting for Jo. His brother had already been taken care of in Nashville by the team Rocco had left behind. Apparently, Jo was from Memphis and was in Nashville handling business with his brother. I doubted my intuition when we saw him out and gave grace, when I should have handled him right then and there. This wasn’t anything new to me, and I knew I should have handled him before he had the chance to follow or touch me. Being with Innvy softened me and knocked me off my square. I didn’t want to handle that kind of business around her, but I would never make that mistake again.

The moment he stepped into his apartment and cut the light on, he jumped at the sight of me. Had I not been irritated from waiting three hours for him to arrive it would have amused me.

“How did you get in here?” he asked, looking around. Almost as if he expected me not to be alone.

“Is that what you want to be your last words?”

Jo chuckled as he took a step back. I had a feeling he was going to try and make a run for it, so I stood from the recliner I’d been waiting in. I’d already searched the apartment and moved all of his weapons... including the shotgun that was under his entertainment center.

“Are you really going to kill me because of what I did to your car?”

“I’m going to kill you because you went where my family feels safe and took that away from them,” I clarified, stepping in his direction.

Everything happened so fast. Two steps toward him, and he reached for his gun. Thankfully, I was faster. After sending three to his chest and two to his head, I stood over him so he wouldn’t be alone as his spirit left his body. Once it was gone, I wiped the chair and door down then went home.

12

I nnvy

In Dallas

I hadn't been able to stop smiling all weekend. At the last minute, my assistant's daughter got sick, so she couldn't come to the vender event. Bully offered to take her place, and as hesitant as I was to have him as my helper, I agreed. There were five hundred people registered for the expo, and I knew not every one of them would come to my table. Well, I was in for a rude awakening, because word had started to circulate about Innvious and how we'd gone viral last fall, so I had a constant line of people.

Bully was so present and sociable. He was so fine I knew some women came to the table just to see him. Not one person who walked by, looked over, or expressed interest was able to leave without being swayed to buy something because of him. He handled the cash register while I did demos, packed orders, and answered questions. We were truly a team, truly partners, and that truth made me cry.

By the time the event was over, I checked the numbers, and we had three hundred and eighty sales. I cried. So many of them had already followed me on social media and joined my mailing list. I kept thanking Bully because I honestly wouldn't have been as calm as I was without him. This was the first time he'd joined me at a vendor event, and I didn't want to do it without him again.

His support was just what I needed to maintain my peace and keep a calm spirit. He

was attentive and willing to do literally whatever I needed. And he had a charming way of bringing people over to the table so I could reel them in. Bully was absolutely perfect, and I'd be forever grateful to have him by my side.

We were so tired after the event Friday that we returned to our suite at the Ritz Carlton, ordered room service, then went to sleep. Yesterday afternoon, Bully treated us to massages and we went shopping before hitting up a lounge. We were supposed to leave on an early flight in the morning, and Bully told me not to make plans with my family today because he was going to take me on a date. Though I'd originally told my cousins I'd hang with them before I left, the idea of going on a date with my man appealed to me more. I told them I'd catch them on my next trip here, and seeing as they knew Bully had recently resurfaced, they completely understood.

Bully and I talked on the flight here and admitted our focus had been on his relationship with Innah. Though we hugged and cuddled at night, she was our center, as she should have been. He wanted to end our trip making sure I understood he hadn't come back just for our daughter but for me too. I missed the closeness and intimacy of our bond. We were having fun as friends and coparenting as well, but I did want more, so I was looking forward to our date and whatever else he had planned.

While Bully finished the FaceTime with Innah and my parents, I got ready to shower. I'd called to check in and he took over which was cute. She was so excited to see him, and every time I saw them engage with each other, I thanked God. I had a feeling she'd be a daddy's girl and she was definitely shaping up to be one. Innah still came to me first, but after she used me for my love, she went straight to her daddy until she got hungry or tired.

"Can I join you?" Bully asked.

I looked at him through the mirror, but he was too busy eyeing my frame to notice.

He rubbed his palms together and licked his lips. I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss his dick. We decided not to have sex a month before the wedding, so if you added to that the nine months he was gone and the weeks he'd been back, I was feeling the lack of having him inside of me.

"Are you going to behave?"

The sexy chuckle he released as he slipped his hand under my cotton robe made me shiver.

"Not at all."

"It's um..." My eyes fluttered and I swallowed as my mouth watered from his touch. "It's been a really long time, Gabriel. You might drown."

Wrapping his hand around my neck from behind, Bully pressed my back against his chest. "I'm going to make this pussy as wet as I possibly can. I know how to swim."

His grip around my neck tightened as we kissed. Bully knew that was my weakness. I could cum from him choking and touching me alone. Each time his hand rubbed and squeezed my ass I had to fight back my moans. I lost all composure when he smacked it and pressed his hard, thick dick against me.

"Get yo' sexy ass in that shower before I fuck you right here," he ordered against my ear before nibbling it, but that only made me melt more against him as I gripped the counter. "Innv..."

"Okay," I conceded, using my ass to push him backward. After dropping my robe, I opened the door to the shower and stepped inside.

Bully undressed and joined me. My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. For a good

long while, all we did was hold each other. He shielded my head from the water, but the hard water on the rest of me combined with his hard frame felt magical . When we did start to move, it was to touch each other. I loved running my hands over his wide, tattooed frame. That milk chocolate skin made me want to lick every inch of him.

Eventually, we started to kiss. Deep, long, nasty. I reached between us and stroked his dick. When he moaned, my pussy throbbed.

“You give what belongs to me to somebody else?” I asked, stepping away from him and toward the shower door.

“Never. I don’t want nobody else. I’ll never want anybody else.”

“Really?” I asked softly. “You didn’t even get head?”

“Nah, baby. I know how to separate my desires from actions, and I have discipline. The whole time I was gone, whether you believe it or not, I craved you and you alone.” I believed him, but hearing him say that he hadn’t been with anyone else made my spirit ease. “Now c’mere.” I took small steps toward him. As Bully looked down, he told me, “Get on your knees.” The second his eyes returned to mine, I lowered to my knees. “Good girl,” he praised, using my high ponytail to tilt my head back. His hand gripped my jaw. “Open wide.” And I did, stretching my mouth to accommodate his length and girth.

The second I wrapped my mouth around him, he groaned and shuddered. His body further confirmed that he hadn’t been with anyone else. Bully had never been a minute man but going almost a year without sex had him cumming quickly in my mouth. I graciously accepted every drop before standing. We showered and dried our bodies quickly, then he picked me up and carried me to the bed.

As soon as he had me on my hands and knees, he kneeled and spread my ass cheeks. The warmth from his tongue made me spineless as my top half collapsed on the bed. His long tongue slid from my asshole down my opening to my clit. He took his time feasting on me, leaving no part of me unsavored. When his tongue started to enter and exit my pussy, my toes curled. And when he latched onto my clit and sucked, my spine tingled.

“Fff—ah!” Releasing a hiss of breath, I gripped the sheets and fed him more of my pussy. “I’m about to cum, bae.”

Bully held my waist and continued to devour me, keeping his same pace even after I came. As he smacked my ass cheek he told me, “Scoot up, and stay on your knees.”

I did as he said, gasping when he slid under me. Bully lowered me slightly until I was sitting on his face.

“Oh shit,” I moaned, tweaking my nipples as I circled my hips. Two of his fingers entered me as he licked and slurped my clit. As good as it felt, I wanted it to last forever. “Oh my God, Bulllyyy...”

His fingers bent and put pleasurable pressure on my spot as the tip of his stiff tongue zeroed in on that spot under the hood of my clit that would have me cumming and squirting within seconds.

“Ahhh fuck, oh fuck, I’m about to s-squirt,” I warned him, trying to scoot down.

Bully’s arm wrapped around my waist and he held my ass cheek, spreading me open as he continued to eat and please me. I tried to hold it back but I couldn’t. My cum dripped as I squirted and bucked against him. He released a growl and sucked my clit into his mouth, making me cum again.

“Bully,” I whimpered, grabbing hold of his wrists as my body convulsed.

“Mhm,” he moaned, kneading and squeezing my ass as the last of my tremors subsided. When he finally loosened his grip on me, I took advantage and laid flat on my back. “Told you I know how to swim,” he teased as he sat up. His face was drenched, and the cocky smile he sported made me roll my eyes as I laughed.

“Damn, bae. I forgot how good you are at that.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll remind you again when we get back, but we really need to get ready to go.”

He stood, hard dick swinging as he headed toward the bathroom again. It would have been my pleasure to milk him until he softened, but apparently, we were on a schedule. I composed myself while he took a quick shower, then I did the same. Since I didn’t know what he had planned, I let him choose my outfit for the evening.

* * *

Bully took me to Cosm and it was a beautiful exhibit. We stayed for the double feature, and seeing the sky and Earth as an astronaut would was phenomenal. After that, we had dinner and drinks at Scarlet Lounge. We ended our night at Double D’s bar and danced the night away. By the time we left, I was borderline drunk and couldn’t stop smiling and giggling. The only reason we left when we did was because we both got horny as hell when we were drunk, so we decided to have our final drinks at the bar at the hotel. I’d been craving him since our foreplay session earlier.

Everything he said and did for the rest of the day was making me want him more and more. The planning, the eye contact, the conversation, the priority and attention he gave me. There was no doubt in my mind that I would combust when he finally made his way back inside of me.

We stopped by the bar and had two glasses of Clase Azul reposado before tumbling into the elevator. Well, I tumbled. He held me and laughed.

“I don’t remember you being a lightweight,” Bully said, scanning his key card and pressing six.

“I wasn’t, but I haven’t really been drinking. I would have the occasional mimosa with Neo if we went to brunch but that’s about it.”

His expression turned serious as he stared at me. “You meant it when you said you didn’t like drinking with no one else, huh?”

Smiling, I nodded and tugged my bottom lip into my mouth. “Yes, bae. I only trust you and her outside of my family. Of course I trust the crew too, but I don’t know. It just didn’t feel right going out without you. I’d have a couple of glasses of wine at home if I wanted to unwind but that was it.”

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, cupping my cheek and using it to pull me close. “I couldn’t risk bringing you with me, but I hated leaving you there. I didn’t think of all the ways it would affect you.”

“You don’t have to keep apologizing, Gabriel. That was literally years ago. You didn’t know it would come back around when and how it did. We’re okay.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

The smile that spread his lips made me mirror it. Just as he was about to kiss me, the elevator doors opened. Bully wasted no time peeling my dress off my body as soon as the suite door closed behind us. I fumbled with the buttons on his black button down

as he yanked my panties off. Since he had the first three buttons already open, it didn't take me long to push it off. As I slipped out of my bra and heels, he kicked off his loafers and pushed down his slacks and boxers.

I giggled when he picked me up and carried me into the bedroom, but it turned into a moan when he tossed me onto the bed. Our kisses and touches led to him licking and sucking my nipples before making his way further down. My legs remained spread wide as he ate my pussy as if it was the most exquisite morsel on Earth. Low hums escaped me as I palmed his head and rotated my hips.

Back arched off the bed, I pulled in a shaky breath as my eyes squeezed shut. My mouth hung open and toes curled as I palmed the sheets. Bully moaned as my clit throbbed in his mouth. I didn't have to warn him that I was about to cum. He was so in tune with my body that he knew just as soon as I did. His grip on my thighs tightened as I whimpered and prepared for ecstasy to wash over me. His tongue strokes were relentless, not stopping until well after I came.

As he made his way up my body, it trembled. The intensity in which he looked at me took my breath away. Bully lifted my legs so that my ankles were by my ears. I reached between us and put his meaty head at my opening. Slowly, he filled me. Gasping, I dug my nails into his sides. Once he was all the way inside, Bully stilled.

His thumb grazed my cheek as we smiled. "Hi," he almost whispered.

My eyes watered as I sniggled. "Hi."

The greeting felt appropriate, because it felt like this was a reintroduction to one another.

"My big baby," he muttered against my lips before kissing me. "I love you so much, Angel."

“I-I... mm...” The declaration was temporarily cut off when he began to move inside of me.

“You what?” he taunted, circling his hips in a way that made me cry out and pull him closer, not that there was any space between us to begin with.

“I love you, Gabriel.”

He moaned and increased his pace. I knew this time was different because there was no dirty talk. No shit talking. Just heavy breathing, moans, and eye contact. Bully turned me slightly and lifted my left leg while the right remained on the bed. His long, medium paced strokes were deep. My walls immediately began to leak and close against him.

“Hmm,” I whimpered, holding his sides as my spine tingled.

His hand stroked my neck, causing my eyes to roll into the back of my head. Each time he stroked my pussy and neck at the same pace, some kind of sound came out of me and my pussy. I anxiously awaited the squeeze, and I was sure he felt the same about my walls contracting against him. As soon as he squeezed and choked me, my walls pulsed as I moaned and came.

“Ahh fuck!” I cried out as I convulsed under him. “Harder, bae,” I requested, and he obliged, squeezing and picking up his pace.

I lifted my arms and gripped the sheets as my titties bounced from the hard pace. Bully growled and alternated from tweaking one nipple to the other before leaning forward and sucking. He wrapped my legs around his waist and scooped me into his arms, cradling the back of my head in the palms of his hands. As they rested on the bed, he slowed his strokes, filling me deep and methodically.

He returned his lips to mine, kissing me tenderly. As he sucked my tongue and lips, moans and whimpers and hums poured from my mouth. I felt every inch of his strokes all over me. My body trembled and he held me steady, whispering against my lips and releasing moans of his own.

“You creaming on me,” he announced in my ear. “Who told you to do that?”

“Your dick told me to do it.”

Bully laughed, but it turned into a moan when my walls squeezed him tighter and refused to let go. He lifted slightly, rocking my hips forward, brushing my clit and g-spot at the same time.

I stroked his nipples with my thumbs, and when he jerked, that was my signal that he was about to cum with me. As we exchanged fluids he growled.

“Look at what you did,” he taunted as his dick throbbed inside of me. “Look what the fuck you made me do.”

“Yesss, bae. Cum in this pussy. It’s yours.”

“Argh!” he roared, wrapping his hand around my neck.

The sticky sound of my cum gushing and mixing with his filled the room. His strokes hardened and sped up as his free hand lowered to my clit, rubbing it until we both came again. Instead of pulling out of me, he laid on his side and held me close. We both pulled in choppy breaths with goofy smiles. I tossed my leg over him as I rubbed his back in small circles.

“Thank you for this, Bully.”

“We needed it. I love bonding with baby girl and us having family time, but I needed this time with you.”

“Same. I needed it with you too.”

“You wanna stay another day?”

“Can we?”

“I mean... yeah. If your folks don’t want to keep Princess, you know mine will. It’s a short flight. Let’s stay one more day.”

A slow grin spread as I briefly considered his request. “Okay. Let’s stay.”

Needing to adjust our plans was the only reason we pulled away. We soaked in the tub and took a quick shower before he busied himself seeing if he could book our suite for another day. I called my mom to let her know what was going on, though I was sure she wouldn’t mind keeping Innah.

“Hey, baby,” she answered.

“Hey, Ma. Sorry for calling so late.”

“It’s okay. Are you okay?”

“I’m great actually. Bully and I are going to stay one more day, so we’ll be back Tuesday instead of tomorrow. Is that okay?”

She sighed and my heart dropped. “I guess this means you’re back with him huh?”

“I mean... yes. Do you have a problem with that?”

“I do actually.” My eyes rolled as I lowered my body in the bed. “He hurt you, Innvy. He missed so much without an explanation. How can you forgive him so quickly and easily?”

“Because we talked. Because I understand why he did what he did. He’s promised to never do it again, and I believe him. I also love him and planned to spend the rest of my life with him. We’ve already lost almost a year. I’m not willing to waste more time being mad for no reason.”

She scoffed. “You’re a damn fool, little girl. Ain’t no way on this Earth your daddy could’ve—”

“Look, I didn’t call for your opinion or permission. If you don’t want to keep her and Daddy has to be at the clinic, I’ll call someone else. Matter of fact, I’ll just do that anyway.”

I pulled the phone from my ear to end the call but the sound of her calling my name stopped me.

“Innvy, wait.” After releasing a long breath, she continued. “I just don’t want to see you hurt like that again. When a man shows you who he is, you’d be wise to believe him.”

“Ma, you don’t even know what happened. Bully showed me he’s a protector, a man of honor, and one who keeps his word. Do I wish he would have told me what was going on before he left? Yes, but he didn’t. That was a mistake on his part and he’s working hard to make amends. I understand your fear and I know it’s from a place of love, but you taught me to have faith.”

“In God, not a man!”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “I love you, Ma. I’ll talk to you when I get home.”

“I love you too. And don’t you send nobody to get my grandbaby. You know I have no problem keeping her... even if it is so you can lay up with her disappearing ass daddy. I’mma start calling his knucklehead ass Houdini.”

As much as I didn’t want to, I laughed. “Bye, Ma.”

“Bye.”

I disconnected the call with a shake of my head. After he rescheduled our flights, Bully joined me in bed. I didn’t bother telling him about Ma’s reservations. She’d already told him how she felt the first time he dropped Innah off and it didn’t sway him either way. He made it clear he didn’t give a fuck how she felt, respectfully, and that he’d come back to get both of his girls. I knew only time and the behavior she’d grown used to from him would make her trust him again and I respected that. For now, I was feeling too good to let her lack of faith in us ruin my mood and our time together.

13

Bully

I studied the way my father loved my mother. A few things thing he took very seriously were listening to her, being thoughtful and considerate, and taking care of her wants and needs. Before I left, I'd made it my mission to be so in tune with Innvy that I could pick up on her wants and needs before she even expressed them.

Last night, after hearing about her not going out much without me, I made the mental note to clear a day out of every weekend to take her on a date. I also ordered the limited edition Clase Azul Pink since it was her favorite kind of tequila. I didn't mind paying three thousand for it because I knew she'd keep the pink bottle forever.

Now, we were looking at new timepieces because I noticed the solar one she had had a tighter fit than it should've, so she didn't wear it for long periods of time. She'd been saying she would go and get more links added since I'd been back, but Innvy hardly ever took the time to do stuff for herself unless it was really important. So I decided to replace it altogether.

"Are you sure?" she asked, looking up at me with innocent eyes.

Chuckling, I nodded as I gripped her waist. "Yeah, baby. Is this the one you want?"

She looked down at the glass case where the Lady-Datejust Rolex rested. The oyster, 28 mm, yellow gold timepiece had diamonds and was just under \$155,000, so I could understand why she wanted to confirm she could get it. That was a hell of a lot of

money for a watch, but there was a method behind my madness.

“Yes, but I can get a vintage one that’s far less expensive,” she reasoned. “There’s one for like five K at—”

“You remember the first time we talked about watches?”

A slow smile spread her lips as she nodded. “I do. I was telling you about how I wanted to go to Osaka, Japan to get a vintage Rolex to add to my collection and that I wanted to get certain pieces of jewelry, including pearls and watches, that I could pass down to my children.”

“So this will be the first, and you can give it to Innah. We’ll still take that trip to Japan so you can get one or two there too. How’s that sound?”

Tugging her lip between her teeth, she sniffled and nodded as she blinked back tears.

“I think it sounds just like you—perfect.”

* * *

One extra day turned into three. It felt irresponsible as hell, but we needed this time to ourselves. Though Bianca and Hamilton said they were cool with it, I still had my mama go get Innah Monday. I felt like Bianca still didn’t trust me and was giving Innvy a hard time when we called to check in on my princess. So I made the decision to have my parents keep her so Mama B could stop stewing. I didn’t want her around my baby girl with that negative energy toward me.

Innvy and I enjoyed every minute of our time here. We spent the rest of the days doing interactive dates instead of the standard dinner and a movie. We went to an adult arcade, a fluid art store, an interactive sports arena, and a cowboy bar that was

wild as fuck with some strong drinks and good ass hot dogs. I'd never put Dallas on my list of places to visit often but it was officially on my list.

Since we were flying private, we were chilling in the lounge for about thirty minutes before it was time for our short flight. It was never over an hour and a half, and since it was just us, it would probably only be an hour and five minutes. I checked emails from my business manager while Innvy had a virtual meeting with her staff in preparation for her return.

When she ended the meeting she told me, "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Wassup?" I asked, setting my phone down and giving her my full attention.

"I've been looking into it. When we get back home, let's do a voluntary acknowledgment of paternity form. Your name needs to be on Innah's birth certificate, and I want to change her last name to yours."

I won't lie and say it didn't hurt my heart when I found out she'd given Innah her last name but I couldn't blame her. I wasn't there and she didn't know if or when I would be. Unintentionally, I'd put her in a position to be a temporary single mother. It killed me not to reach out to her when I knew her due date had passed, but I also knew if I talked to her, I would immediately return home, and I had to finish that shit for Rocco so he could never call upon me again.

"You sure, baby?" I checked, taking her hand into mine. "I want that... but only if you want me to have it."

"You deserve it. She does too. I want to do this for the both of you."

I used her hand to lift her from her seat and put her on my lap. Cupping her chin, I kissed her tenderly.

“Did I tell you I love you today?”

She smiled and nodded. “Yes, but you can tell me again.”

After kissing her quickly yet sweetly, I told her, “I love you.”

Innvyy wrapped her arms around my neck. “Mm... I love you too.”

* * *

Back Home

The moment Innvyy’s arms wrapped around me from behind, I felt peace. I felt secure. I felt like I was home. That’s what she’d always been to me. That’s what we’d been to each other. Home. From our first night together, there had always been this inexplicable connection between us. We never felt like strangers—always felt like soul mates. And after our crazy return home, her embrace was exactly what I needed.

We underestimated baby girl’s attachment to us—especially Innvyy. We assumed since she’d be with people that she was familiar with that Innah wouldn’t miss us too bad. While she was her normal self while we were gone, as soon as she saw us, she had a fit. Baby girl wailed, hard and loud, in Innvyy’s arms for like an hour straight. And it wasn’t a normal cry; it was an angry cry. She did not want to let Innvyy go. She literally clung to her, and that made me feel like shit.

We didn’t even leave my parents’ home immediately because we couldn’t tear them away from each other. After a little over an hour, Innah finally settled down. We headed home, and by that point, she wanted me. Her little eyes rolled and fists were balled as I apologized for staying away so long. Eventually, she went from just sitting in my lap with my shirt balled in her fist to actually babbling and interacting with me like she normally did.

Innvvy and I did her food and nighttime routine together. After I read her a few books and put her to sleep, I went to my bedroom to shower. I wasn't sure where Innvy had been... more than likely in the theater or game room.

As she moaned, she brushed her nose against my back then kissed it. "You always smell so good," she complimented.

"Mm." I turned to wrap my arms around her and face her. After giving her a kiss, I told her, "And you always look and taste good," before kissing her again.

Innvvy released a content sigh as she kissed me back. My hands lowered to her ass, and I pulled her close.

"Sweetheart, we can't ever do that again," I said sadly against her lips.

"I know," she agreed, exhaling a shaky breath. "Not like that at least."

Hand in hand, we walked over to my bed and climbed in. "I thought she'd be okay since she was with her grandparents. Princess was really mad at us. I don't think I've ever seen a baby that mad."

"I wonder where she gets her temper from," Innvy teased, getting comfortable on my chest. "But seriously, I wasn't expecting that either. She has a thing about strangers and doesn't want to be away from me when they are around, but I didn't think she'd respond to our absence like that."

"So... next time we take a trip, we have to bring her," I decided, lifting her hand to kiss. "Maybe we can find a travel nanny or pay one of our mothers to do it. That way when we want alone time, they can have her and we can focus on each other."

"I like that idea, because we definitely can't stay away for that long again until she's

much older. The max has proven to be a three day weekend. She can't go any longer without seeing us right now."

"Are you going to have a busier week?"

Innvy groaned. "Yes. I had all my appointments for the last few days pushed back, so I'll be working closer to fourteen to sixteen hours instead of my usual ten to twelve."

Kissing the top of her head, I carefully considered my words. I didn't want to make it seem like I wanted to come back home and change things for her, but her long days weren't going to work.

"I'm going to say something, and I want you to hear exactly what I'm saying. Don't add to it or take away," I warned.

"Uh oh." Her grip around me tightened, causing me to chuckle. "Okay. What is it?"

"I'm proud of the success you've achieved, but when you launch your skincare line, won't you be even busier come this fall? Your days are already packed, Innvy. I'll be starting back up with my responsibilities soon, but I don't want to feel like I never see you and Princess. Is it possible for you to work less hours and we align our schedules so we work at the same time? When I get done with mentoring and the stores, I want my girls."

Innvy sat up and leaned against the headboard, so I did the same.

"Admittedly, I started working such long hours because I was avoiding home. Avoiding not having you. All I did was work and have the baby, with an occasional pop out on the weekend when Neo and the guys forced me. Work is my passion, but it's also been a distraction. I can cut back some now."

Pushing her hair off her shoulder, I kissed it. “I’m sor—”

“Mm mm,” she interrupted before giving me a quick kiss. “Stop apologizing. That was my choice on how to handle your absence. While I don’t regret it, I knew it wasn’t the best.”

“So how will that look for you? If you start working lighter days, will that cut into your weekends?”

“Not really. I’ve been thinking about bringing another esthetician on. I can niche down and do only what I want instead of offering so much. She can do the things I don’t want to do, and I’ll still keep my core clients and weekends off.”

“That’s sounds good, Angel. I don’t mentor daily, and you know their breaks are mine, so I’ll have summers off completely at the schools. With the stores, I can pop in whenever. Asylum’s safehouses are what usually take up the most of my time, but now that we’ve all had babies, he’s brought in a second team, so we won’t have to have those long days anymore.”

“We all need to get together soon. We haven’t done so since you’ve been back. You need to see the way Marz is like the little protector of all the babies. He isn’t like that with just his little sister Merci. It’s the cutest little thing. They all follow him around, even if they have to crawl. Innah rolls on her belly trying to keep up.”

That visual made me chuckle. Marz got that honest from Merc. We all were protectors of whoever was in need, but Merc had always been the one to intentionally step up in any and all situations to lead. I couldn’t wait to watch our children grow up and see who and what they were going to be.

“I’ll set that up,” I agreed, “but for now...” I used her ankle to pull her back down onto the bed. “I want my dick to get together with your pussy.”

“Ooh, I love the sound of that, daddy.”

“Un uh. Don’t start that shit unless you want me to test how loud we can get. Princess has had an emotional day. You better behave so we won’t wake her up.”

Her giggle was like music to my ears, and it only increased when I started licking and kissing her neck. Those giggles turned into moans when I moved down to her nipples. And those moans turned into panting when I made my way between her legs. Keeping them spread, I lapped up her wetness like a cat with a bowl of milk.

Innv’s chest heaved, and she took short breaths as I slurped her clit into my mouth and moaned. Her legs trembled and head flung back as she gripped my head. I watched her unravel—ragged breathing, eyes closed, mouth open, head flung back. Pleasing her always pleased me. My dick throbbed as her clit throbbed in my mouth.

When she whimpered and tugged her bottom lip into her mouth, I knew she was close.

“Moan for me,” I commanded, before licking from her asshole to the top of her clit, paying special attention to her opening.

“Ahh, yes, Bully,” she moaned, holding my neck to keep me in place.

“That’s right, baby. Let go. You deserve to cum.”

I focused my attention on the top of her clit, and only a few seconds passed before her whimpers returned. I lifted, wanting to see her walls pulse and her pussy leak. She had the gushiest pussy I’d ever experienced. I watched in awe as her cum slipped out of her before lowering myself to lick up every drop.

“Oh shit, bae.” Innvy panted and clawed at my shoulders as I sucked her clit and

swirled my tongue around it at the same time. Her hums and moans always motivated me to give her more—and now was no different. I continued until she came again, and the only reason I lifted myself and wiped my mouth was because my dick wanted to feel the wet mess we'd created.

Using her ankle, I flipped her onto her hands and knees. Innvy had always been sentimental, so her favorite positions were those that allowed us to look in each other's eyes. However, when I hit it from the back, I could make her cum quickly and repeatedly. As soon as I slipped into her wet walls, I arched her back and tightened my grip. She released a sizzling breath as I moaned and bit down on my bottom lip.

Innvy looked back at me briefly before burying her head in the pillow. I took a handful of her hair and pulled, lifting her head up. The connection of my body against hers, inside of hers, always felt like heaven on earth. Nothing could be higher than this—than my oneness with her. I had to make her my wife officially... soon.

14

I nnvy

“Uh, no, ma’am!” I yelled through my laugh. I was having a very late lunch with Gabriella and had Innah with me. After she cried so hard yesterday when me and her daddy returned, there was no way I was sending her to my parents today. Bully helped me set up a little area for her in my office, and he’d been dropping in sporadically to check on us both throughout the day.

I didn’t realize how much Innah was paying attention to our conversation until she called me by my name. Well, tried to. After she heard Gabby call me Innvy, she said Inbee.

“Huh?” Innah said as she looked from me to her aunt as if she was confused.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Inbee!” she cheered, patting my shoulder.

“No, mama’s baby. My name is Mama not Innvy.”

“Inbee! Inbee! Inbee!”

“Oh God.”

Gabriella fell into a fit of laughter as I shook my head and groaned. “I can’t wait to

tell my brother about this.”

“Chile, he’s going to be too tickled. I just hope she forgets by the end of the day.”

“Good luck with that.”

We cackled as I lifted Innah and set her on top of the table. Her chubby, tiny hands patted my cheeks as she gave me a slobbery smile. Her little nubs of teeth were slightly taller but they weren’t all the way in yet. She was honestly the cutest little thing ever.

“Mama loves you, baby girl.”

Her babbled response was exclaimed by her flailing arms and wiggling body.

With a wide smile, I pulled Innah into my chest and kissed her head. We were actively working on her words but also not expecting a lot since she was only six months old. Well, she’d be seven months next week. More than anything, Innah seemed to pick up on things through conversation and not intentional teaching. She was a little joker and got more enjoyment out of making us laugh when we were trying to teach her something. So a lot of the words she picked up on, she picked up on when we were speaking to her normally or someone else. I loved how curious she was and how she could focus long enough to say what she wanted.

“She’s so precious, sis. Seriously. My brother is so lucky to have the both of you. And I’m so sorry my past almost ruined that.”

“Girl, you have nothing to apologize for. I know your brother don’t play about you. I’m just glad you talked him out of taking care of it himself though. Between what he’s done for Rocco and the shit I saw him do to Moore... it’s giving he really don’t give a fuck and is about that life even to this day.”

We shared a soft laugh though there was nothing funny about the situation. I took pride in being with a man who had no problem setting it off about the people he loved, but I still prayed he could settle into calmness and never risk losing his freedom or life because of violence.

“Did he... now that he’s back... do you know if he’s going to be working with Karrington?”

My brows wrinkled as I considered her question. “Why haven’t you asked him that?”

Sadness covered her expression briefly. “We haven’t really been talking a lot lately. Guilt, you know? But after being with you today and knowing you two are in a much better place, I feel more comfortable squeezing my way back into his life.”

“Gabriella...”

“I know, I know, but still. I took a lot from him. His position with Karrington. Time with you. The birth of his baby. I know he doesn’t mind but there was still guilt over how everything played out.”

I knew there was no point in me telling her to release it. Gabriella was the most peaceful and least problematic person I knew, so I couldn’t imagine how this had been affecting her. I pulled her close by her neck and gave her a kiss. Innah followed suit, holding her face in place and saying, “Mm muah!” as she pressed her lips against her temple.

We laughed and cooed before loving on baby girl, then we finished our lunch so I could get back to work. I wasn’t sure what led me to ask her to have lunch with me at first, but I was glad I listened and did so. Hopefully now things would return to normal between her and her brother.

15

Bully

I wouldn't say I was nervous to have this conversation, but I was on edge. With how peaceful things had been between Innvy and I, I didn't want involving our parents in our relationship to create anxiety. Normally I wouldn't give a damn how anyone felt about what we were doing, but since I was aware of her mother's lack of faith in our relationship, I decided to take accountability for that and see if there was anything I could do to ease her mind.

So, I decided to take our parents out to lunch. For the entire lunch, things were smooth. Bianca was cordial and warm like she was before I left. Aside from her calling me Houdini, she treated me like she did before what she called my disappearing act. I noticed the shift in her mood after I took a sip of my whiskey and told them, "Though I've enjoyed this time with y'all, there was an intention behind it. I want to talk to you about my girls."

Bianca's eyes rolled and she shifted in her seat before taking a sip of her wine.

"Go ahead, Son," Pops urged, gripping my shoulder with a grin. He'd taken to Innvy just as quickly as I did and didn't play about her or Princess.

"I know me leaving was unexpected, but I'm back now. Innvy and I are making very good progress and we will get married in the future. If any of you had any questions about my intentions or concerns, now is the time and space for them. And after, I don't want to have to prove myself or my love again."

“Your love is not my concern,” Mama B admitted. “It’s your stability I’m concerned about.”

“I can respect that,” I replied with one bob of my head. “To make it clear: My leaving had nothing to do with Innvy or the baby. I wasn’t running from marriage or my responsibilities. Even though it may have seemed like I was gone for a while, I did what I had to do to get back to my girls as quickly as I possibly could.”

Knowing the reason for my departure, Mama’s head hung.

“Can you share with us why you left?” Hamilton asked, causing me to shake my head.

“I can’t, but it was family related. It was life or death, and I really had no way out.”

“Are my daughter and granddaughter safe with you?” he continued.

“They are.”

“Not just physically,” Bianca said, sitting up in her seat. “Are their hearts safe with you? Innvy... She grew up around true love, healthy relationships, people who thrived. If you can’t continue that with her and my granddaughter...” Her mouth snapped shut and eyes watered.

“Mama B, I respect and understand your anger and I know it comes from a place of concern and hurt. Maybe even disappointment.” She nodded. “I know it will be harder for you to forgive me and move on than Innvy because she loves me and knows my heart and intentions. But I assure you, I will never abandon them again. Like I told our princess, only God will be able to pry me away from them. And the only struggles they’ll have are choices between silver or gold, islands or excursions, cash or access to my credit cards. You don’t have to trust me. Trust that your

daughter has good enough discernment to protect her heart and our daughter's if needed."

"He's right, hun," Hamilton said, taking his wife's hand into his. "We raised Innvy to know when to walk away. That's been a part of her power. She's happy and good on her own. She doesn't need him." His eyes shifted to me. "She wants him. There's value in that, and I don't think the boy will risk losing her again."

"If he does, he'll have to deal with me," Pops said. "I done already told him I'll beat his ass if he hurts my daughter or my princess."

Ma chuckled. "All I have to say is this," she started, taking my hand in hers. "Life is short, and sometimes harder than it should be. Our life partner is the most important choice we will make. Besides ourselves, they are the person we will spend the most time with on this Earth." The rest of the elders nodded their agreement. "Even after the children are grown and out the house... you'll still have your spouse. Your life partner. If in Innvy you've found someone that makes this world a soft, safe space... you do whatever you can to make that relationship last. Not just last but be healthy and prosperous. If you can do that, I think I can speak for us all when I say you have our blessing."

Ma's eyes locked with Bianca's, and she nodded with a small smile.

"I have no intentions other than to make their lives as happy, whole, safe, and fun as I possibly can. I love Innvy with my whole heart, y'all. I'm not leaving them again."

"In that case..." Pops lifted his old fashioned. "To new beginnings."

We all lifted our glasses, and Bianca shot me a wink.

"To new beginnings," we repeated in unison.

* * *

Innah's hands smacked her feeding table as she cooed and talked in her own language. We were up to some two syllable words now, but when she got excited and started talking fast, I couldn't understand what the hell she was saying. Baby girl had finished all her dinner, and as a reward, I was going to let her have a little taste of a popsicle. Not only did she enjoy the small taste of sugar, but I was sure the cold felt good against her gums.

"I'm coming, Princess. You're so bossy."

"Da-da, food now!" she yelled, opening and closing her tiny fists as I walked in her direction.

I chuckled with a shake of my head. "We gotta work on your patience, baby girl."

The grunt she released increased my laughter and my pace toward her. Picking her up, I tried to keep her away from the popsicle as she reached for it to ensure I had a good grip on her.

"Damn, girl," I muttered, putting the popsicle up to her mouth as she reached for it with wide eyes. It was my intention to take her to her mama so she could see but she was going at it so fast I didn't bother.

By the time I'd given her a few licks, Gabriella made her way into the kitchen. She wasted no time scooping her out of my arms and wiping her mouth and hands before letting me know she was about to take her for a walk. I cleaned off her high chair then headed upstairs to see what Innvy was up to.

Confusion covered her face as she stared at her phone.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, gaining her attention.

“Bae, why do we have another account?” she asked, showing me her bank app as if I wasn’t the one who took her phone to add the account.

“Because you agreed to work less.”

Her eyes rolled before they watered. “Gabriel, you already set up a joint account for us. Innah has an account for her needs, one for her college fund, and one that she will have access to when she turns twenty-two.”

“Yes,” I agreed, tilting her head by her chin and giving her a slow, tender kiss. “And now you have another one just for you. Do with it what you desire.”

“Bully, I don’t need—”

“I know,” I interrupted to make clear. “And as long as you’re with me, you never will.”

InnvY stood, and since I didn’t move back, we were toe to toe. “You’re an amazing provider,” she complimented, wrapping her arms around me. “Not just of money, but of love, security, validation, fun, partnership—literally everything I need. I love you so much, bae.”

“I love you more.”

“Where’s my baby?”

“On a walk with her tete.”

“Good.”

Innvay tugged me toward the bed, and the seductive grin on her face made my dick harden as I bit my bottom lip.

“Can we stay wit’chu?” she asked, discarding of the clothes that operated as a barrier for me to get to her smooth, cocoa brown skin. Innvay was so mesmerizing I couldn’t respond immediately. Her tall, lean body. Those dark, doe eyes. Her round, pouty lips. That long, flowing hair I loved to grip. “Bully,” she called, cupping my cheek and forcing me to look into her eyes.

“W-what?”

“Can we stay wit’chu... please?”

I chuckled because it immediately made me think about Donkey on Shrek . “You saying you want to stay here permanently, sweetheart? Is that what you saying?”

“Mhm.” Her hands lowered to the waistband of my basketball shorts, and she pushed them and my boxers down. “Me and baby girl wanna stay here with daddy.”

“Hell yeah!” I chanted making her laugh. She had no idea... I’d been praying for that since the first night they spent here. I’d been doing everything I possibly could to make her not want to leave. “Of course you can stay. The only thing that will make me happier is you legally becoming my wife. We’ll go get the rest of y’all stuff this week, and if you want, we can rent your place out.”

“That sounds wonderful.” She lifted my shirt over my head, and as soon as it was off, I told her to get on the bed.

“On your hands and knees,” I demanded, and she purred—fucking purred . This woman was going to be the death of me. I was sure I’d be one of them old ass freaky men who died in their eighties from sex. That was going to be my future. Dying from

a heart attack because I couldn't stop fucking my fine ass wife.

I rubbed both ass cheeks before smacking them, then I rubbed them again. Innvy moaned and looked back at me as she tugged her bottom lip between her teeth. My fingers slid between her slippery folds... taking a few moments to worship her clit before slipping inside of her wet, warm hole.

I took my time in her pussy, massaging her walls until she came. Dropping to my knees, I spread her cheeks and licked and sucked her pussy dry then wet again. By the time I was done, she was a shivering mess. When I lined myself up at her opening, she stopped me and turned.

"I want to taste you." She kissed the head of my dick. "No, eat you." Then licked the length of my shaft. "Gobble you up."

And that was exactly what she did. My stomach clenched, and a sizzling breath released from me the moment she hid my dick in her mouth. As my head tilted, I grabbed her hair and closed my eyes. We didn't have much time, but we were for damn sure going to make the most of it.

16

I nnvy

One Week Later

Bully and I spent a relaxing morning and afternoon fishing. We spent most of the time in solitude, but on the way to his parents' house, we talked and in a way reconnected. It felt like déjà vu as we considered our future and what we wanted it to look like. Marriage. More babies. More real estate. By the time we made it to our destination, I felt the excitement I felt the first time he proposed. I knew forever was the goal when I decided to give him another chance, but as each day passed, it felt safer and safer to rest in that.

What was supposed to be a relaxing evening of us chilling with his parents while his mom fried the fish we caught turned into a little get together. He and Daddy Chris went to the meat market for more fish while me, Gabriella, and his mom Grace stayed back making sides. Only a few hours passed before more of his family and our friends came over and the music started playing while alcohol poured and games were played.

As I sipped a tequila sunrise with Neo and Dauterive, they gushed over how happy they were that Bully was back and things were better than ever between us.

“I just want to know when you’re putting back on your ring,” Neo said.

I looked down at my hand and released a sigh. My ring finger felt way too light

without my engagement ring. I'd taken it off after he left and hadn't bothered to put it back on.

"I don't know. I mean I guess I can put it on now. I just... hated looking at it the second he walked out that door, you know?"

"I feel you," Dauterive agreed. "That ring is literally a symbol of him leaving you. But it could also be a symbol of your love if you changed your perspective."

"Chile, she don't have to," Neo said, gripping my thigh. "If she told Bully how she felt he'd buy her another one in a heartbeat."

Even though we laughed, I knew that was true. He'd been doing so much for me lately I didn't want to bring up something so trivial.

"I mean... it's not really that deep. I'll get a band at the wedding and I can just wear that."

"No, ma'am," Dauterive said, standing and heading for the door.

"Uh, what are you doing?" I asked as my heart raced. One thing about these two, they never let a need go unannounced or a problem unchecked. That was a great thing but also annoying as hell and why I limited talking to them while Bully was gone. I didn't want them trying to fix how I felt, though I know it came from a good place.

When Dauterive came back, it was with a curious looking Bully.

"What I do now?" he asked, closing the door behind him.

Neo chuckled and shoved my shoulder as I groaned.

“Neo asked me when I was going to put my ring back on. I told her I wasn’t sure because it reminded me of that day and that I’ll be fine with the band when we get married.”

His head tilted and brows wrinkled. “I bought you a ring that day we went shopping. I just didn’t tell you because I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Now it was my turn to look confused. “Oh. Well there’s that.” I patted my legs with a smile.

“I was waiting for the right time to give it to you. You want it now?”

My head shook as I beamed. “No. I want to be surprised.”

Their laughing tickled me even though I was serious.

“Say less.” He leaned down and gave me a quick kiss before leaving us alone.

“See what happens when you speak up,” Neo teased, causing me to roll my eyes. But I couldn’t lie, I was grateful for her nosy ass.

We revolved in our own little world for a little while longer before returning to the others. By that time, Bully was feeling his liquor. He wasn’t quite tipsy yet, but he was happy and in a friendly mood.

“C’mere,” he demanded quietly, casually tugging me away from the crew and down the hall.

“Bully, what are you—oh no. We can’t!”

He waited until we were in the bathroom and he had the door locked to say, “We gon’

do whatever the fuck I say we gon' do. Yo' pussy is too."

A low purr escaped me, but it turned into a gasp when he effortlessly lifted me and put me on the counter.

"In your parents' house, bae?" I confirmed as a sneaky grin spread my lips.

"In my parents' house," he replied against my ear, putting my hand on top of his rock hard dick.

As I moaned, I busied myself with pulling him out of his boxers. Bully helped me shimmy out of my jeans and pushed my panties to the side. He held me close as he entered me, burying his face in my neck. His strokes taunted me... daring me not to enjoy them. Not to be vocal. Not with force, but with precision. I clung to him and dug my nails into his back. Bit his neck and licked his ear. Whispered my whimpers and praises.

When I couldn't hold back anymore, I released a long series of short moans as I came.

"Yesss, that's it," he praised. "That's it, baby. Cum for daddy."

"Ooh, Bully. That feels so good, bae."

"Mhm. Keep cumming for me."

I had no choice but to comply when he wrapped his hand around my neck and pressed me into the mirror. He told me to hold my legs and I did. Between him choking me and circling my clit with his thumb I came again in no time. My legs trembled as they fell, but he kept them spread wide as he continued to stroke me into a third orgasm. That time, he came too.

* * *

The Next Night

By the grace of God, our parents were feeling good enough yesterday to agree to watch our babies, so the entire crew had a free night tonight. We all took full advantage and enjoyed ourselves at Karrington's house. I loved games and gambling, so I'd spent a lot of the night alternating between poker and blackjack. Unlike when we were with the elders, weed was in rotation tonight, and that meant long, slow, nasty sex when me and Bully got home.

For now, I was truly enjoying spending time with our people. I hadn't spent a lot of time with Eyela because she was so shy but she'd been coming around more and was actually really cool. Malaysia and Enjell were here with their men and Malaysia's wild ass reminded me of my cousins on my daddy's side. Neo, Dauterive, and Whiskey were in the corner cackling, and Dauterive's sister Dallas was in the cut balancing her time between the single men in the room.

The sound of Bully's laughter pulled me out of my people watching. I would know his voice, his laugh, even if there were a million men in the room. As if he felt eyes on him, Bully's eyes scanned the room until they landed on me. He licked his lips and shot me a wink that made my pussy wet as I squeezed my thighs together.

"It's on you, sis," Beethoven said, returning my attention to our poker game.

"I'm all in," I said, pushing the rest of my chips into the center of the table.

"I'm out," Asylum said with a shake of his head.

"What about you, Merc?" I asked with a grin.

“I’m in,” he said, shoving the rest of his chips in.

“This too,” Bully said, handing him a ring. I wouldn’t attempt to guess how many carats it was, but it was three times as big as my first ring.

“Bae...” I whispered, speechless. My eyes watered. Every man at the table wore smiles and looks of pride as they set their cards on the table—face down.

“Looks like you won,” Bully said, pushing the pot, and the ring, toward me. “Though, having you and Princess makes me the real winner. I love you, Innvy. Thank you for giving us a second chance.”

My eyes blurred from my tears as I picked up the ring. Bully made his way around the table, kneeled, and slipped it onto my left ring finger. As our friends cheered us on and clapped, I lowered myself and embraced my man.

“Was this a surprise?” he asked in my ear with a smile. “Special enough?”

“It’s absolutely perfect.”

* * *

Early May

About a month passed since Bully graced me with my new ring. I didn’t want to jinx it and say things were perfect between us, but they were. Innah and I had settled into Bully’s home and made it our own—and for me, it was better being back with my baby. We were a real family now, and I couldn’t ask for more. She was crawling and saying more words. My work schedule was lighter but my profit was higher because I rented out the three spare rooms to other estheticians who paid rent.

Bully was working with the schools just until the end of the month, then he'd be free for the summer. He was supposed to start in August but couldn't stay away for that long. I couldn't wait to see how we'd spoil Innah and show her more of the world. I knew she was far too young to remember anything we did during her first summer on this Earth, but we'd have tons of pictures to show her.

It was such a beautiful day that I decided to pick Innah up myself after work and take her to the park. Bully didn't give me that much of a hard time about it since it allowed him to go to happy hour with his brothers. As the sun started to set, I decided it was time for us to head home.

While I walked to the car, I felt like someone was watching me. I looked around, eyes landing on an older gentleman who was on the phone. When I looked at him, he immediately looked away. It wouldn't have been the first time a man eyed me, so I didn't think twice about it. Once I got Innah settled in her seat, I made my way to mine. We didn't even get a full five minutes into the drive and she had already fallen asleep.

My laughter turned into panic when my Wagon juttet to a stop as smoke filled it. Seeing as I hadn't had it for more than two months, I had no idea what could have been going wrong. I pulled over to the side of the road and groaned before quickly hopping out to grab my baby. Before I could dial Bully's number, a black town car pulled over behind me. Since I didn't know what was wrong, I wasn't sure if they'd be able to help. I wouldn't mind allowing them to try if they were about to offer.

The back passenger door opened and a tall older man stepped out. I was pretty sure I'd never met him before but there was something about him that was familiar. He buttoned his suit jacket as he took long, confident strides in my direction.

"Need some help?" he asked with a wide smile.

“Yes, I believe so,” I replied, looking down at a still sleeping Innvy. “I don’t know what happened. It just started smoking and stopped.”

“I can take a look under your hood if you’d like.”

“Uh, sure. Thanks.”

“Do you want to sit in the car while I do?” he asked, opening the door to pop the hood.

“Oh no, we’re okay. Thanks.”

His head bobbed once as he eyed me from head to toe, then proceeded to round the Wagon. I stepped off to the side to avoid traffic and hoped it was something he’d be able to fix quickly. If not, I’d have to call for a tow truck and hope Bully wasn’t too far away to come and pick us up.

17

Bully

The laughter and conversations around me faded when I pulled my phone out and saw a picture of Innvy holding Innah on the side of the road. I checked the contact again because I was confused as to why PJ would be sending it to me. It looked like he'd taken it from the inside of a car. Shortly after, I saw Rocco standing next to Innvy. She looked like she was paying close attention to what he was saying.

Not bothering to call PJ, I dialed Innvy's number. She chipperly answered after a few rings with, "Hey, bae."

"Where you at?"

"Um... down the street from the park. My car started smoking and stopped and this man is helping."

"Who?" I asked, shooting up from my seat, though I knew who it was.

"I'm not sure. He didn't tell me his name."

Gritting my teeth, I released what I needed to be a calming breath as I headed out of the bar. Without even knowing what was going on, Asylum, Merc, Beethoven, Karrington, and Aspen followed.

"Listen to me carefully. The man you're with is Rocco. The one I was working for." I

paused and gave her time to process what I was saying. “Play the game so you and Innah will be safe, but do not get in that car with him. I’m about to call my connect with MPD so they can send the closest unit to your location.”

She cleared her throat. “O-okay, bae. We’ll be fine. Like I said, this nice man is helping us. You enjoy your time with your mom.”

Relief filled me at how calm she sounded. “I love you, Angel. I’ll see you soon.”

“I love you too.”

After disconnecting the call, I went to her contact ID and sent her location to Graham. I called him and told him the situation and he confirmed he would have dispatch send someone out on my behalf.

“What the hell is going on?” Asylum asked once we were all out by our cars.

I ran down the situation to them, and as soon as I was done Karrington asked, “Has he reached out to you since you’ve been back?”

With a sigh, I ran my hand down my face. “Yeah, but I told him we had nothing to talk about and not to call me.”

“Clearly this is his way of trying to get your attention,” Merc declared.

“Well he got it, and he gon’ get these bullets too,” I replied.

“Wait, brother,” Karrington said, gripping my arm and keeping me from getting in the car. “I know you’re upset and you’re ready to go in guns blazing, so I’ll think for you. You need to be logical and have a clear plan.”

“The plan is to go get my fucking girls,” I snarled, jerking my arm away from him as a scowl covered my face.

“Look, we let you handle this shit your way the first time and look what happened,” Beethoven said, standing in front of the door so I couldn’t get in.

“That mane just took nine months of your life,” Asylum said. “I’m willing to bet he’s trying to use you again.”

“Going after him won’t make him stop. It will only make shit worse,” Merc reasoned.

“Now you know we all for shooting a nigga and protecting our own, but this ain’t the way,” Beethoven said.

Sighing, I felt my anger slowly start to release. “Then what do y’all suggest?”

“Let’s let MPD get them home,” Karrington started, “and I will set up a sit down with him on your behalf. Let me get you out of this, brother.”

My head shook adamantly as I pushed Beethoven out of the way so I could get inside.

“I know that’s your pride, but don’t let it fuck you up,” Merc said. “Ain’t no shame in letting Karrington move on your behalf. We brothers and we look out for each other.”

Fuck.

That was true.

“Let me do this for you,” Karrington pleaded softly.

My nostrils flared as I released a shaky breath. Nodding, I squeezed the bridge of my

nose. "Aight. Let's do it."

* * *

4:00 AM

I stared at the made bed. Neither me nor Innvy had been in it. Thankfully, she and Innah got that police escort before Rocco and PJ tried to force them in the car. Karrington had set up the sit down with Rocco, and now I had to wait. That anxiousness was what kept me up, and I was sure Innvy felt the same way. She kept assuring me that she was okay but I felt like shit. I promised her my situation with Rocco wouldn't affect them and it had.

Making my way out of our room, I headed to Innah's room and checked in on her. She was still sleeping, so I searched the rest of the house and found Innvy standing by the island in the kitchen. A wine glass and bottle were in front of her as she stared blankly into the distance. When I wrapped my arms around her she jumped but instantly relaxed.

When her body meshed with mine, I kissed her neck.

"Why aren't you in bed next to me?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"I'm nervous about your meeting."

"You have no reason to be," I assured her as I turned her and placed her on top of the island. "I can take care of myself, and even if I couldn't, my brothers will be with me."

She sighed and shook her head as a sad expression covered her face. "I just don't understand why he won't leave us alone."

“I’m good at what I do, sweetheart. I am not surprised that he wants me to work for him again. The mistake I made was thinking he’d be a man of his word and expect a favor for a favor. Not favors.”

Innvy nodded her agreement. “This is one time I wish you weren’t good at what you do.”

Her soft smile comforted me. “I know you said you were okay, but could fear or anxiety be why you can’t sleep too?”

Swallowing hard, Innvy shook her head and ran her hands down my chest. “You know what’s crazy is Ma told me not to have faith in a man but to have faith in God. When you called me and told me who he was, fear filled me for only a brief moment.” She cupped my cheek. “There was no doubt in my mind that you’d save us. I had all the confidence in the world that we’d be okay because of God... and you.”

Her words surged through my heart and restored my confidence in myself to protect them. It fucked with me knowing Rocco had stooped as low as to fuck with her truck and approach my girls, but I shouldn’t have been surprised. He’d fucked up when he positioned himself to breathe the same air as my girls. Rocco wanted me to kill, and he had no idea how close he was to being on the other side of my Glock.

“Thank you for trusting me still.”

“Always. I know you’d do anything to protect us. I’m just glad you allowed them to cajole you into this meeting instead of taking matters into your own hands.”

I released a hard breath. “Yeah. Now that I’ve calmed down, I know that would have started a war and that’s the last thing I want. I want this shit to be over, so if Karrington has to step in for me, I will accept that.”

InnvY brushed her nose against mine then kissed me. “I know you feel guilty but it wasn’t your fault. You did your part. You honored your word. He didn’t.”

Gripping her thighs, I kissed up her neck and cheek to her lips. “Thank you, baby.”

“If you want to thank me, make sure this man never bothers us again.”

As I pushed her hair out of her face, a slow smile spread my lips. If I had any doubts that she was the one, this moment would have solidified it.

* * *

Later that Evening

The Sit Down

“Y’all didn’t check this man to see if he had any weapons?” Beethoven asked with a serious expression, making me, Asylum, Merc, and Karrington laugh. Blaze and Aspen insisted on joining us, but they were outside at the door with Loki and Wolf.

“You know he got that thang on ’em,” Merc answered with a grin.

“Probably got a few,” Asylum added absently as he looked at his phone.

“I told Rocco this would be peaceful so we gon’ be grown men about this shit,” Karrington started, “but if he wanna take it there...” He shrugged and allowed the essence of his words to fill the hallway.

I didn’t give a damn either way. Regardless of the means, shutting Rocco down was my motive. We could do it peacefully or blow his ass to pieces. I promised my girl I’d handle him today and I was standing very firm on that shit.

Two guards in brown suits stood in front of the double doors. Their hands were cupped in their centers, gaze forward. When we made our way in front of them, their attention shifted briefly before the one on the left tapped on the door with his knuckles.

“Let them in,” Rocco granted, which led to the other guard trying to search us, but I told him we had guns and that wouldn’t be necessary. He told us we couldn’t go in with them but Rocco told him it was okay.

As soon as we entered the room and my feet hit the mahogany floor, something shifted inside of me. My eyes landed on Rocco, and I couldn’t stop myself from pulling my Glock from my back.

“Whoa,” Karrington said, gripping my wrist, but my reach was firm.

“That’s how you gon’ play it, young blood?” Rocco asked with a crooked grin as guns cocked all over the room.

“If you kill this man, you will start a war,” Karrington reminded me. “That’s not what we’re here for. Peace for your girls. Freedom. Remember?”

Slowly, my head shifted in his direction. It felt like my arm was covered in concrete because it was almost impossible to lower it. Eventually, I huffed and lowered the gun. Karrington’s frame relaxed next to me, and Rocco nodded for us all to take seats. I preferred to stand and make this shit quick.

My eyes were trained on him as he and Karrington talked and came to an agreement. In exchange for him never asking me to do anything else and keeping Andre’s murder a secret, Karrington would become his new supplier and offer him a twenty-five percent discount. I’d already made up in my mind to give Karrington that back because I didn’t want him taking a loss for me. Once they sealed the deal with a

handshake, Rocco stood to shake mine.

I took his hand into mine and used it to pull him close. Against his ear I told him, “If you so much as look at my wife and daughter again I will kill you. I’ll go to war with God Himself behind them, so I have no problem going against you and sending you to Him.”

My words caused the grin he’d been sporting the entire time to drop as he released my hand. Silence found us as we made our way out, but once we were outside, I thanked them all for showing up for me in this way. Truth was, I was used to being the one who showed up... not the one people had to show up for. Had I let Karrington do this before, I wouldn’t have been away for as long as I was. But that was in the past and it was finally behind us.

Once I got in my car, I called Innvy, and she answered after the first ring.

“Well...” she said with a smile in her voice that I couldn’t help but mirror.

“Hey, baby. It’s over.”

Innvvy

A While Later

Me and Bully were laying on a thick blanket on the carpeted floor. Innah's toys were spread all over our floor as she played in her own little world. I fed him popcorn as he rested his head on my lap. We could have easily watched a movie in the home theater but doing it in our room gave Innah the space to crawl around and play without us worrying about her getting under the leather seats.

Things had returned to normal after their meeting with Rocco and I couldn't be more content. The only thing that would have made life better was having my man and daughter's last name. He'd been put on her birth certificate and he shed a few tears just like the first time he saw her.

Bully gasped and gripped my arm. I looked down at him and then in the direction of his gaze. A quiet, choked cry escaped me at the sight of Innah waddling in our direction. Clutching my chest, I blinked back my tears. Immediately, we both cheered her on and held out our arms to receive her. She smiled and giggled and fell two times before making her way into my arms.

I stood and spun her around, holding her close and kissing all over her face. When I put her back down, I grabbed my phone and recorded her walking over to her daddy. Our princess had taken her first steps and we both were here to see it. Just months ago, I wasn't sure that would be the case, but by the grace of God, Bully was back home with us.

The rest of the night went by in a blur. We played with her a little while longer and read her a few books before feeding her and doing her nighttime routine. Once she was fast asleep, we showered then climbed into bed. It was crazy how we went from spending our weekends at sporting events, traveling, or at lounges to lounging around at home. I wouldn't trade our relaxed, slow pace of living now for anything else in the world.

"You wanna try to finish the movie or call it a night?" Bully asked as I lay on his chest, causing me to look up at him.

He was truly the most handsome man in the world to me with his smooth milk chocolate skin, the meaningful tattoos, square head and beard, juicy lips, and perfect white teeth. But as always... it was those eyes... those piercing, slanted brown eyes... they were always my weakness.

"You are so sexy," I complimented.

His expression turned serious before he asked, "You want this dick?"

That got a hearty laugh out of me. "Really, bae?"

"Hey, you complimented me. If you want the dick, just say that."

"I mean... I'll always take it, but I really was just in awe of how fine my man is. I want a son that looks like you."

Bully's smile was relaxed as he flipped me onto my back and switched our positions. "You wanna make him tonight?"

"Well we can't because I'm on birth control, but we can definitely practice for when I get off."

“And when will that be?”

“After the wedding. I’m not giving you another baby to have your last name before I do.”

His chuckle was sexy as he lowered himself to my lips and kissed me. “That’s fair, and I’m more than okay with that.”

Our lips connected again, and soon, our centers did too.

* * *

Bully

Another While Later

This kind of shit didn’t happen to men like me. When you came from the hood I did, you didn’t get to live your dreams. You didn’t get to marry the good girl. Shit, you didn’t get to live past twenty. I’d not only gotten out the hood and made something of myself, but I met and fell in love with the perfect woman for me and had a beautiful baby girl in the process.

Surrounded by the men I loved and trusted, I prepared to make Innvy my wife. I didn’t believe in love at first sight until I laid eyes on her. Maybe it wasn’t love—maybe it was an innate need that connected me to her and told me she was the one. Regardless of what it was, I’d been locked in because of it and didn’t plan on that changing any time soon.

When someone knocked on the door, I expected it to be the wedding planner coming to make sure we were good to go. My heart damn near dropped to my feet when Innvy walked in.

I would have said it was bad luck for us to see each other before the wedding but there would never be anything bad about laying eyes on her.

“Hi,” she spoke bashfully, making her way over to me in a beautiful, long, wide dress. It was so wide she could barely fit it through the door. Her makeup was immaculate, and her hair was in loose flowing curls that made her look regal.

“Hi, sweet girl. You look absolutely beautiful,” I told her as everyone looked at us.

“Thank you. You make the most handsome groom.”

“You’re not about to flip the tables and leave me, are you?”

Her light laughter was like music to my ears as I took her hands into mine and kissed them.

“No, um...” She looked around the room hesitantly before returning her eyes to mine. “The girls wanted to do a toast and I told them no. But I didn’t want to tell them why. I wanted to tell you first.”

My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach when I realized what she was saying. I didn’t want to get excited prematurely, but it took everything inside of me not to hop from one foot to the other.

“Whew,” I released, rocking on the heels of my feet to my toes. “Speak to me. Say what I want to hear you say.”

Her head hung shyly, briefly, before her eyes returned to mine. “I’m pregnant, bae. We’re... we’re going to have another baby.”

“Hell yeah!” I roared, picking her up and spinning her around.

As my friends and family congratulated us, I could barely hear them over the sound of my heart beating in my ears. My eyes closed as they watered while I put Innvy on her feet. My baby was having my baby—again. With a moan, I cupped her cheeks and covered her lips with mine.

“You just made an already perfect day even better. Thank you, Angel.”

“Thank you,” she muttered against my lips before kissing me again. “Thank you for coming back to us. Thank you for loving us. Thank you for my babies. I love you so much, Bully.”

She caught a tear I didn’t realize was about to fall as I told her, “I love you more. I love you so much more.”

We embraced again, and I released her only because the urge to officially make her my wife consumed me. I couldn’t wait another moment. We were a little early, but I took her by the hand and led her out of the room. As we made our way through the lobby, Pops and Hamilton told their wives the wedding was about to happen now.

No Innah as our flower girl.

No elaborate walk from the wedding party.

No Marz as the ring bearer.

Just me and my angel making our way down the aisle hand in hand.

As soon as we made it in front of Pastor Bailey, he joked about me not wanting to give Innvy time to change her mind. I chuckled along with everyone else, but I really wasn’t in the mood for none of this shit. I just wanted to say I Do and get to my honeymoon. Innvy may have already been pregnant with my baby, but I was about to fill her up with so much cum she might get pregnant a second time if it was possible.

Once everyone was in the sanctuary and settled in their seats, her girls made their way behind her while my brothers made their way behind me. Innvy and I turned to face each other, connecting both hands. She released a shaky breath and gave me a warm smile, and all I could do was thank God that she was finally about to become my wife.

The ceremony went by in a quick blur. I honestly just listened in for the part where we said our vows and I Do . As soon as he pronounced us husband and wife, I took Innvy into my arms and kissed her deeply. Scooping her up over my shoulder, I carried her down the aisle as Eyela played “Endless Love.”

“Bully, wait!” Innvy yelled as she laughed and held on to me. “At least let me say bye to my baby.”

“We’ll see her in three days when they meet us on the island. I need to be inside of you—like right now.”

She groaned and giggled before telling me she loved me, and I made the declaration back. The moment we slipped into the back of the limo, I rolled the partition up and pulled her and her puffy ass dress onto my lap. As soon as I squeezed her hips and realized she didn’t have on any panties I understood God’s favor. Our lips connected as she unzipped and unbuttoned my pants. It wasn’t until she slid down on my dick that I felt like I could breathe. Could think. Could relax and release.

Her arms wrapped around me, and her forehead rested on mine.

“Damn. I needed this,” I confessed, rubbing my hands against her stomach.

“Clearly,” she said with a laugh, but it turned into a moan when she sat up slightly and slid back down. “You always feel so good, bae.”

“Nothing feels better than you. I love you. Thank you for giving me another child.

Thank you for being my wife. Thank you for never giving up on me.”

Her eyes watered as she smiled. “I get my own personal declaration and vows?”

Chuckling, I nodded and moaned as I gripped her hips. “You deserve it—oh shit.” Her walls contracted against me, temporarily distracting me. “I vow to protect you, honor you, lead you, and mm—”

Innvyy hissed as her head flung back. She’d never cum so fast and it was about to make me cum too.

“Please don’t stop,” she begged, and I obliged.

Every time she sank down on me, I made another promise I fully intended to keep.

By the time we made it home to change clothes for our flight, my pants were drenched and she’d cum at least seven times. I felt high and had no substance other than my wife. And that was a high I’d chase for the rest of my fucking life.

The Beginning

Because True Love Has No End

Ready to say goodbye to the crew?

Catch up with everyone one last time in The Protectors 2 Fall 2025.