



Caught Me Slippin'

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Category: Urban

Description: On paper, McCoy Toliver's life is what every young girl dreams of.

She has a thriving law career, a big, beautiful house, and a man by her side.

Except there's a problem.

Everything that glitters isn't always gold, and the man she was once madly in love with is now a tyrant she no longer recognizes.

McCoy has fought for her life for the last few years, and she's desperate.

She knows she has to get out of the situation for good.

Earth Carlson hustled his way to street royalty at a young age.

His killer mentality and book smarts have made him a few enemies.

Earth couldn't care less about who he has pissed off as long as he has money in his pocket, food on the table, and his family and friends are taken care of.

The only thing he ever regretted was the loss of his best friend.

But Earth vowed to get the man responsible for his death, even if it meant he had to die trying.

To get out of an abusive relationship, McCoy does the one thing she finds logical: kidnaps her fiancé's biggest enemy.

The saying goes, 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend,' right? And right now, McCoy needs all the friends she can get. What she didn't expect was the man she had locked inside her home would become the man locked inside her heart.

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CHAPTER 1

MCCOY TOLIVER

“Why am I here?” I asked Jamel as soon as I saw him.

He looked at me with a smirk and nodded toward the opposite side of the room. I had to squint my eyes to see the man sitting tied to a chair. His head was down, so I couldn’t make out his face, but I knew whoever it was must’ve been important because there would be no other reason for Jamel to have me here.

“You see that nigga?” Jamel asked with a low laugh. “His name is Prince Holland.”

Jamel walked to Prince, around his chair, and nodded for me to approach him. Even though the room was dark, the closer I got to him, the better my view improved. “He’s one of the founders of DBB.”

“Bitch ass nigga, understand DBB will take you out for this,” Prince said, lifting his head.

I expected to see his face black and blue with cuts, but it was completely unscathed. Prince was cute; he probably had a million and one women vying for his attention, but I could also tell he was dangerous. He was what Jamel pretended to be.

“Earth will kill your ass, and everything attached to your name.”

A look of disgust and annoyance on Jamel’s face was unmistakable. But there was

also something else there; it almost looked like fear.

“Nigga, just like I got you, I will get Earth,” Jamel replied with a laugh as he tried to play off his momentary pause.

The six or seven men he had with him laughed while I stood there waiting. I’d never been dragged into anything Jamel did. It wasn’t like I wasn’t aware of his life outside our home because I was. I knew he was a monster. I was just never included in firsthand situations. He grabbed Prince by his long locs and pulled his head back, so he had to look at him.

“The DBB isn’t untouchable, niggas were just too scared to do it.” He smirked down at Prince. “I’m not.”

“Then untie me and let’s see who walks out this bitch,” Prince replied.

I bit my bottom lip to keep from laughing because, even though I didn’t know this man, I had more respect for him than Jamel. He was strong, and even though he was outnumbered and more than likely would die, he wasn’t afraid.

“Nah, nigga,” Jamel denied, then hit Prince in the face two times.

Prince seemed to eat the blows Jamel delivered. I knew firsthand Jamel’s hits packed a punch. I’d been on the receiving end of them one too many times. He let go of Prince’s head, stepped back, and wiped his hand on a towel he pulled from his back pocket. Prince licked over his swollen bottom lip, smirked, and then spit the blood in Jamel’s direction.

“You hit like my little sister.” Prince chuckled. “When she was two.” He wiped his bottom lip against his shoulder. “Step your shit up, little nigga.”

“You think this shit a joke?” Jamel roared as he pulled his gun from his waist. “I’ll kill you right now.”

“Do it,” Prince replied with a shrug. “You snatched me up already. I know how the game goes. I ain’t making it out of here alive.”

“You don’t run shit.” Jamel pushed his gun under Prince’s chin. “I make the decisions.” Moving quickly, he hit Prince in the middle of the head with the butt of his gun. His skin split open, and blood poured from the opening. “You’re alive until I say otherwise.”

“Nah.” Prince laughed. “That ain’t how it works, nigga. It’s somebody above you, the real boss. Get me that nigga because you move like you a low man on the totem pole. Who the fuck is in charge?” He looked at me and smirked. “Is it you, baby? You run this nigga? Are you the bitch in charge? Because I know it ain’t this weak nigga.” I shook my head, knowing if I opened my mouth, Jamel would be on my head before I could close it. “Damn shame. I got more respect for you than I do for him.”

“Stop talkin’ to my bitch,” Jamel said, stepping in front of me so he blocked Prince. He rolled up his sleeves and shook his head. “I have been wanting to beat your ass for a minute now.” Jamel moved to the side so he could see me, and I could see him and Prince. “You better not look away, either. If you do, I’ll do to you everything I do to him, plus more.”

I did what I was told, never taking my eyes off Prince as Jamel hit him. Prince once again took every hit without flinching. His nose bled, and his eyes swelled, but he never took his eyes off me. It was like he was waiting for me to help, but what could I do? I was stuck here, too. Stuck with a man who probably hated me just as much, if not more, than he hated Prince.

“Stop looking at my bitch!” Jamel roared and grabbed Prince’s face. “What did I tell

you?” He hit Prince in the face twice. “Stop looking at her.”

“She fine,” Prince replied with a smirk. “I’d rather look at her than your ugly ass.”

“Oh?” Jamel let go of Prince’s face and walked over to me. He grabbed my hair and dragged me to where Prince was tied down. “I’ll kill this bitch without a second thought, just like I plan to kill you. So, look at her face long and hard because it’ll be the last thing you ever see.” He pushed my face into Prince’s, making his blood smear onto me. It was the only time Prince moved. “Nah, bitch, be still!” He pushed me into Prince some more before pulling me back and throwing me on the floor. “Sit on your fuckin’ knees in front of that nigga.”

I didn’t move fast enough, which made Jamel punch me in the face and then kick me in the stomach. I lay on my side in the fetal position. Tears rolled from my eyes, but I didn’t make a sound because I knew that would egg Jamel on more.

Prince’s dark eyes searched mine before he looked up at Jamel. “You a bitch ass nigga for putting your hands on a woman. That must be the only way your dick gets hard.”

“The fuck you worried about my dick for, faggot?” Jamel questioned. He got in Prince’s face and smirked. “That sister you mentioned will know how it tastes before I put a bullet in her head.”

Prince laughed long and hard before shaking his head. “Yeah, keep thinkin’ that shit,” he said once he got himself together. “Nigga, kill me now, or shut the fuck up.”

“Don’t worry, I’m gonna kill your ass, then drop your body at Earth’s doorstep,” Jamel said, then left out of the room.

“Ay,” Prince said, making me look up. “Find Earth Carlson and tell him I said to take

care of this shit for me. He's my boy, really my brother. Him and Fire both are." He let out a small laugh and shook his head. "He's a good nigga. Find him; he'll get you out of this shit with Jamel. That nigga gotta die, shorty. I'ono whether you love him or not, but if you don't, find Earth. Tell him I sent you?—"

The doors to the room were pushed open, and Jamel and his boys walked back in. They beat Prince while Jamel snatched me up from the floor and threw me out of the room. The last thing I heard before the door closed behind me was the sound of a gun being fired.

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CHAPTER 2

EARTH CARLSON

“Let’s make this shit quick,” I said, walking into the house.

My brother Fire slowly made his way inside behind me. I heard him knocking shit over as he made his way through the foyer. Usually, I’d be annoyed, even want to snatch his ass up, but today, I needed his dramatic flair. I was tired; coming off a seven-hour flight to having to come here and handle shit we usually wouldn’t have to was pissing me off. But Prince was missing; he wasn’t answering the phone or at regular hangouts.

“You can’t rush perfection,” Fire said.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and tried Prince again. Just like the past two days, his phone rang twice then went to voicemail. I didn’t leave a message; there was no reason. He never checked them.

“I swear this nigga gonna make me go upside his shit,” I said, then stuffed my phone back in my pocket.

“He probably with a bitch,” Fire said as he looked at a large painting hanging above the fireplace that sat in the middle of the room. “You know how he gets when he finds the new love of his life.”

I sucked my teeth and then grunted. My boy was a hopeless romantic. Every woman

he was with somehow became his life's love after a short time. Eventually, they became some bitch he used to fuck with. I didn't doubt he loved them at one point; he just didn't know how to stay in love.

"Probably," I agreed.

"You sure this nigga here?" Fire questioned as he walked away from the fireplace and picked up a vase off the end table near the couch. "This shit ugly." He dropped the vase on the ground and stepped on the broken pieces before jumping on the couch. "This shit stiff."

"It's old people's shit," I said with a laugh. "These muthafuckas don't know shit about comfortable furniture. They don't even care if it's comfortable because they aren't sitting on it."

"I guess so," Fire replied as he stepped off the couch. "Let's find this nigga so we can collect our money."

"Cool with me, I'm tired anyway."

I pulled my gun from the waist of my pants and waited for Fire to do the same. Chancy Moore might be rich, but I knew he was a street nigga at heart and hadn't forgotten his roots. His camping out at his grandparents' house didn't mean shit. He knew what time it was, and when we caught him, shit wasn't going to be easy.

"How much you think this shit gonna get me at the pawnshop off 12 th Street?" Fire picked up an old-school camera on a table near the steps. "Shit, look like it's got some secrets on it."

"Put that shit back," I said as I passed him. "We ain't here for that."

“So, you sayin’ I can’t make no money off killin’ the nigga that owes us money?” he asked, as I made my way up the stairs. “Earth, nigga, I know you hear me!”

“I hear you, fool. Take the shit if it means that much to you,” I shot back, knowing Fire didn’t give a damn about the camera but was just trying to get on my damn nerves.

“I don’t want this old ass shit.” Fire threw the camera down the stairs, then smirked at me. “But that painting in the living room is going with me. I know this girl that likes old shit like that. I’m going to tell her I bought it on the black market to impress her.”

We made our way upstairs and checked each room we found. For the house to be so damn big, there was a lot of unused space.

Chancy had made his name in the streets a few years back, but a few bad business deals had him looking for someone to invest in his business. I’d warned him we wouldn’t play with him when he came to us. On the outside, Elemental Investment was just an investment company; my hands were in almost every type of business. We made money in our sleep. When I stepped into a board room, everyone waiting for me to show up was pleased when I opened my mouth. What most didn’t know was how we moved behind the scenes.

In the streets, we were known as DBB, the Duffel Bag Boys, and we weren’t the ones to fuck with. We made our money early on, jacking every corner boy with no regret. We eventually moved to selling the drugs we jacked. We got money by taking and didn’t care who knew. After a while, we had more money than we knew what to do with, so we invested in some small businesses to have a cover story about why we were making money. That brought in more money, and our parents didn’t raise dummies, so we started going to school: me for business management and Fire for finance. Less than ten years later, we were legit businessmen who were still hood at heart.

“You mess with hoodrats. Them bitches don’t know shit about pictures,” I retorted, and Fire laughed. “Now let’s hurry this shit up so I can go home, take a shower, and go to sleep. Unlike yo’ ass, I’ve been sitting in board meetings, impressing muthafuckas who have no idea I’m their worst fuckin’ fear.”

“Young, educated, and black,” Fire said, and I nodded. “But hood and with all the best connections.”

“Ain’t no other way to be.” I laughed. “Now let’s kill this nigga.”

“So fuckin’ pushy, I swear,” Fire replied and then kicked open the only door that was locked.

I half expected someone to start shooting or at least try to go out like an OG. Instead, Chancy sat in a chair near the window, a blunt in one hand and a glass of liquor in the other. There was no doubt in my mind it was cognac because that was the only thing I’d ever seen him drink.

“Took you lil niggas long enough to get here,” he said with a chuckle, then took a pull of his blunt. “I’ve been waiting all night.”

“It’s only ten-thirty. Shut the fuck up,” Fire responded as he looked around the room. “And you are only six years older than us; stop trying to make it seem like you an OG in the game.” He mugged Chancy hard. “Talkin’ about I been waiting all night. Bitch, you dumb for rushing us to kill you.”

“Nah, I’m not dying,” Chancy smirked. “Not with the information I have.”

“What you know?” Fire questioned. I stood back, watching their interaction. Chancy was cocky as fuck right now. He didn’t look like a nigga worried about dying. If anything, he looked like he would live through this night and plenty more later.

“I know who snatched Prince,” he answered, and I stepped forward. Prince was like a brother to us. We’d grown up together. He was my brother without needing the blood connection. “He hasn’t been answering the phone for you over the last few days, has he?”

“Who got him?” Fire made it across the room in less than six steps and pushed his gun into Chancy’s temple. “Huh, nigga? If you wanna live, you’ll start talkin’.”

“I tell you who has him, and y’all let me live,” Chancy said, looking at me. He knew Fire wouldn’t make a move without my word, or at least he hoped he wouldn’t.

“Put the gun down,” I said to Fire. He looked at me with a confused expression, and I nodded. “Let him talk.”

“It better be some legit information, too,” Fire said, then pushed away from Chancy.

“Jamel snatched him,” Chancy said quickly. I chuckled because this nigga was stupid. He had no guarantee we’d let him live, and yet he’d run his mouth.

“Go on.”

“Two nights ago, he was leaving the club on Eighth Street, and he didn’t make it home,” Chancy said. “Word is, Jamel had his boys snatch him up and drag him to an empty warehouse near the west bottoms. He’s still there.”

Fire stepped back, pulled his phone from his pocket, and was already making calls before I could tell him. I watched him as he paced in front of Chancy and talked on the phone. He looked up at me and nodded, and I knew he had a location. “Citrine and Wednesday said they are going meet us there.”

“Wednesday in a good mood?” I questioned with a chuckle. Wednesday Long was

never in a good mood. Nigga stayed pissed, which was always a plus for us because he worked best when he was mad.

“Probably not,” Fire answered with a shrug. “I saw Mondai the other day, and she said he threatened to beat up her new boyfriend, so we actually might catch him without a mug on his face.”

“If he ain’t kill him, then I doubt it,” I off-handedly said, and Fire nodded in agreement. “You killin’ this nigga, or am I?”

“Hey!” Chancy screamed as he jumped up from his seat. Fire shot him in his knees, making him fall to the ground.

“Who killed the last one?” Fire questioned, and I paused to think. The last time we were together, we’d gone for a drink after I got back in town, and a nigga was talkin’ reckless to our sister Breeze. Without thinking, I pulled his gun out and shot him.

“Me, at the bar,” I answered.

“The nigga was talkin’ slick to Breeze,” Fire said, then nodded. “Alright, so I’m going with my signature then.” Fire put two more bullets in him, one in each shoulder. “He can sit there and bleed out. If he’s right with the lord, he’ll die from that before the fire gets him.”

After leaving the room, it took Fire a few minutes to get what he needed. As a kid, he always played with fire. At one point, I swore that nigga was going to burn down the house. All he did was flick his lighter or strike a match. It took our pop threatening to hang him up by his balls after setting the porch on fire before he finally got it together.

“How far is the warehouse from here?” I asked him once we were in the car and

pulling out. Even though Chancy's grandparents' house was in a nice area, it was off the grid. When someone realized it was on fire, it would be too late.

"It smells like ass out here," Wednesday said as he walked past us and headed toward the warehouse. I knew he wouldn't be there for any conversation, which I was okay with. "I hate the damn dirt and worms, and trees, and fuckin' animals."

"And the rivers, oceans, and lakes," Fire teased as we walked behind him.

Wednesday stopped walking and turned to face us. "That shit, too," he said, then grunted. "I hate the whole earth."

"World. Say you hate the whole world," Fire corrected. "Saying earth makes it seem like you talkin' about my brother."

"I hate that nigga, too, for having me out here," Wednesday replied, then turned around and headed toward the warehouse door.

I laughed out loud, not giving a fuck if he heard me because I was used to his mean ass always complaining about shit. He didn't want to deal with it if he couldn't be in his house, in the luxury of central air, heat, and water. Wednesday was OCD and a big-ass germophobe. He ran the streets as a kid to care for himself and his sisters. He never looked back once he hooked up with us and started making money.

"Doubt it," I replied. I turned to Citrine, who walked beside Fire, and tossed him the bat he'd left in my car. "Your shit stays with you, not me."

"I been lookin' for my lady," he replied as he examined his bat. "You were nice to her, right?"

"Nigga, get a woman," I replied, then turned back to Wednesday, who mugged us.

“Kick shit in or something to deal with your anger.”

“Fuck you,” he said, then kicked in the warehouse door.

The door was cheap and had wood rot, so it broke off the hinges and dropped to the ground. We walked inside, again not caring whether someone heard us or not. The entire warehouse was empty except for one room. Inside, Prince sat tied to a chair with the back of his head blown off.

“Who did this shit?” Wednesday asked, stepping out of the room. He briefly glanced at Prince before shutting the door.

“Jamel,” I answered. Tears dropped from my eyes, and I had no intention of wiping them away. Citrine, Wednesday, and Fire had all seen me at my lowest. Shit, we’d all seen each other at our lowest, so there was no reason to hide behind some macho shit now. Our boy was dead, and we had to mourn him. Jamel would die for this shit.

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CHAPTER 3

MCCOY

“Get your ass up!” Jamel yelled as he stood over me. I barely opened my eyes before he snatched the covers off me. The scalding water hitting my skin made me jump from my bed. I screamed out in pain, and Jamel’s laugh hit my ears. “Quit all that screaming. The shit wasn’t even hot.”

I wiped my face and prayed it wasn’t burned too badly, but I knew my prayer would fall on deaf ears when I felt my skin pulsate. I kept my eyes on Jamel as he paced in front of my bed. I hated he was in my condo, had a key, and used it freely. “What are you doing here?” I asked as I tried to get myself together.

“Ay, watch your tone before I break your shit,” Jamel replied as he mugged the hell out of me. I didn’t say anything back. Instead, I looked down at my clothes and skin. I was starting to blister in certain spots, and even now, after a few minutes, I saw steam rolling off me.

“What can I do for you, Jamel?” I questioned instead of saying something I knew would set him off. I’d learned quickly to play my role when it came to him. He was one of those men who needed to be in charge. He was a weak-ass nigga who was trying to be more than what he was. I just hated it took me so long to see it.

“My cousin Kaleb needs to get off,” he replied, and I stared at him, confused. Jamel pulled a blunt from his pocket and lit it without taking his eyes off me. “Make that shit happen.”

“What did he do?” I asked, knowing whatever it was was more than likely serious. I’d been around Kaleb a few times, and I got a bad feeling from him each time.

“Don’t matter what he did or didn’t do.” Jamel pulled his blunt and blew the smoke in my direction. I knew not to move or react because he would do it again if I did. “Make that shit go away.”

“I need to know what I’m making go away,” I replied, and Jamel grunted. He dropped the pot he was holding on my bed, immediately burning a hole in my sheets, and walked into my space. I didn’t move. Not because I was afraid, because, at this point, I wasn’t scared of anything when it came to Jamel. It had more to do with the pain I was experiencing from being burned by scalding water. The fact the pot was still hot enough to burn my silk sheets wasn’t lost on me.

“What the fuck did I say?” Jamel grabbed my face to make me look at him. “Get him the fuck off!” He took a pull of his blunt and blew it in my face. “That’s your fuckin’ job, right? To get niggas off? Do that shit then!”

“Where is he?” I asked through clenched teeth.

“Central lock up,” he answered. “Get that nigga bond, pay it, and get him out. When I come back later, shit better be done.”

“I’ll try,” I replied honestly. No matter how much I wanted to lie, I never lied, especially about getting someone out of jail. Even if they were related to Jamel and weren’t shit in my eyes, I wouldn’t lie to them or him.

“Your choice is to get him out or deal with me,” Jamel said, looking me up and down. He licked his lips and smirked. “And trust me, baby, as much as I’ll enjoy it, and you’ll enjoy it, too, I’ll break your ass and put you on a corner after I’m done.” He pushed me away and headed out of the room. “Play with me if you want to!”

After Jamel left, I headed to the bathroom connected to my bedroom and stared at myself in the mirror. My eyes filled with tears as I did so. I was blistered on my arms, stomach, neck, and parts of my face because of the water Jamel had thrown at me. I peeled off my clothes, letting the tears fall freely because of the pain. This wasn't the first time he'd burned me, but this was the worst.

I grabbed the ointment from my medicine cabinet and tried to apply it, but I could barely move. Against my better judgment, I went back to my room and grabbed my phone from the end table. I had one person I could call, but I knew she would show her natural ass when I did.

"I'm about twenty minutes from your condo," Lynx said as a greeting. "You hungry?"

"No," I moaned in pain as I sat on the bed. "I need you to stop and grab me some stuff from the store, though."

"What you need? It ain't yo' time of the month, so I know it ain't tampons," she replied with a small laugh.

"Some burn ointment," I answered in a mumble.

"Why?"

"Jamel did his version of a wake-up call," I answered truthfully. "With a pot of scalding hot water."

"How bad, McCoy?" Lynx questioned. The sharp tone of her voice and the difference in her breathing signaled she was pissed.

"I'm fine. I don't need you doing anything stupid."

“McCoy, you just said this nigga threw hot water on you, and you don’t want me to do something stupid?”

“I just need you to calm down,” I replied softly, hoping to calm her. “Just calm down for a second and listen to me. I know this is a fucked-up situation. I’m not dumb to that fact, but I have to move smart, or it’ll blow up in my face.

“When I run, and I will run, Lynx, I need to ensure everything is tied up in a neat bow so I don’t have to come back.”

“I swear on everything I love, McCoy.”

“It’s fine.” I looked down at myself and bit into my bottom lip. “I’m fine.” It was bad, probably worse than I even wanted to admit. But I wasn’t letting Lynx retaliate and do something stupid because she was upset. We’d worked too hard, way too fucking hard to do something stupid now. “Just get the ointment, and I’ll take care of it. Please, Lynx.”

“I’ll be there in a bit,” she replied after a few minutes of silence.

I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling, trying not to move. I was hurting badly, but this wasn’t new for me. I mean, yes, the pain was new, but the reason behind the pain wasn’t. The person delivering the pain wasn’t new.

“I swear to fuckin’ God, McCoy. I hate this nigga,” Lynx said, coming into the room. I opened my eyes to see her staring at me. Her face was void of emotion, but her eyes told another story. She was pissed. I’d never know how I lucked up to have a best friend like her, but I did know I never took her for granted.

“Join the club,” I replied. “Help me up.” I put my hand out, and Lynx pulled me up slowly. I screamed in pain once I was on my feet. “Shit!”

“Your plan better fuckin’ work, too, McCoy,” she said as she helped me into the bathroom. “If it doesn’t, I’m killing him, no questions asked. We can fight about it then.”

“My plan will work,” I weakly argued. Doubt pushed in the back of my mind, though. I’d been sitting on this plan for a few months, waiting for the perfect time. “Now help me get myself together. I need to get down to the police station. Jamel’s cousin is in lock up.”

“The fuck did he do?” she questioned, even though I knew she didn’t care. The conversation was to take my mind off the pain. This was our new normal, and I knew she hated it, but it was my life.

“No clue,” I answered.

CHAPTER 4

EARTH

“Somebody is following me,” I said as soon as Fire answered the phone. There was no time for greetings or anything like that; it was straight business. I glanced in the rearview mirror to ensure the black Escalade remained behind me. I’d tried ditching it for the last thirty minutes, but every corner I turned, there it was, not even five seconds later.

“Where you at?” The sound of a chair scraping against the floor echoed through the speakers. I knew Fire was at his office, but I was on the other side of town. He wouldn’t make it in time if something were going to go down. “Huh, Earth? Where are you?”

“Moving south,” I vaguely answered. I wasn’t about to make him panic. Fire lived up to his name in more ways than one. He’d burn down this city without a second thought if he thought it would help me or Breeze.

“Drop the location,” he replied.

I sucked my teeth and ran my hand over my beard. I wasn’t dropping shit. “Look, get to my house and check over my security camera. Call Nine if you got to.”

“The fuck am I doing all that for?” Fire questioned. “The fuck you not tellin’ me?” The call switched to FaceTime, and I chuckled at the look on my twin’s face. His locs covered his face, but I knew just like I knew my name, his left eye was twitching as

he tried to control his anger. “Huh? The fuck you not tellin’ me?”

“Nothing, nigga,” I answered. Truthfully, I was hiding enough. This wasn’t my first time seeing this Escalade. I’d noticed it following me for the last two months but didn’t think twice about it.

Since Prince’s death, I’d been moving nonstop. Killing niggas, snatching bags, making my presence known. I knew, eventually, someone would make a move on me. I was just waiting so I could kill that nigga too.

I glanced through the mirror again before making a right at the last minute. “One, two, three.” The Escalade turned and followed me. I chuckled then. Yeah, this nigga was coming for me, and now whoever it was wasn’t hiding it.

“Drop yo’ location, Earth!” Fire barked. “Stop playin’, nigga, and make it happen.”

“It ain’t gonna matter.” I reached into the passenger seat and grabbed my duffel bag. I quickly opened it and stuffed a small knife in my pocket before taking two Glockes out. Shit wasn’t typically my style, but I planned to make it home tonight. “Call Nine and have that nigga find out who the fuck been following me.”

“He ain’t your brother!” Fire yelled. I cut my eyes to him for a quick second to see him staring at the phone. His dark eyes shined with anger. “Tell me what the fuck to do.”

When I was about to answer him, another Escalade cut me off. “Fuck!” I yelled as I slammed on my brakes. I threw my truck in reverse and hit the gas, but the first Escalade was on my bumper. I thought I was leading them on a wild goose chase the entire time, but they were two steps ahead of me. “Ain’t this some shit.”

“Where the fuck are you, Earth?” Fire yelled in a panic. I put my truck in park,

picked up my blunt from the ashtray, lit it, and took a pull. “Earth!”

“I hear you, Fire,” I answered, then picked up the phone. I blew the smoke out and watched as four more cars blocked me, all the same make, model, and color. It wasn’t just one; that was why when I turned, they were on my ass. They were waiting.

The block was empty. I was going to die, but I was going to go out on my terms. “Look.” I took another pull of my blunt. “Tell Breeze it’s alright. Love, nigga. He ready. She’ll understand what I mean.”

“Nigga, what?” Fire questioned. He pushed his locs out his face and shook his head. “Nigga, the fuck are you talkin’ about?”

“Get you a woman, nigga.” I chuckled, then took another hit. “One that’ll calm your mean ass down. Money ain’t going to keep your ass from being cold at night in that big ass house of yours.”

“Earth, man.”

“Chill, Fire,” I said, shaking my head. I pulled my locs into a ponytail. “Tell Mama she raised a nigga right, I was just hard-headed. Pops, too. Nigga gonna swear this shit his fault, and it ain’t.” I started checking over my guns. “LaLa pregnant.”

“By who?” Earth questioned.

“Prince,” I answered. “She found out a couple of days ago. She ain’t taking the news good, though, ‘cause she still mourning that nigga. Whatever you do, have her raise that little girl right. Keep her from the streets but under DBB protection.”

“She’s having a girl?”

“Something tellin’ me she is.” I turned my truck off and took another pull of my blunt. “Prince wanted a daughter, and you know that nigga got whatever he wanted. It’s only right his only seed on this earth is a girl.” Out of nowhere, the sky got dark. God knew to make it rain to clean the blood off the streets. “Fire?”

“I’m comin’, bro!” Fire yelled. He’d thrown the phone on the seat, so all I could see was the ceiling of his truck.

“Fire, pick up the phone, little bro,” I said calmly. “Fire!”

“Yeah?” He picked up the phone and looked at the screen. Unshed tears sat at the brim of his eyelids. They wouldn’t drop, though. Fire had already lost Prince, and losing me was going to break my brother, but he was a survivor and would use this pain to push himself harder. “I’m coming, Earth! I swear, bro! Just drop the location.”

“I’m good.” I chuckled. “Know I love you, man. It’s been an honor to be your big brother.”

“Earth, dog, I swear after all this shit over, I’m rockin’ yo’ shit for being emotional.”

“Tell me you love me, little bro,” I calmly replied.

“I ain’t tellin’ you shit, Earth! Fuck that shit!”

“Fire.” I chuckled and shook my head. “We the Duffel Bag Boys, right?”

“Always about money and never scared of shit!” Fire repeated the motto we’d made up when we were younger.

“Til death and then some,” we said in unison.

“I love you, Fire,” I repeated.

“I love you, Earth,” he finally replied.

I hung up and stepped out of my truck. The doors to all four Escalades opened, and niggas stepped out. I chuckled and wiped nonexistent dust off my clothes. “Who the fuck is in charge?” I called out.

“We can do this shit the easy or hard way, Earth,” one of the niggas in front of me answered. The fact they all had guns in their hands let me know they knew who the fuck they were dealing with. “I’on care. Either way, this shit a paid job. The boss said to bring you in alive. Leave your phone and keys in the truck.”

I chuckled, then nodded my head. They wanted me to be alive. Good. That meant whoever was dumb enough not to kill me would die by my hands. I grabbed my duffel bag from the truck, dropped my keys and phone in the driver’s seat, closed the door, and headed to the Escalade in front of me. “Tell your boss he just signed his death certificate,” I said as I climbed into the back seat.

I was sitting in a chair in the middle of a warehouse a while later. I leaned back, getting comfortable, and waited. I wasn’t a nigga that liked to be rushed, and whoever the fuck had me snatched up wasn’t rushing either.

The ride here took almost two hours, and the entire time Marco, the head nigga in the car I was in, kept checking in. Whoever McCoy was was running a tight ship. He had Marco nervous as fuck each time the phone rang, and not one of those calls was from McCoy himself.

“Stand up,” Marco said, walking into the room I was being held in. I mugged the hell out of him and chuckled. “Look, you either stand up or I snatch your ass up.”

“You could try,” I replied, then ran my tongue over my teeth. I was itching to knock his weak ass out. “I dare you to try.”

“Alright, don’t,” Marco said with a slight chuckle. He mugged me like he knew something I didn’t, then stepped into the corner of the room, leaned against the wall, and crossed his arms over his chest. “I hope when McCoy is done with you, I can knock all your fuckin’ teeth out your mouth.”

“I got thirty-two of these bitches; I’d love to see you try,” I replied, and Marco grunted.

The door opened back up, and two niggas stepped inside. I squared my shoulders, preparing to kill my way out of the room, but stopped at the sight of the third person walking into the room. She probably wasn’t even five-three, shapely as hell, dark, golden, sun-kissed skin, curly, wavy black hair, oval face, full lips, small nose, and slanted dark eyes. Dressed in a matte green jogger, black fitted tee, and on her feet were a pair of sexy ass heels. She was fine as fuck. Her toenails were painted the same color as her pants, and her jewelry was minimal. She had a black watch, a necklace with an M, and diamond earrings in her ears.

“Earth.” She said my name, then nodded her head.

“Baby girl, as fine as you are, and trust me, you are fine as fuck”—I looked her up and down, then licked my lips—“Tell the nigga sending you in here ain’t gonna soften the blow for when I kill him.” I stood and adjusted my pants. “Send McCoy in here so we can get this shit together.”

A small smile spread across her sexy ass lips, and I had to hold my groan back at the sight of her diamond-encrusted fangs. Shorty was checking every box on my list of a dream woman. Marco and the other men around me laughed softly.

The woman walked toward me, her perfume filling my lungs, and my dick started to brick up. She ran her hand up my chest, then around my shirt collar, and pulled me down. Her lips brushed against the shell of my ear. "If I didn't need you, you wouldn't be here," she said softly. She pushed away from me before her words could sink in.

"Yo' nigga know you bold like this?" I questioned as I stood up. She walked around the table and sat down.

"You haven't seen bold yet," she said. "Sit down so we can talk." She pointed to the chair I once sat in.

"Talk?" I roared. "We lost all opportunities to have a civil conversation when yo nigga had me snatched." I chuckled and shook my head. "State what the fuck you need so I know whose name is gonna be on the headstone after I kill you." I looked her up and down. "Shit, you fine enough, I'll probably drop a couple of flowers at your grave site from time to time."

Her small hand extended across the table, and a smile tugged at her lips. "McCoy Toliver, it's a pleasure to meet you." Her hand dropped when I didn't move, and she stood from her chair. "Damn shame. I thought you had better manners than that." She mugged me before turning to Marco, who was still behind me, laughing. "Show him to his room. I'll talk to him when I get back."

I couldn't even front, I was too stunned to speak. She was the reason I'd been snatched. I wiped my hand over my mouth and smirked. Shit had just gotten interesting.

CHAPTER 5

MCCOY

“It doesn’t smell like shit cooking in here,” Jamel said, walking into my condo. “What the fuck have you been doing all day?” I hated being here. I hadn’t laid my head in the bed to rest since he’d burned me with water a few months ago, but he didn’t notice because he was never here. He’d occasionally check in but never laid his head here. I wasn’t complaining about it. Whoever the woman was who was entertaining him deserved an award.

“I was at the office,” I answered as I closed the notebook I was writing in. It was notes for my upcoming case, but when Jamel was around, I never left anything around that he could use against me later. He would take something as simple as a work notebook, and when I asked for it back, he’d have stipulations.

I stuffed it in my backpack and stood. “What do you want to eat?”

“Not shit now,” he said, dropping into the chair across from me. He pulled a stack of money from his pocket and dropped it on the table in front of him. “That should cover the rent.”

“It’s already paid,” I said, shaking my head. I never took money from Jamel. Not because I was too prideful but because he never offered anything without wanting something in return. If he offered to pay the rent, whatever he wanted in return wouldn’t be worth it.

“Who paid that shit?” he questioned with a lifted brow. “You had some other nigga in here?” He stood from his seat, and I knew whatever he was about to be on would leave me black and blue.

“No,” I denied, shaking my head. “I paid it.”

“With what money?” he asked as he approached me. I leaned back in my seat when he braced his arms on either side of me. “Huh? What money you got ‘cause the last time I checked, my name is on all your accounts, and you ain’t pulled shit out.”

“My credit union account,” I answered, and Jamel mugged me hard. While in college, I opened the account. It had a decent amount of money I used to pay bills and was the only account Jamel wasn’t on. He’d asked me to put his name on it, but luck was always on my side because the bank was closed every time we went to the bank to add him to the account.

Quicker than I was expecting, Jamel grabbed me by the throat. He pulled me to him. My hands went around his wrist, and he stared me down. “Let me find out you are lying,” he roared in my face. The barrel of his gun was pushed into my temple. Tears formed in my eyes, but I didn’t drop my gaze. This was the crazy part of him people didn’t see, but I’d dealt with all the time. “I’ll break your fuckin’ soul out of your body, then put you on a corner if I find out otherwise. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Good girl.” He smiled brightly and then kissed my forehead before letting me go. “Now, go make me something to eat.”

I left the living room and went into the kitchen. I had food in there because I enjoyed cooking.

Working quickly, I prepared Jamel's favorite meal of fish and spaghetti. I did not think the two went together, but I would sit through the dinner if he liked it, and it kept him from going off every two seconds. Once I was done, I returned to the living room to see him going through my notebook.

"The fuck you got information on the DBB for?" he asked without looking up. My heart slammed against my chest, and I licked my suddenly dry lips. "Huh, McCoy? The fuck you got information on them for?"

"My client," I answered, trying not to panic. I thought I'd taken that notebook out of my bag before coming inside, but my mind was in such a whirlwind from my plan starting, I must've forgotten.

"You got the DBB as your client now?" Jamel looked at me with so much hatred in his eyes, I had to take a step back. "Huh? Earth's bitch ass got you on his payroll?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "My client is stating they set him up."

"Did they?" he asked with a smirk. "Huh?"

"Not that I can tell right now," I answered. "It looked like a dead end on my part."

"You sure?" he asked, walking toward me. "'cause, I doubt it that you, out of everyone, couldn't find anything."

"I've searched," I said, trying to figure out a way to explain myself out of this situation. "It's a dead end. Whoever they paid off isn't talking."

"Make them," Jamel replied. He pulled his phone out of his pocket, dialed a number then put the phone to his ear and mugged me. "Ay, Boo, get me some information on the name..." He stopped talking and lifted his brow at me. "What's their name?"

“Joseph Evan,” I replied.

Jamel nodded, then put the phone back to his ear. “You heard her? Good. Get me the information, and if it ain't shit to find out, bring him to me so I can refresh his mind.” He hung up the phone and headed toward the kitchen. “My food better not be cold.”

Instead of responding, I followed him into the kitchen and fixed his plate as he sat at the table.

“Needs more seasoning,” Jamel said in between bites. I knew he was lying because the only thing that could be heard was his smacking and the fork scraping the plate, but he'd never give me props on cooking a good meal. “Shit kind of bland.”

“Okay.” I nodded, not caring. He was lucky I didn't put poison in it.

“This weekend, we are stepping out,” he announced suddenly. “Shit ain't gonna be too much of nothing, but we got shit to celebrate.”

“We?” I questioned, and he nodded. Jamel and I hadn't been out together in months. He stayed in the clubs, but I was never invited, nor did I want to go.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “The city is lit right now.”

“Why?”

“Earth Carlson is dead,” he answered with a laugh. “I finally got that nigga!” He stood from the table and threw his arms wide. “The city is going to bow down to a nigga for real now! It's a new fuckin' king!”

Jamel sat back down and finished eating. Once he was done, he stood, walked to me, and grabbed me by my ponytail so I would look at him.

“You’re hurting me,” I said as I stared into his eyes. I wanted the man I’d once loved to make an appearance. The one who would hold me while I slept and wipe my tears when I cried. The one who made me fall in love with him. “Jamel.” Tears slid out the corner of my eyes as he gripped my hair tighter. “Please.”

“Give me some pussy,” he said, smirking.

“I’m on my period.”

He reached between my legs and grabbed a handful of the pad I was wearing. “Useless ass bitch, no wonder your parents didn’t want your ass and you ended up in the system,” he said in disgust as he let me go and pushed me away from him. “Be ready to go in a few days.”

“Okay.” I nodded as I wiped away the tears.

“I’m going out of town. Got some business to handle.”

“When are you coming back?”

“Two days,” he answered with a grunt. It took everything in me not to smile at his words. Two days was more than enough time for me to convince Earth to help me. “While I’m gone, get your hair done and limit your eating.” He looked me up and down before smacking my ass and walking away. “You gettin’ too damn fat. Shit ain’t attractive, and I refuse to have a fat bitch on my arm.”

CHAPTER 6

EARTH

I'd been moved from the warehouse to an actual house and had been chilling for a day with no one coming to check on me. The shit was nice as fuck, though. The whole vibe of relaxing and getting my mind together was cool.

I'd explored the entire house, making myself at home since I had a feeling I would be here for a while.

"The fuck did I get myself into?" I asked myself and laughed. I dropped on the bed and then fell back. My arms spread out, and a smirk appeared at the thought of McCoy. This was what I got myself into. A fine-ass woman had my ass snatched up, and I was going along with it. Call a nigga crazy, but Shorty had my mind thrown for a loop. She was bold as fuck. I mean, so bold, I had to give her some respect for her actions. She'd kidnapped a nigga. I chuckled at the thought. This was some crazy shit, but I was intrigued as fuck as to why.

I sat up, looked around, and smirked. I could get the fuck out of here if I wanted, but I wanted to see what McCoy's fine ass had up her sleeve.

"Might as well make some food," I said and got off the bed. I expected it to be locked each time I went to the door, and it never was. I chuckled and shook my head. She and I were going to have to talk about this whole kidnapping shit because she wasn't doing it right so far.

The house was big as fuck. Six bedrooms, not including the one I was staying in. I went downstairs to the kitchen, went straight to the fridge, and grabbed a bowl of grapes from the top shelf. I grabbed them, rinsed them off, and sat at the island. After I finished the grapes, I did the polite thing and washed my bowl, put it away, and then finished looking around. My mama had raised me to have manners, after all.

Even though I'd explored the entire house, I still hadn't stepped foot in her room. At first, I was giving her some privacy. I grew up with a sister and understood they didn't like people being in their personal space, but today, I didn't give a fuck. I let out a whistle at the sight of her bedroom. It sat on the opposite end of the hallway from mine. While my room was all white, this one was matte green and cream. Her furniture was oversized, which made sense because her room was massive. I pushed open her closet door, and another whistle escaped my lips. Shorty spent a lot of money on clothes. Her closet was filled to the brim, but neat as hell, everything in its place. The bathroom was connected to the closet, and I chuckled at seeing it: marble floors and walls, an oversized tub, and a walk-in shower. The toilet was even in its own room. Whoever she was dealing with was sponsoring the fuck out of her lifestyle, and she wanted him dead. Shit was crazy.

Without anything else to do, since I didn't have my phone, I stayed chilling in what I considered my room. It wasn't as big as McCoy's, but it was nice as fuck too. The bedroom was separate from the sitting room, which had a couch, loveseat, wingback chair, table, fireplace, big ass TV mounted on the wall, and a mini fridge tucked in the corner. A California king-sized bed, two end tables, a plush rug, with another big ass TV mounted on the wall was in the bedroom. The bathroom was dope, too, again all- white, almost identical to McCoy's, just not as big. It even had a washer and dryer tucked away in the corner of the linen closet.

"Might as well fuckin' shower," I said out loud as I turned on the water. It took a few seconds for the steam to start, but I stepped back and looked at myself in the mirror once it did. I was treating this shit like a vacation because it felt like it was. I pulled

off my clothes and threw them in the washing machine. I didn't have shit else to wear, so after I showered, I wrapped a big ass towel around my waist and went back into the room.

To my surprise, McCoy's fine ass was standing against the wall, arms crossed over her big ass titties with a sexy ass smirk on her face. She wore a long-sleeved, turtleneck shirt, and high-waisted pants, and on her feet were a pair of tall ass heels. Just like the first time I saw her, they were matte green.

"What's up, shorty?" I greeted her as I headed to the sitting room. I grabbed a water bottle from the mini fridge and sat in the wingback chair. The sound of McCoy's heels clicking against the hardwood floor caught my attention just as the smell of her perfume filled my lungs. I took a drink of water, watching her over the bottle's rim as she came and sat down.

"You okay?" she asked. I would've thought she was concerned for my safety in any other situation.

"Was I not supposed to be?" I threw back at her. I closed the water bottle and set it on the table before me. "You ain't did shit to hurt me."

"That was never my plan," she said, and I reared back. This wasn't the same woman who stepped to me at the warehouse. Her vibe was off, and as crazy as it sounded, I wouldn't say I liked it. "What do you need?"

"Tell me why I'm here," I said. I stretched my legs out in front of me and crossed my ankles. McCoy looked me up and down, her dark eyes stopping at my dick print. To fuck with her, I made my shit jump, and she licked her lips. "Ay, shorty, my dick ain't on the menu right now. Stop lookin' at my shit and hold a conversation."

"I need your help," she answered.

“Help?” I laughed and sat up. I bent my legs, opening them so my dick could hang but was still covered by the towel, and rested my elbows on the tops of my thighs. I wiped my hand over my face and shook my head. “This ain’t how you ask for help.”

“Well, technically, not your help, but your help, nonetheless,” she said, and I stared at her like she had two heads. “I’ll be in debt to the DBB if you agree to do this.”

“The DBB ain’t who you want to owe a debt to,” I said, knowing for a fact whatever she wanted, I was going to try my hardest to give to her. I didn’t even know her, but the look in her dark eyes told me she was desperate, and desperate people were dangerous to my mental state. Her ass had already snatched me up. If I didn’t do what she wanted, then it could be one of my people she snatched next, and her being fine and having sad eyes wouldn’t mean shit when I had to break her neck.

“I don’t have any other options,” she sighed.

“It’s always other options,” I replied, and she shook her head.

“Not for me.” The tough girl facade she had when she had me snatched up was gone. Whatever she needed me for was taking a toll on her. Maybe I was her last option, but if I was, then the price was going to be steep as fuck. “It’s either you help me, or I’ll die.”

“You’re being dramatic as fuck, shorty,” I replied with a laugh as I sat back. “What happen to the boss that stepped to me in the warehouse?”

“I did what I had to do to get what I wanted,” she said shaking her head. “Now I’m going to be truthful because I know that you won’t do anything you don’t want to, and I need you to want to do this.”

“Why?” I questioned.

“Because I want to live,” she said, shaking her head. She stood, wiped her hands down her clothes, and headed toward the door. “Clothes are on the bed. Get dressed; we have business to discuss over dinner.”

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CHAPTER 7

MCCOY

“Where are you?” Jamel questioned with an attitude. I shut the door to my room and looked around. Nothing was out of place, but it smelled different. I inhaled deeply, my mouth instantly watering, and I knew Earth had been here. His cologne still lingered in the air. “McCoy!”

“Work,” I lied as I pulled myself out of my thoughts. “I told you I had to work late tonight.”

“How long do you plan to be there?” he asked, and I sighed to hide my frustrations. Jamel never checked on me while he was out of town on business or even when he was around. He lived his life, jumping back into my world to remind me he was still around, and then disappeared again.

“A few more hours,” I replied.

“You set up an appointment to get your nails and shit done?” he questioned with an attitude. “I can’t have you looking frumpy and shit when we go out. You gotta look your best.”

“My stylist was booked,” I lied. The truth was, I hadn’t even tried to make an appointment. I didn’t want to go out, didn’t want to be on his arm, and knew failing to get an appointment would make him not want to deal with me.

“Why the fuck didn’t you say something before?”

“I hadn’t spoken to you,” I answered. “I called you three times yesterday, and you never answered.”

“Because I was busy!” he yelled. “I told your stupid ass I was out-of-town working. My business picked up because Earth’s bitch ass is dead. Let me make my fuckin’ money!”

“Okay,” I softly replied.

“Get your fuckin’ hair done before I get back in town tomorrow night! If not, I’m going to knock your fuckin’ head off your shoulders!” Jamel hung up before I could respond. I tossed my phone on the bed and shook my head. I wasn’t going to let him fuck up my mood. He was out of town, and I would enjoy my little peace until all hell broke loose.

I made my way to my closet and grabbed something to wear. The dinner invitation was impromptu, so I wasn’t dressing up. This was my house, and while he was my guest, I wasn’t about to go above and beyond to impress him. No matter how fine he was.

After I grabbed my clothes, I went to the bathroom to shower. Forty-five minutes had passed before I walked back into my bedroom. I checked myself in the mirror, ensuring all my scars and bruises were covered before heading out of the room.

Once in the kitchen, I went straight to the fridge. I was hungry, starving to a degree because I hadn’t stopped moving since I woke up. Plus, the stress of having Earth snatched last night was still messing with my mental. I’d slept at my office, watching the cameras at this house and the condo. It would have been my luck that Jamel popped back up to make sure no other man was there, and if he called, I would have

wanted to be prepared. But he never did, and I spent most of my night watching Earth walk around my house as if it were his.

My nerves finally settled, so I was ready to eat. I grabbed the pork chops I'd marinated before I left the morning before, plus everything to make mashed potatoes and green beans.

Earth came into the kitchen in the middle of my cooking. He didn't say a word as he watched me. I was nervous, but not because Earth could, without hesitation, grab me and kill me, but from the way his eyes roamed over my body. The appreciation I saw there made me feel good.

If I listened to Jamel, I would think I was overweight and sloppy, but I was anything but. Had I gained weight over the last few years? Yes, but that was life. I stayed in the gym, watched what I ate, and was no bigger than size sixteen.

Once I was done, I pointed to the plates. "Grab those for me, please?" I requested. I was prepared for him to argue or even laugh at me, but instead, he grabbed the plates and silverware out of the drawer while I grabbed the last of the food and followed me into the dining room.

"Say your grace," Earth commanded just after I sat. He dropped his head, mumbled a soft prayer, then lifted his head to stare at me. "Pray."

I nodded and then did what he asked. When I lifted my head, Earth's eyes were still on me. Once pleased, he picked up his silverware and cut his pork chop. The sound of him moaning as he ate made me squeeze my legs together. "Yo, this shit is good."

"Thank you," I replied.

"Welcome." He continued to eat, and I let out a small laugh.

Even though Jamel ate my cooking when he was around, he always complained about it, so to hear a compliment made me smile.

We ate in silence for a while before Earth finally spoke up. “Alright, so what do you need me to do?”

“Nothing,” I said between bites of my food. Earth stared at me with a blank expression on his face. “I need your family, the DBB, to think you’re dead.”

“Why?”

“So they’ll kill the person they think is responsible for killing you.”

“You trying to start a war?” He laughed. “’Cause that’s all you’re going to do is start a fuckin’ war, shorty. My family, the DBB, will kill any and every nigga they think is responsible for my death.”

“I know,” I agreed. “I need them to.”

“Why?” he questioned. “If you know the kind of niggas you are dealing with, then why fuck with us?”

“Because no one is crazy enough to go after my fiancé.”

“Who is your nigga?” Earth leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest, and waited. My heart beat against my chest so hard, I knew he could hear it. When I didn’t open my mouth, he stood up, planted his hands on the table, and stared down at me. “Open your fuckin’ mouth. Who is your nigga?”

“Jamel Holden,” I answered softly.

A dark look swept across his face, and I swore the room got cold for a second before Earth started to laugh. “You serious?” I nodded. “Shorty, you didn’t have to kidnap me for that to happen.”

CHAPTER 8

EARTH

I let out a small laugh and left the kitchen. This girl was fucking crazy. She'd kidnapped me so my family would kill her nigga. I didn't do domestic shit. If she didn't want to marry that nigga, she needed to talk to her family, not bring my ass into their shit. I respected the hustle; I just disagreed with how she went about it.

Midway up the stairs, I stopped walking. This was his house, and she brought me here? Yeah, Shorty might have been fine and even had a few screws loose, but she had me fucked up.

I pulled my gun from my waist and went back downstairs. The fact that her security searched my bag but still left my gun was comical. These niggas obviously didn't respect her as much as she thought or they were shitty at their job. She wasn't in the kitchen or dining room, so I went looking for her. The living room and the library were empty. I was about to give up, but then I remembered an office on this floor, so I made my way that way.

I pushed open the office door, and she was sitting behind the desk, headphones on, typing away at the laptop. She was chilling like she hadn't just dropped a bomb in my fucking lap. "Ay!" I slammed my hand on her desk to get her attention.

"You don't have to yell," she sighed as she pulled her headphones off. When she looked up at me, I had to step back. McCoy was too fucking fine. Her dark eyes bore into me, and for a second, a nigga's heart stopped. She was back in her boss bitch

persona, but it was too late. I'd already seen that she could be soft and planned to use that to my advantage. "What can I help you with, Earth?"

"You got me in this nigga's house, knowing our family got beef?" I questioned with an attitude. She was fine—cool, I got that—and yeah, my dick was bricking up more and more with each passing second she stared at me, but she had me completely fucked up.

"This is my house," she countered.

"You just said you got a fuckin' fiancé. Now you tryin' to tell me he doesn't lay his head here?" I questioned with a grunt. McCoy shook her head, and I huffed. Wasn't no fucking way she was with this nigga, and they didn't live together. "Stop fuckin' tryin' to play with my mind, McCoy."

"He doesn't live here," she denied. "This is my house. He's never even stepped foot on the property."

"But he's your nigga?" I laughed. "How does that shit work?"

"It's a long story," she sighed.

"Give me the cliff note version of it," I replied, and she shook her head. "Look, you got me here, and you need my help. You gotta open your fucking mouth."

"What do you want to know?" she questioned apprehensively, and I stepped back. Her eyes told a story her mouth wouldn't. Something was going on, something way deeper than a woman wanting to get away from a nigga.

"Why the fuck do you need my help when you got niggas?" I asked. "You had five Escalades full of niggas and a bunch more in a warehouse. That doesn't look like

someone that needs my help.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” she said, and I grunted. “I already told you that.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“They were loaned to me,” she answered, and I laughed. How the fuck did she get niggas on loan?

“What do you do that niggas can pay you in street niggas?” I asked her once I got myself together.

“A lawyer,” she answered, and I nodded in understanding. I’d never met a lawyer who wasn’t crooked, and even though she was fine, I couldn’t put shit past her, especially since she had me snatched up using loaners. “Look, I was desperate.”

“That shit is obvious.”

“But I’m smart.” She smirked, and I nodded. “I mean, I got you snatched up without any problems.”

“That’s because I chose not to kill them niggas,” I said. “You ain’t notice not one shot was fired? That’s because I let them take me. Don’t get the shit twisted.”

“Why did you?” she asked. She leaned back in her seat and watched me closely. “Everything I learned about you says you’re a killer. I’ve watched you kill a handful of people over the last few weeks, yet you let them take you. Why?”

“Because I was intrigued.” I shrugged at my honest answer. “Nobody has ever been bold enough to snatch up a DBB.” I smirked at her. “I wanted to see who had a death wish.”

“I don’t,” she denied. “Which is why I had you snatched,” I grunted. That shit didn’t make sense. She had my ass snatched because she didn’t have a death wish? Maybe she wasn’t as bright as I thought she was. A degree didn’t mean she had common sense. From the looks of it, she didn’t. “Look, you don’t have to believe me.”

“I don’t.” I laughed. “The shit you just said made no sense. You too fine to be this damn na?ve.”

“I’m not na?ve.” McCoy rolled her pretty ass eyes, and I shrugged.

“Prove me wrong then ‘cause this shit seems like you are. You got me snatched using some loaner street niggas, which means you are going to have to have them niggas killed ‘cause they have no loyalty to you and will eventually use that shit to come after you.”

“They won’t,” she denied.

“And why not?”

“Because I know where all their bodies are buried. I have a deal with them; they do my footwork, and I keep them out of jail. A service for a service,” she said, looking smug. I couldn’t help but nod in appreciation because the shit was clever. A street nigga always needed a lawyer, and having one on retainer was brilliant, no matter how the debt was paid on their end.

“Why not have them niggas kill him then?”

“Because it can’t be connected to me,” she answered.

“Why not?” I needed to know where her head was at. This plan didn’t feel like it was a spur of the moment, but at the same time, there were scattered pieces to this puzzle.

“Because disloyalty equals death in our world,” she answered. “We both know that.”

“We don’t know shit.” I shook my head. “Niggas around me are loyal.”

“You sure?” She questioned me like she knew something I didn’t. “Because everybody has a price.”

“DBB is solid.”

“How do you think I knew where you were?” she asked, and I reared back. I had a weak nigga in my fold? They’d die as soon as this shit was over. “Everybody, including DBB, has a price. I found the right price and got the information I needed.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why come after me?” I asked her again. There were a million niggas with the heart of a killer who were looking to make a name for themselves.

“Because you hate Jamel as much as I do.”

“You’d hate the nigga responsible for killing your closest friend, too,” I said, and McCoy nodded. “So, you asking me for help could have gone a different way. One business meeting would have been all you needed.”

“I needed this to look legit,” she said, shaking her head. “If not, this marriage will happen, and I can’t let it.”

“Why?” I asked, and McCoy sighed. “Don’t make it seem like I’m annoying you.” I sat across from her and shook my head. “Why the fuck is your family making you

marry that nigga? What is it he has that's keeping you locked down? You loved him at one point or something?"

"At one point in time, I thought I did," she answered, and I nodded. "But that was a long time ago. And I don't have any family. It's just me."

"What do you mean, it's just you?" I questioned. "You tellin' me you ain't got nobody in your corner?"

"Not that's biologically related to me," she denied, shaking her head. "I have two friends, and that's it."

"How that nigga get his hooks in you, then?" I asked, trying to wrap my mind around this shit. Something was off. She was being too vague about shit. This went deeper than just not wanting to marry his ass. "At one point, you had to love him."

"At one point," she replied. "But not anymore."

"What, that nigga cheat on you or something?" I asked with a laugh. "Look, I don't do domestic shit. If you're just trying to scare this nigga because he got another bitch, then let me go. I don't have time for the games."

"If he has another woman, I would gladly pay her to take him off my hands," McCoy said, and I grunted because I could tell she was lying.

"How old are you, McCoy?"

"Thirty-five."

I laughed. "You slow or something?"

“No,” she huffed.

“You better not be because if my ass is helping you and you turn out to be slow, I’m a be pissed.”

“So, you’ll help me?” she asked with a small smile.

“I ain’t got no choice, do I?” I countered. “I’m here until my family does what the fuck they do.”

“Right,” McCoy agreed.

“Alright, cool,” I said, then stood.

I woke up the next morning, pissed off. Not because I had a bad night due to discomfort; the bed was comfortable. It had more to do with McCoy.

Snatching me up was smart as fuck, honestly. It was shit I would have done if I was her. But her ass was hiding something, more than likely something serious as fuck, too, because she was guarded as hell. I mean, yeah, I got it, I was a stranger in her damn house, but I didn’t ask to be here. She forcefully invited my ass here.

After I pissed, brushed my teeth, and showered again, I got dressed. That was another thing that got to me. The closet was full of clothes, shit I’d rock, and in my size. McCoy planned for me to be here for a while. With no phone or computer, I could not contact my family and let them know I was okay. For now, all I could do was bide my time.

“Yeah?” I called out at the sound of a knock at the room door. McCoy pushed the door open, a small smile on her face when she saw me. Today, she wore a long-sleeved, high-neck matte green dress. It didn’t look thick but shit. It was the summer,

and I knew she'd be hot by the end of the day in that shit. On her feet was a pair of matching sandals. Her wild curls were pulled up into a ponytail at the top of her head, and she didn't have an ounce of makeup on, except for lip gloss. She was fine with a bare face and a simple-ass outfit on.

"Food is on the counter if you're hungry," she said, and I nodded. "I'll be back in a few hours. I have a million and one apps, so you should be able to find something to watch. If I don't have it, order it. There's a phone on the table downstairs. Press one for me."

"The fuck you mean, press one for you?" I questioned with a grunt.

"You'll see." She shrugged with a smirk. "I'll be back later."

I watched her go, surprised the same woman who had just walked in here was not the same woman I talked with last night. Don't get me wrong, it was McCoy, but her vibe was different. She had her boss vibe going. Shit was sexy, but I couldn't front. I liked the unguarded side I saw last night better.

CHAPTER 9

MCCOY

“I thought you said you would be gone for two days,” I said as soon as Jamel entered my office. He was an attractive man. Not as tall as I liked, standing at only 5’10, he had a decent amount of muscle mass, a chubby face, small lips, and a bare face like he’d never been able to grow facial hair. He also had a head full of locs, which was another thing I’d never been attracted to. I loved a man with short hair, preferably waves. To put it mildly, he wasn’t Earth, nowhere near him in the looks department. He shrugged his massive shoulders and looked around like he’d never been in my office.

“Surprise,” he finally said, and I rolled my eyes. “I went by the condo, and you weren’t there.” He picked up a picture of me from college. I was standing in front of my dorm, my two best friends on either side of me, a big ass smile on our faces. Jamel looked at it, then peeked over his black-framed glasses to look at me. “I should’ve picked Coral instead of you.”

Coral was a sore subject for me. She and I had been friends since our first day in undergrad. Coral was intelligent and ready to tackle every obstacle in front of her, and she did. But she was also stubborn as hell. When I met Jamel, she had said he was bad news and would be my downfall. We agreed Jamel wouldn’t be discussed to keep our friendship intact. For the most part, it worked, but when she and Lynx found out he was hitting me, she said she couldn’t watch her friend slowly die in front of her and left. I hadn’t talked to her in over a year, and I missed my friend.

“She was fine, had a good head on her shoulders, and didn’t back talk like your stupid ass does.” He shook his head as if I was his biggest disappointment. “She wasn’t a fuck up like you.”

“I’m not a fuck up,” I sighed. “But this isn’t the time nor place for this conversation.”

“You not a what?” He let out a humorless laugh. “McCoy, look at you! Who the fuck would want you, huh?” He walked over to my desk and pulled me from my seat. “You ain’t shit to look at. You not that fuckin’ smart, so I know the only way you got them degrees is ’cause you fucked a few of your professors.”

My phone ringing made both of us glance at it. No name was saved, but I knew the number was for the phone I’d gotten Earth. “I need to take this.”

“Answer the phone,” Jamel said dismissively as he let me go and walked around my desk. He sat in the chair across from me and pulled his phone from his pocket.

“It’s business.”

“I’m yo’ nigga. Answer the fuckin’ phone and talk to whoever you gonna talk to about whatever boring ass shit they need to discuss.” I picked up my phone, pushed away from my desk, and rounded it. Jamel grabbed the phone from my hand and swiped it to answer it.

“McCoy Holden’s phone,” he answered. I reached for the phone, but he smacked my hand. I was irritated for two reasons: one, he’d taken my phone, and two, he’d used his last name instead of mine. “Hello?” I reached for the phone again, and he turned, giving me his back so I couldn’t take it. “Hello?” He stopped moving and turned and looked at me with a deadly look. “Ay, nigga, I don’t know who the fuck this is, but understand something; this my fuckin’ woman. I’ll fuck this bitch with you on the phone so you can hear her scream my fuckin’ name. Speak the fuck up.”

“Jamel!” I yelled and reached for my phone again. He moved quickly, grabbed my ponytail, and pulled me back so I couldn’t get it. “Let me go!”

“Shut the fuck up!” he yelled at me. “Who the fuck is on the phone, huh?”

“I don’t know!” I said through gritted teeth. “You answered it, remember?”

“Why the fuck they ain’t say shit?” He dropped the phone on the chair, face up. I saw the timer counting the seconds, indicating Earth was still there and listening. “How the fuck you know it was business, huh?” He pulled me closer to him and smacked me in the face. I felt my lip split instantly, and I sucked it into my mouth to keep blood from getting on my clothes.

“It’s my business phone,” I answered. “Anyone who calls is a client or potential client.”

Jamel mugged me, then ran his tongue over his teeth a few times before nodding. “Cool, but let me find out you’re lying and I’ll slice yo’ fuckin neck.” He let me go, pushing me into the other empty chair. “I’ll be at the condo tomorrow; we’ll leave for the party from there.” He fixed his clothes. “Get your fuckin’ hair done and make sure that lip doesn’t look disgusting when I see you.” He mugged me one last time and then left the room.

Once he was gone, I got up, grabbed the phone off the chair, and returned to my desk. I dropped into my seat and ran my hand over my face. “Fuck!” I yelled and slammed my hands on my desk in frustration. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Tears filled my eyes, and I let them fall with no shame. I wasn’t crying because I was hurt; I was crying because I was pissed. I swore I’d never be in this situation, yet here I was, being controlled by a man I once loved.

I dropped my head on the desk and cried, letting everything out because I had no

plans to do it again.

“Pick up the phone, McCoy,” Earth’s deep voice called out. The phone wasn’t even on speakerphone, and I could hear him loud and clear, so I knew he’d heard everything that happened.

“I thought you hung up,” I said, not lifting my head from the desk.

“Nah,” he replied, sounding angry. I didn’t have time to deal with his attitude right now. One man being upset with me was enough. “That nigga hit you?”

“Grabbed my ponytail.” I reached up and touched the spot I knew would be sore later.

“He put his hands on you before?”

“I try to spend the least amount of time with him as I can.” It didn’t answer his question, but I didn’t want Earth to see me as weak.

“Alright.” He then sucked his teeth.

“Thank you for not saying anything.” I lifted my head off the desk and wiped my face. I hadn’t worn makeup today and was glad because it would have been ruined. “If you had, there was no doubt he would’ve known it was you.”

“Yep,” he said.

I picked up my headphones off my desk and put one in my ear, pausing a few seconds to allow them to connect to my phone before getting up from my desk. I went to the bathroom connected to my office and looked at myself in the mirror. Just like I knew it would be, my bottom lip was busted, and my face was red. I had bruises, a fat lip,

and a sore head. I sighed and shook my head before taking down my hair and running my hand through it. I'd always loved my hair, but having Jamel use it to control my movements made me want to cut it. After fixing my hair and doing a simple bun style, I returned to my office and sat at my desk.

"Why'd you give me this kiddy ass phone?" Earth asked. I'd forgotten he was on the phone.

"Because you need to be able to get in contact with me while you're at my house," I answered, knowing if the shoe were on the other foot, I would be mad as hell the only connection I had to the outside world was a phone that was programmed with four numbers I had no control of putting in.

"Shorty, you gave me one of those kiddie phones, though." Earth laughed. His deep voice vibrated through the headphones in my ear and caused goosebumps to form on my skin. "Like, legit, I only press one, two, three, or four. And if you said one is you, then who the fuck is two, three and four?"

"Me," I replied, and he grunted. "Two is my direct office line at work, three is my direct line to my office at the house, and four is to my condo, but never call that one unless you're sure I'm dead."

"The fuck I gotta call you for if you at home?" he questioned. The way he said home as if it were our shared residence sounded good. I shook my head at the thought. I was reading too much into shit that wasn't there. "Huh, Coy?"

"Sometimes I get stuck on a case and lock myself in my office," I answered as I nibbled into my lip. "It's a bad habit I have."

"Not while I'm here," he grumbled. "I'll be damned if I'm bored 'cause you're working. You invited me, so you're going to keep me entertained."

“I invited you?” I repeated with a laugh. “Is that what you gonna call it?”

“Fuck yeah,” he replied with a small laugh. “I’ll be damned if I admit you kidnapped my ass. That shit is going to be our little secret until well past both our deaths.”

“If you say so.” I smiled. I looked up to see my computer alert me that I was due for a meeting with a new client. “Look, I gotta go.”

“Ah, for real?” Earth sucked his teeth. “Cool. I’ll see you later.”

“Later,” I replied, then hung up the phone.

“Coy!” Earth pushed open my office door and strolled in with a stack of menus. He dropped into the chair across from my desk and kicked his feet up. It amazed me that even though this wasn’t his house, he walked around like he owned it. “What you tryin’ to eat tonight?”

“I’m not hungry,” I replied without taking my eyes off my computer screen. I had to be in court tomorrow at eight and wanted to refresh my memory on some essential information.

“It’s damn near ten at night, and you have been sitting in here for the last three hours. I get you gotta work, but that shit is dead.” He reached up and turned off my screen. I cut my eyes at him, and he stared at me with murder in his. As soon as I came home, I went straight to my office and continued to work. “That nigga hit you.”

“I told you I wasn’t hungry.” I turned my screen back on and continued to look over the evidence. This was a cut-and-dry case, but I never went into anything cocky. That was how people lost, and I hated to lose. “I ate earlier at work.”

“You also said that nigga didn’t hit you, and obviously, you lied,” he grunted, then

pulled out the phone I'd given him. I let out a small laugh and shook my head. The fact he was carrying the phone like it was a regular phone killed me. He cut his eyes at me, and I held up my hands in surrender. He put the phone back in his pocket and mugged me. "Ain't shit funny."

"You and the phone are," I replied, and he stood up.

"Bring your ass," he said, extending his hand.

"I'm working," I weakly protested.

"I'on give a fuck about none of that shit," he said, waving me off. I started to protest but stopped when he cut his eyes at me. "We got some shit to talk about because one of us doesn't know the rules to this shit."

"Rules?" I asked as I shut down my computer.

"Rules," he repeated with a shrug. "Yo' ass got too many secrets, and that shit gonna get me killed if I let it."

"I doubt it," I said, shaking my head.

"How the fuck do you know?" he grunted. "You ever did some shit like this before?"

"No," I answered as we walked out of my office.

"Alright then. Let's get some rules agreed on, then."

"It's not necessary," I said without thinking.

"I say otherwise." He laughed. We made our way to the living room and sat on the

couch. I tucked my feet under me, and Earth stretched his long legs out and rested his feet on the table. His socks were stark white, but I still didn't like his feet on my table. "If my feet on your shit bother you, speak up."

"It bothers me," I said. Earth nodded, then moved his feet off the table. "Thank you."

"See, rules," he said, pointing to his feet. "Look, this your shit. I gotta follow your rules. I'm not denying that, but we also gotta have some trust between us." He shrugged. "This shit ain't gonna work otherwise."

"What do you have in mind?" I sighed and ran my hands over my face.

"You gotta start with the truth," he said. I looked at him, waiting for him to ask me what he wanted to know. "I ain't gonna beg you for your words, though."

"I don't know where to start," I finally said.

"Shit, tell me anything," he said with a shrug. "What do you like to do? What is your favorite color? What made you become a lawyer?"

CHAPTER 10

EARTH

The entire time McCoy spoke, my eyes never left her lips. She could be telling me anything, and as long as those juicy muthafuckas kept moving, I would happily listen. I chuckled and wiped my hand over my beard. Shit was crazy as fuck right now. This damn girl was holding me against my will, yet I was sitting across from her, imagining her lips around my dick and trying to get to know her. I knew the shit was fucked up. She'd kidnapped me to get away from her nigga, and I found myself wanting her. But shit, if that nigga didn't know what to do with her, that was his problem. At the same time, it didn't matter because he'd be dead shortly.

"You ain't got nothing to say?" I questioned, and she just stared at me. I sat forward, elbows resting on my thighs. "You're a lawyer, I know that, but what else are you about? 'Cause I know that ain't the only thing you want to be known for." She lifted her brow in surprise, and I chuckled. I wasn't a dumb nigga. I might not have known of her, but I knew women like her. She had ambition, that shit was obvious, but she'd fucked up by linking with a weak nigga who couldn't keep his hands to himself.

"I want to expand my business. Have firms in different parts of the country," McCoy said with a smirk. "I want little black girls who came up in the system just like I did to know that whatever the punk ass kids in her group home had to say or whatever nigga tried to beat into her isn't the truth. That she's worth it."

"You grew up in the system?" I asked, slightly surprised, and she nodded. Now her comment about being alone made sense. "Tell me about that."

“Nothing to tell.” She shrugged. “I never knew my parents and was never adopted. After I graduated high school, I went to college on an academic scholarship and worked. I met Jamel my senior year, and we got into a relationship fairly quickly.”

“He paid for you to go to law school?”

“No,” she replied with a laugh. “School loans and a lot of sleepless nights due to working paid for law school.

“Jamel was always in the streets. He never hid that from me, but he never let our two worlds collide until after I passed the bar. Then something in him changed. He got meaner and asked me to represent a few of his boys, and I did because their cases were simple. Back then, I needed the money. I had bills to pay, and my loans weren’t going to pay for themselves.”

“So, you learned the game?” I asked, and she nodded. “Represent the hood niggas, collect money, and still look out for your nigga?”

“Something like that,” she replied, and I nodded. “I didn’t look at it like that at first, but as the years passed, I realized that’s exactly what I was doing. I have a Rolodex full of killers, drug dealers, and God knows what else, but I can’t use them.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know who is connected to Jamel and who isn’t,” she said, then ran her hands over her hair. She winced a little like her head was sore, and I ran my tongue over my teeth. She was sitting here with a fat lip, aching head, and more than likely bruises hidden under her clothes, and that nigga was living his life like everything was fantastic. It wasn’t, and it never would be.

“Yet you took the chance with the group that snatched me up.”

“I was lucky,” she replied.

“They won’t be, though,” I said, and she looked at me like she already knew what I would say. “They came after me. Do you think for one second the DBB is going to let them live? They’d be out of the country by now if they were smart.” I ran my hands over my face and sighed. “Shit, you had to know that too.”

“I did,” she replied with a nod. I never took her for a dumb ass. She knew the game probably better than her nigga, which was why I was sitting on her couch right now. But there was still a piece of me that questioned her. Don’t get me wrong; I didn’t trust McCoy for one second. I knew I was a pawn in her game, but she seemed legit for the most part. Even though she’d just admitted she set them niggas up to die. “It doesn’t make me feel any better about my decision, though.”

“Look, they knew when they agreed to do it. It's kill or be killed in this world, and they made a stupid decision that would lead to their death,” I said and meant it. It was wild that I comforted her as if I wasn’t locked up. But being around her did that to me. I was protective of her and her feelings. “Don’t feel bad because they made their own choice. If anything, the shit was smart.”

“Thank you.”

“No reason to thank me for speaking the truth. If anything, I owe your ass an apology.” I shook my head.

“An apology?” she questioned, and I nodded. “For what?”

“‘Cause I should’ve been killed that nigga a long time ago,” I answered with a shrug. “Me and Jamel been beefing for years, but he’d gotten cocky lately. Stepping into places he knew he wasn’t welcome and making noise with folks he didn’t want beef with.”

“A few months ago, my boy Prince was killed. The streets talk too damn much at times, but I’ve been listening, and they were saying Jamel was responsible for it. I’m not sure how, but I vowed to take that nigga out for it. I was biding my time, making sure shit couldn’t be linked to me. If I hadn’t been waiting, then you wouldn’t be in the shit you are in now. And you can front all you want. I know that nigga putting his hands on you.” She opened her mouth to deny it, and I mugged her. I hated liars and wanted McCoy not to lie to my face.

The thought that I was slightly responsible for her being with this nigga fucked with my brain. I mean, I knew they had a past, but shit, if I’d killed his ass a long time ago like I knew I was supposed to, then, as I said, I wouldn’t be sitting here. And more importantly, neither would she.

“When this is over, I’ll forever be indebted to you,” she said, giving me a small smile.

“Nah, Coy, I don’t want you in my debt after this,” I said, standing. As crazy as it sounded, I didn’t want her to be in debt to me. I wanted her heart. I knew the moment she stepped her fine ass into the warehouse and mugged me like I was a little nigga.

A few hours later, I snuck into McCoy’s room and grabbed her phone off the end table next to her bed. I swiped the screen and shook my head. This damn girl didn’t even have a lock on her phone. How she planned and executed a whole plan to kidnap my ass and didn’t get caught was beyond me. Jamel was a weak nigga, so I knew he was going through her shit whenever she wasn’t around. The sound of the water turning off made me stop and wait.

I knew dropping the bomb on her that I wanted her for the rest of our lives and beyond would be too much for her to handle right now. So, I had other plans. I was going to kill that nigga Jamel and have McCoy fall in love with me at the same time. The last thing he would see was me proposing and McCoy accepting it before I put a bullet between his eyes. Me wanting her wasn’t in her game plan, but I learned a long

time ago it didn't matter what we planned; life would do what it was supposed to do, no matter what.

I stuffed the little phone in my pocket and left her room. I dialed my brother's number once I was back in my room.

"Who the fuck is it, and what the fuck do you want?" Fire roared into the phone.

"Damn, nigga, just say hello." I chuckled as I sat on the edge of the bed. "I thought you'd be happy to hear from me."

"Bitch, you're supposed to be dead!" Fire replied, making me laugh harder. "Why the fuck would I expect you to be calling me for?"

"Cause yo' big bro is like a cat and got nine lives," I replied with a grunt. "Now tell me what the fuck the word on the street is."

"Nigga, how about you tell me where you are so I can come get you!"

"I'm chillin'," I said, knowing Fire would be annoyed with my answer. "Just tell me what you know."

"You bitch ass nigga." Fire chuckled. "Apparently, I don't know shit because you're supposed to be dead. At least that's what the fuck Jamel's bitch ass is saying."

"Cause nigga thinks I am," I said, and Fire sucked his teeth. "I got snatched up, but not by him."

"By who then?" Fire questioned. "'Cause that nigga tellin' folks he got your head on a spike sitting in his basement."

“Obviously, that shit is a lie.” I laughed and shook my head. “That nigga doesn’t even know where I’m at.”

“Where are you?”

“Under his fuckin’ nose, and he doesn’t realize it,” I answered. “Listen, I need you ready to move. Jamel’s bitch ass might not have snatched me, but he definitely gotta die for the shit he has been doing.”

“Tell me what you need me to do,” Fire said. My brother was always on go-mode. It was never a question of whether he had my back, just like I always had his. Being brothers made our bond strong, but being twins made it unbreakable.

“Be on alert. Any and every nigga that steps to DBB gotta go, no questions asked.” I ran my hand over my mouth. “And contact Shaka. Tell her I need her to do a romantic dinner.”

“Romantic dinner?” Fire screeched. “Nigga, we out here trying to plan your funeral, and you worried about a romantic dinner? The fuck kind of shit are you into right now?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I laughed. “Just ask her to be ready when I need her. Can you do that?”

“Yeah, nigga, I can do that,” he said, then sucked his teeth. “What about Mama and Daddy? What do you want me to tell them?”

“They gonna have a daughter-in-law,” I answered. I heard McCoy’s bedroom door open, and her voice echoed down the hallway. “I’ll call you later. Don’t call this number back, though.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“‘Cause I’m spending time with my future wife, nigga, and we don’t want to be interrupted.” I hung up before Fire could respond and powered the phone down. I didn’t trust Fire not to call back just because I told him not to. McCoy walked past my room on another phone. Her face was twisted like she didn’t believe the shit the person on the line was telling her. Our eyes locked for a brief second before she disappeared down the hallway. I stuffed the phone under the pillows and followed her.

“Jamel, I’m at work,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t know how long I will be. A couple more hours, I think.”

I sat across from her on the couch. The little ass shorts she had on looked good as fuck on her, but it was the bruises and scars I saw that pissed me off. She’d been through the wringer with this nigga. Her body was the battlefield, and the wounds were proof she was a survivor.

“Are you at home?” she asked, and I heard that nigga say no. Typical fuck boy shit. He was rushing her to get to the house, and he wasn’t even there.

I tapped her shoulder, and she pulled the phone from her ear and put it on mute. “Get the fuck off the phone with that nigga,” I said, mugging the phone. “He only checking in on you ’cause he doing shit he ain’t supposed to do.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But I also know if I piss him off, he’ll show up at my office and show his ass when he realizes I’m not there.”

“Let him,” I argued. “That nigga a bitch.”

“I know that too,” she said with a small laugh. “Just let me handle this so I can sleep

peacefully tonight.”

“Do you,” I said, nodding even though I disagreed. I planned to call Fire back as soon as she went to sleep. I wasn’t about to hide in this house like she wanted me to.

“Thank you,” she replied, then took the phone off mute. “Jamel, I’m leaving now, okay? I can take everything home and work from there. Are you hungry? Do you want me to cook something?”

“Fuck nah,” he replied. “Yo’ ass can’t even cook for real. Just take your ass home. I’ll be by tomorrow to pick you up so we can go out.” He hung up the phone, and McCoy dropped it on the table in front of her.

“Y’all going out tomorrow?” I asked, intrigued.

“He wants to go out,” she said, nodding. “To celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“Your death,” she answered, and I smirked. Nigga just didn’t know this was about to be his last party.

CHAPTER 11

MCCOY

“I’m not going to argue with you, Jamel,” I said as he yelled into the phone. I looked up from my computer to see my secretary walk into my office. She handed me two files and just as quickly as she came, she was gone.

“It ain’t a fuckin’ argument, bitch!” he barked into the phone, and I sighed. I wasn’t in the mood for him to be screaming and yelling. I had a headache, and I was tired. Plus, he was out of town. How he was hours away and still getting on my nerves was beyond me. “Sigh the fuck again and see if I don’t black your fuckin’ eye! Who the fuck do you think you are, McCoy? Have I not shown you I’m not the nigga to play with?”

“Jamel.” My voice was calm because I couldn’t handle this today. I knew anything I said would set him off. “I don’t even know what the problem is.”

“The problem is my cousin has been looking for you and your bitch ass hasn’t been around! Two of my boys are in jail right now!”

“Who’s in jail?” I asked, even though I already knew. I’d gotten the call. His cousin Leon had been calling my phone nonstop for the last twenty-four hours and I’d been ignoring him. His family would no longer have access to me.

“Leon’s little brothers!” Jamel yelled. “He called me saying they got locked up with a couple of pounds on them. Make that shit disappear.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Not good enough!” Jamel yelled. “They better not sit another night in jail, or I’ll come see you personally.”

“I can’t make something like that disappear overnight. A few pounds is different from the few grams they’ve been caught with before. I’ll have to look into the cops who arrested them and see what I can find. And if they’re dirty or in need of some money, then we can make something happen.”

“That sounds like some bullshit,” he growled. “You know what? You’re fuckin’ useless. I’ll handle this shit myself.”

“Okay,” I sighed.

“Okay?” He laughed even though I could tell he didn’t find anything funny. “Yeah, okay then. Get the fuck off my phone, McCoy.”

I hung up, not needing any more reason to talk. I had a million other things to worry about and his family was nowhere on my list.

For the rest of the day, I worked, getting ready to go to court in a few weeks. When it was almost closing time, I called a small staff meeting to make sure none of the junior partners or associates needed help with anything. At the last minute, I decided to have one of my junior partners look into Leon’s little brother’s case.

I ended up leaving my office at almost midnight. I was tired and didn’t want to do anything but take a hot shower and crawl into the bed. Tonight, Earth would have to entertain himself. I wasn’t even in the mood to talk to him.

I pressed the unlock button on my key fob, waited for the lights to flash, then opened

the back door. I tossed my computer bag, jacket, and heels into the backseat and closed the door. I rounded the car, and just when I was about to open the driver's door, I felt a hand grab me by the back of my neck and I was slammed into the car.

"You thought I was fuckin' playin' with you?" Jamel growled into my ear. He pulled me back and slammed me into the door again. I felt the air leave my lungs and I got lightheaded. "You got me out here lookin' fuckin' stupid! My family in jail and you think this shit a joke!"

"Jamel." I moaned in pain. He grabbed my ponytail and rammed my head into the window. The sound of the glass cracking rang in my ears at the same time as I felt blood run from my forehead.

"Nah, don't say my fuckin' name now!" he yelled, then let me go. I had to grab onto the car to keep from falling. "You were smart as fuck on the phone, with that okay bullshit." His fist smashed into the back of my head, and I fell into the car door. "You keep tryin' me, McCoy, like I won't kill your ass!" He wrapped his forearm around my neck and squeezed. "Bitch, you mean nothing to me! I won't even drop a fuckin' tear at your funeral." He bit into my neck hard, then pulled away and spit. I knew he broke skin and probably took a chunk of skin too. "Get my fuckin' family off and stop playing."

"I'm working on it," I tried to say, but he was still choking me. I scratched at his arm, hoping he'd let me go. "Jamel, please."

"That's right, bitch, cry," he taunted. "Remember who the fuck I am before you ever try to get smart again." He let me go but I didn't have a chance to regain my composure before he started punching me as if I were a nigga in the streets. The only thing I could do was drop to my knees and cover my head. It felt like an eternity before he stopped punching me. He grabbed my head, pulled it back so I could look at him, and punched me again. He only stopped because he was winded. My eyes

were swollen, and I felt my nose bleeding. I lifted my hand to wipe my nose, but he smacked my hand away with his free hand. "Leave that shit." I closed my eyes and let out a deep breath to try to not think about the pain I felt. The sound of his zipper being pulled down made me open my eyes in horror. There was no way he thought for a second I was going to have sex with him after what he'd done.

"Jamel." I moaned and tried to shake my head.

"Shut the fuck up," he said, then pulled out his dick. To my disgust, he was hard. He started jacking his dick off in my face. When he threw his head back and groaned in pleasure, I had to cover my mouth with my hand to keep from crying out. "Fuck!" He looked at me and smiled. "Move your hand and open your mouth."

"No," I said, shaking my head.

"Bitch!" He smashed my head into the car door, damn near knocking me out, but I wouldn't move my hand. "Fuck it, I'll nut on your face then. It's the only place I ever liked leaving it anyway." He stroked himself a few more times, then nudded on my face, hair, and clothes. Once he got himself together, he stuffed his dick back into his pants, zipped them, then bent down so we were eye to eye. "The next time you try that shit with me again, I'll kill you. I'm done playin' games with your ass, McCoy." He roughly patted my leg, then got up and walked away.

I waited until he pulled off and I knew he wasn't coming back to get me. My entire body hurt all the way from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet. I knew he was expecting me to go back to the condo, but I knew I wouldn't make it there. My eyes were swelling so much, I could barely see. My house was half the distance from the condo to my office and I knew I could make it there. If I didn't and I crashed, then so be it, but I wasn't going anywhere Jamel had access to.

The drive to the house took longer than expected because I had to keep pulling over

because I was getting lightheaded. I pulled into the garage, parked, shut off the car, and got out. I didn't even care about my work laptop or anything else. I needed to shower and get Jamel's nut off me.

"Ay, you said you'd be home earlier than now," Earth said, coming out of his room. My back was to him so he couldn't see my face, but I knew even from behind, I looked a damn mess.

"Not right now, Earth," I replied and kept walking.

"What the fuck happened to you?" he asked. My steps were slow because my body was hurting, so he caught up to me within a few strides. He grabbed my arm, and I hissed in pain, which made him let go of me and shake his head. "That bitch ass nigga did this to you?"

"I'm fine," I said, then tried to sidestep him. I didn't make it two steps before stumbling. Earth grabbed me around my waist and picked me up. I wanted to protest but I was in too much pain to do anything. "Earth, I'm fine."

CHAPTER 12

EARTH

I didn't say shit as I carried McCoy into her room, then the bathroom. I was too pissed to, and I knew the last thing she needed was for me to go off. She'd already gotten her ass beat and me going off wouldn't do shit but more than likely trigger her.

I sat her on the counter and stared down at her. Her eyes were swollen, her lip busted, and her nose looked like it was broken. I let out a sigh and shook my head. Moving quickly, I ran her bath water, chuckling at the sight of Breeze's body wash sitting on the rim of her tub. As the water filled, I went back to her. "I'm gonna take your clothes off."

"No." She moaned and shook her head. "My body hurts too much to move."

"Look, if you get in the tub with them on, they'll feel heavy and be hell to get off, trust me," I said as I took off her Crocs and tossed them in the corner.

"This is my favorite suit," she mumbled as I unbuttoned her jacket.

"I'll buy you another one," I grunted. I helped her straighten her arm, then pulled her sleeves to get the jacket off.

"This is a two-thousand-dollar suit."

"That's chump change," I replied, then checked the label. I wasn't surprised to see

the Mahogany Fashion logo on the tag. McCoy didn't know it, but after this was over, I'd have Mahogany personally call her and get her a whole new wardrobe designed exclusively for her.

I took off her silk button-down shirt that was stained with blood and what looked like nut, then helped her off the counter. She stood in front of me with her head down, more than likely embarrassed. She dropped her skirt, but I had to kneel in front of her to help her peel her stockings then panties off. Her body was littered with bruises and scars.

"The water, Earth," she said softly, and I looked over my shoulder at the tub.

I got up, shut the water off, then let a little out so it wouldn't overflow when she got in. Once the water was set, I went back to McCoy, picked her up, and walked her back to the tub. I gently sat her in the water, then grabbed her body wash and loofah. I washed her body, making sure I didn't press too hard and cause more pain. I moved around to the other side of the tub so I could clean her face. I didn't know what I expected, but seeing McCoy sitting there with her arms wrapped around her legs, silently crying wasn't it. She had a fresh towel sitting on the edge of the tub that I used to clean her face. The entire time I worked, she never said a word or looked at me.

"I gotta wash your hair," I said, and she nodded. From years of practice because of Breeze, I knew how to take a ponytail holder off. Her curls fell to her shoulders. "Can you bend your head back?"

"No," she whispered.

I looked at her tub and how much space she had and knew I was going to have to make her lay back. It would be the only way I could wash her hair without hurting her, but I knew that would require McCoy to trust me.

“I need you to lay back,” I finally said. McCoy turned her head slowly to look at me and I knew from that small action, it hurt. “It’s the only way I can wash your hair and get that nigga’s nut off you without causing you pain.”

“Physically, I’m in so much pain I’m almost numb,” she replied, then turned her head back.

“Lay back, Coy,” I requested. She let out a deep breath, then unwrapped her arms from around her legs. I helped her lay back. I cupped the back of her head to keep her from completely submerging and washed her hair. The entire time, McCoy stared at the ceiling and continued to cry. After I was finished with her hair, I washed her body again in the shower, helped her put on body cream, and dressed in an oversized tee she’d bought for me.

I ended up making her some soup and spoon-fed her before taking her back to my room and laying her on the bed. I took a quick shower, needing a minute to myself to try to get hold of my anger. Jamel’s bitch ass had beat her down, natted on her face, then left her to fend for herself.

After I finished showering, I put on lotion and deodorant and threw on a pair of pajama pants and a wife beater. The room was dark, but I could see McCoy was still in the same spot I’d left her in. She’d stopped crying when I was feeding her, but her breathing was still ragged as if she would start up again at any moment. I grabbed one of the bags of ice I’d stored in the mini-fridge before I got in the shower and climbed into the bed.

“Chill out, it’s just me,” I said when I felt her tense. I moved her as gently as I could so I could get behind her and rest my back against the headboard. I put the ice pack on her eyes, then closed my eyes and leaned my head against the headboard.

“He wanted to kill me today. I could tell. Even before he said the words, I could tell.

His hits were harder, more direct, and intentional on where they landed. When he looked at me, his eyes were void of all emotion. There was a moment when I didn't think I'd make it," she softly said. "And it's a piece of me that didn't want to. If this is my life, I'd rather die."

"I know," I replied because I believed her. No person deserved the treatment she was getting. I looked down at her and shook my head. "I got you from here on out, McCoy. That nigga will never be able to do this shit again. On me, you won't suffer like this again."

The next week, the only thing McCoy did was sleep for the most part. I had to help her get to the bathroom, shower, and handle her hygiene. She called her office and told them she had the flu and would be out for at least two weeks. They must've been used to her calling out because her secretary told her she'd handle everything and make sure all her cases were covered.

On day eleven, she was finally moving on her own. The swelling in her face was starting to go down and her movements weren't as stiff as before. I decided to cook something simple, so I ended up making chicken Caesar salad. After I finished cleaning up the kitchen, I took our bowls to my room and handed her one.

"I saw this shit on the net so if it's nasty, blame them and not me," I said, sitting next to her. McCoy scooped some onto her fork and took a bite. Her eyes got big, and she nodded her head.

"This is good," she said, covering her mouth with her hand so I couldn't see the food in her mouth. "I've seen this but never made it." She took another bite. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I said, then started eating. I had to admit the shit was good; way better than the soup I'd been warming up.

“No, I owe you a thank you,” she said, then wiped her mouth with her napkin and set her bowl in the bed. “You’ve been taking care of me for almost two weeks. This isn’t how I expected this to happen.”

“What did you think would happen?” I asked with a laugh.

“Honestly?” she said, and I nodded. “I didn’t expect you to be here this long. I thought I’d snatch you and not even twenty-four hours later, the DBB would go after Jamel and his boys.”

“That ain’t how we move,” I said, shaking my head. “Going right after who we think is involved is sloppy. I’m a businessman, so is my brother and my closest homies. They are going to look over everything. Nine is going to hack every camera and security system, Fire is going to kick in doors, and Citrine is probably grabbing every nigga that looks at him wrong. The only thing they haven’t done is kill anyone yet.”

“Why?”

“Because starting a war with the wrong nigga won’t get them the answers they want, and since my body hasn’t been produced, it’s always a chance I’m still alive and they’d rather find me battered and bruised than dead.”

“So, there’s a chance they won’t kill Jamel?” She looked defeated, like all her work was for nothing.

“Oh, nah, they are definitely going to get that nigga, but they want to make sure they get everyone involved too.” I took another bite of my food. “Understand everybody involved is gonna die.

“Okay,” she said, nodding.

We finished our food in silence. I could tell McCoy didn't like what I told her, but I wasn't a nigga who would lie to her. In any other circumstances, I would kill everyone involved, but McCoy had been through enough. She didn't deserve to die because she'd run out of other options, and she felt like I was her only saving grace.

"Let me get your bowl," I said, standing. She handed me her bowl and I stacked it on mine. "You tired?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I'm going to go work in my office."

"Nah, stay right here," I said, then left the room. I took our dishes to the kitchen, washed them then came back to my room. I didn't say a word to McCoy as I went to the end table next to the bed and picked up my gun.

"What's that for?" she asked, scooting back into the bed. Her eyes went from the gun to me, then back to the gun.

"You need to learn how to use it," I said. I put my hand out for her to take. "Get up."

"I don't like guns," she said, shaking her head.

"Don't matter whether you like them or not. If that nigga comes to you like he did last time, I want you to be able to protect yourself." I removed the clip and bullet from the chamber. "I just want you to get used to the feel and know the basics is all."

McCoy hesitated for a second then nodded her head. She slowly got out of bed and stood next to me. "Show me." I handed her the gun. "It's lighter than I expected."

"Cause you probably watch all of them movies and them niggas act like a gun is a hundred pounds. A heavy gun doesn't do you no good when shit gets real. You gotta be able to grab your shit and move. Less than three pounds of weight is in your hand,

but it'll stop a nigga's life with about seven pounds of pressure."

"Show me," she said with a determined look on her face.

"Alright," I said, then stepped behind her. I lifted her arms and showed her how to hold the gun properly. "Don't twist that shit like you see in movies. Keep your arms straight, but not too tight. Squeeze the trigger; don't pull back on it. This is a Glock 19, so all you gotta do is aim, squeeze, and wait for that nigga to fall."

"Can I squeeze the trigger?" She looked up at me and I nodded.

"Ain't no bullet in it, so you cool," I said, and she turned back to look at where she was pointing the gun. The gun clicked every time she pulled it and I stood there with my arms around her, letting her get used to it. "I'ma put the clip and bullet back in but don't pull the trigger. Even though I'ma make sure the safety is on, still don't pull that shit."

"Okay," she agreed. I grabbed the clip and bullet and put it back in the gun. Before I put it back in her hands, I made sure the safety was on.

"Put your finger on the trigger but don't squeeze," I said once behind her again. "The next time that nigga steps to you wrong, pull this gun out, flip the safety." I tapped where the safety was on the gun. "And squeeze the trigger. I don't give a fuck who is around, your life matters. You matter. That nigga doesn't. Don't let him take shit else from you, you understand me?"

"Won't you need your gun?" she asked without looking at me.

"Don't worry about me," I said. She didn't know it, but I could see the tears falling from her eyes. "I got a million niggas behind me, and because you are riding with me from here on out, that means so do you."

McCoy dropped her arms and turned to look at me with a surprised look on her face. “After all this, you aren’t going to kill me?”

“Nah.” I laughed and shook my head. “I get why you did what you did. You are fighting for your life. I’m not gonna be the nigga to take it from you once you finally get it.”

“Thank you, Earth,” she said, then hugged me.

“You got it, Coy,” I said, then kissed the top of her head. “Now let’s see if you can throw hands just in case that nigga try to sneak you again and you can’t get to that gun.”

CHAPTER 13

MCCOY

“You had a gym down here the whole time?” Earth asked, looking around my home gym.

“Yeah.” I laughed as I slowed down my speed on the treadmill to a light jog. “I don’t use it often, but it’s here.”

“I been working out in the room since I got here,” he said, shaking his head. “If I’d known this was down here, we would’ve been sparring down here.”

“I don’t think what we’ve been doing can be considered sparring.” I wiped my face with the small hand towel I had hung on the handrail.

“What you call it then?” He sat on the floor near the machine I was running on and started to stretch. “Cause, in my opinion, that’s what we been doing.” His naturally low eyes swept over my body before returning to my eyes.

“Learning to throw a punch,” I answered, and he grunted.

“You knew how to do that, you just had to learn how to do it correctly.” Once he was done stretching, he got into the push-up position. “All I did was show you.”

“Who taught you to fight? Your daddy?” I asked as he did pushups.

“Nah.” He grunted. He moved effortlessly up and down. “I was hardheaded, so he put me in boxing classes as a kid to try and get a hold of my anger and quick temper.”

“Did it work?” I asked with a slight laugh.

“Nope.” He laughed and shook his head. “If anything, it made me feel unstoppable. I was knocking niggas almost ten years my senior out.”

“So you were good?” I increased my speed as we talked. If he could work out, then so could I.

“Until I met Nine.” He laughed. “That nigga walked into the gym one day, beat the black off my ass, and walked right out the gym. I trained for months after that, hoping he would come back.”

“Did he?”

“Fuck yeah. He smirked. “And he beat my ass again.”

“What?” I had to jump off the treadmill to keep from falling because I was laughing so hard. “He beat you up twice?”

Earth stopped doing push-ups and sat on the floor. “That nigga beat my ass ten more times. Each time we stepped into the ring, he knocked me on my ass.” He shook his head and smiled. “I didn’t learn until almost eight months into us sparring on and off that my pop had trained and paid him to show up and fuck me up.”

“Why did he do that?”

“To humble my ass.” He shrugged. “I told you I thought I was unstoppable back then and my pop knew the only way I would chill the fuck out was to have somebody go

upside my head. He knew Nine would be that nigga.”

“How?”

“Nine is a computer genius. Nigga can hack into anything at any given moment, but the nigga has zero people skills. At times, I think he is autistic.”

“Really?” I felt like a parrot for asking the same two questions, but I didn’t care. Earth’s life was interesting, and he always had a good story to tell.

“Yeah, but I know now he isn’t.” Earth got back in the push-up position, then nodded at the treadmill. “Start your run back up.” I’d damn near forgotten about the machine. Luckily, I had one that stopped spinning if it didn’t feel pressure after thirty seconds, so all I had to do was step back on and the belt started rolling. Once I was back at my speed, Earth nodded and continued doing his push-ups. “Anyway, Nine is just a solo ass nigga. He looks out for his family and works.”

“He doesn’t have a girlfriend?”

“Nah,” he replied. “I know at one point he was serious about someone, but he never brought her around.”

“Why?”

“No clue,” he said, shaking his head. “And I didn’t ask. I respect his boundaries when it comes to his personal life.”

“So how did y’all become friends after he beat you up all those times?” I couldn’t help but giggle when I heard Earth suck his teeth.

“Like I said, he could hack into anything. Back in the day, I was a jack boy; both me

and Fire were. We stole everything that wasn't bolted to the ground, but we wanted to level up and cars were the next best options." He stopped doing push-ups and stood. "Keep running." I nodded. "Anyway, we didn't want to deal with the everyday cars; we wanted the expensive stuff. Like I said, Nine could hack anything, including car security systems. He and his little Blackberry phone made us a lot of money."

"So, he went from beating you up to being your partner in crime?"

"Yep." He laughed. "Made money as teens, flipped it, and started our own businesses. Nine owns a couple of security companies and moves money on the stock market for us."

"And you?"

"I own an investment company and a few rental properties," I answered and shrugged. "Nothing too major."

"I knew that, you know?" I said, smiling.

"Knew what?"

"That you owned your own business," I answered, laughing. "I did my research before having your grabbed."

"Then what you ask for?"

"To see what you would tell me." I slowed down on the treadmill. "People tend to pretend they are something they aren't, especially when it comes to men. As soon as they realize it's a good chance I make more money than them, they tend to embellish what they do."

“I ain’t one to lie, Coy.” He laughed. “You can make all the money you want, and I’d never be jealous of that shit.”

My phone rang, pulling my attention from our conversation. Alexa read off the number and I sighed. It was Jamel’s cousin, Leon. If he was calling me, that meant someone else was in jail and they expected me to get them out.

“Not someone you want to talk to?” Earth said once the phone stopped ringing.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “They aren’t even worth the headache I would get talking to them.

“Cool,” Earth said, nodding. “Let’s get back to our workout.” He tapped the treadmill control panel and stopped it. “You know how to jump rope?”

“Yes,” I answered as I got off the treadmill.

“Show me,” he said as he handed me one of the jump ropes I had hanging on the wall. “Whoever loses has to cook dinner.”

“Deal,” I agreed.

“And just so you know, I like my steak medium well, broccoli soft with extra butter, and my potato with all the fixings.”

“Me too!” I laughed as I started jumping. Earth smirked, shook his head, and followed suit. “I’m ten seconds ahead of you.”

“Alexa, start the timer,” he said with a laugh.

CHAPTER 14

EARTH

“Guess how many,” I said to McCoy, walking into her office. McCoy looked up from her computer, confused as hell. The swelling in her face was almost gone but her bruises were still visible. It would probably take a few more weeks for them to be completely gone. “Guess.”

“Why?” she asked, giggling. I put the jar full of marbles I was carrying on her desk and stepped back. “What’s this?”

“Figure out how many marbles are in the jar.” I sat down in the chair across from her desk and stretched my long legs out in front of me.

“What do I get if I guess how many?” she asked, then smirked.

“What you want?” I replied and she shrugged. “Alright, so how about this? If you guess right, we can do whatever you want. I won’t complain one time.”

“And if I don’t?” she countered, then lifted her brow.

“You gotta let me go,” I said, and she shook her head. Truth was, no matter what she guessed, I was going to let her think she won. McCoy needed control right now, especially since I knew I wouldn’t be in this bitch too much longer. I knew how my family moved; they weren’t going to let Jamel walk around alive too much longer. Enough time had passed. Don’t get me wrong, I was ready to go home, but I wanted

McCoy by myself. But to do that, I had to make sure she completely trusted me.

“I ca?—”

“This is about trust, McCoy. Right now, in this instance, we gonna trust each other or not.” I stood and took a small sticky note off her desk, along with a pen. “How about this, I’ll write down how many marbles are in the jar and set it upside down right here.” I wrote the amount on the note and set it down. “That way you know I’m not lying when you say your number.”

“Okay.” McCoy got up from her seat, walked around her desk, and picked up the jar. “All I have to do is guess the correct answer?” she asked, glancing over at me. I nodded and she sighed. “Did you use all the marbles in the living room?”

“Yeah, plus the bedroom,” I answered, and she nodded.

“It’s two hundred and ninety-six marbles,” she said, and I laughed.

“How did you know?” I dropped back in my seat, ran my hand over my face, then shook my head.

“Because I have three hundred marbles in the house, but only two hundred and ninety-six are in this jar.” She set the jar down, rounded her desk, and opened the top drawer. “The other four are right here.” She pulled out the remaining marbles and set them on her desk.

“Why you have four marbles down here?” I was intrigued as fuck by her reply.

“It’s the number of cases I’ve lost,” she answered with a shrug. I sat forward, rested my elbows on the tops of my knees, and tented my hands in front of my mouth. “The first case I ever had, I won, then the second, third, and so on and so forth. As a joke,

my co-worker when I was a public defender got me a marble every time I won a case and would drop it in that jar.” She nodded at the jar and smiled. “We agreed we couldn’t quit and start our own practice until we filled our jars.”

“You have your own practice, so that means you won, right?”

“Yep.” She laughed.

“Is she still a public defender?”

“Nope.”

“What she doing now?”

“Doesn’t matter,” McCoy said as she stood. “It was a different time and a different life.”

“Where are you going?” I asked, watching her step around her desk. I put my hand out, touching her stomach to stop her from walking. McCoy looked at my hand, then at me.

“To get the popcorn and juice,” she answered. I stood and looked down at her. “We are going to have a movie night. I get to pick the movies, though.”

“Ah, man. Please don’t pick nothing girly,” I said, shaking my head.

“You said you wouldn’t complain.” She laughed.

“You right.” I threw my arm over her shoulder, and we left her office. “Just don’t pick nothing sappy.”

“How do you feel about scary movies?” She looked at me with so much hope in her eyes, even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t have been able to tell her no.

“How scary?” I asked with a sigh. No lie, I wasn’t even a movie buff, so her asking me to watch something scary or sappy wouldn’t have mattered because it was a good chance I’d never seen nor heard of it.

“Nothing too bad,” she answered, and I knew her ass was lying. “We can watch The Exorcist or one of the Saw movies.”

“How about we binge something instead?” I offered and she rolled her eyes. “I’on watch much TV so I know it’s gotta be some shit neither of us has ever seen.”

“Fine. I’ve been meaning to watch The Last of Us . It’s a zombie show.”

“Cool.” I laughed. I pulled her close, dropped a kiss on her forehead, then let her go when we got to the kitchen. “I’ll get the popcorn and juice; you go turn on the TV and get everything ready.”

“The fuck is you squinting for?” I asked, watching her. We’d finished The Last of Us and were about to start watching The Walking Dead . She said to appreciate the first one, I had to watch the show that changed how people viewed the zombie apocalypse.

I relaxed in my spot and ran my hands over my face. I really needed to shave but I only let Corinthian touch my face and hair. I would look like a wild man until I was out of here. “You can’t see?”

“I see well enough.” She looked over her shoulder and answered me. McCoy was stretched out on the side of me. Her head was close to my feet, but she was so damn short, her feet barely hit the middle of my stomach. She had on matte green silk pajama pants and a black wife beater. I could tell from the way her ass and titties

moved that she didn't have on any panties or bra. I had to adjust my dick in my pants every so often so she couldn't see my shit bricking up.

"Well enough?" I laughed. "Coy, yo' ass can't see?" She rolled her eyes, and I laughed harder. "I thought I was trippin' the other day when you was squinting. I didn't know whether it was because your eyes were still swollen or you couldn't see." She turned back to the TV, but not before I saw her eyes filling with tears. I grabbed her by her ankle and pulled her to me. I wasn't rough or trying to hurt her, but I didn't like that she was trying to hide her feelings from me. "Come here." I started tickling her.

"Stop, Earth!" She laughed and tried to pull away from me. Somehow, I managed to grab her around her waist and drag her into my lap. I wrapped my arms around her and held her close. "Why you ain't been wearing yo' glasses?"

"I don't like wearing them," she answered, still laughing. "They make me look like a nerd."

"You wear contacts?" I started tickling her again.

"No!"

"Coy, you walkin' around here blind as a fuckin' bat. I bet yo' ass run into shit all the time on the low 'cause you can't see."

"I'm clumsy!" She screamed and tried to get away from me, but I was stronger and wasn't letting up. "I fall at least two or three times a week."

"The fuck your grown ass be fallin' for?" I asked as I stopped tickling her. I didn't let her up out of my lap, though. I liked how she felt close to me.

“I don’t know.” She laughed. “It’s not as bad when I wear my glasses, but when I don’t, it’s dangerous.”

“Yo’ ass can’t see!” I laughed harder.

“It’s not funny.” She mushed my head, and I fell over, still laughing.

“Where are your glasses now?” I questioned as I tried to get myself together.

“Over there on the end table. I probably haven’t worn them in two months.”

“Why not?” I wiped my hand over my face and shook my head. “If you can’t see, then wear them muthafuckas. I bet you got that whole sexy nerd vibe goin’ on when you put them on.” I got up, sat her on the bed, then grabbed the cat-eyed, cheetah-print glasses and brought them over to her. “Put these things on, Coy. You probably can’t even see me for real right now.”

“I can,” she weakly argued but took the glasses from me and put them on. “There, you happy?”

“Fuck yeah, blind ass woman,” I replied, then sat next to her. I was right. She was already fine as fuck without the glasses, but now seeing her in them, I was for real stuck. I adjusted my dick in my pants. “Now let’s watch this damn show you swear is the best thing in the world.” I dropped back onto the bed and pulled her close. “If this shit is boring, I’m picking the next show we binge.” I looked over at her. “I hope you like car shows.”

“I don’t,” she said, shaking her head. “We can watch 1000-Lb. Sisters if you don’t like this.”

“What the fuck is that shit?” I reared back and stared at her like she was crazy.

“Oh, we’ll watch that first. You’ll love it, I swear.” McCoy picked up the remote and turned the channel. She looked over at me with a serious expression. “After this, we can watch Naked and Afraid .”

“Alright, so check it,” I said as I continued to fix breakfast. McCoy looked up from the bag she was packing and waited. “You know that nigga gonna try you, right? Like, legit try your ass and I need you to be prepared.”

“Prepared?” she questioned and I nodded. “For what?”

“You got my gun?” I asked. I wasn’t about to answer her question because there was no reason to. She knew what the fuck I was talking about and was intentionally playing dumb. “Nah, put your head up. Don’t put that shit down for nobody else under no fuckin’ circumstances from here on out.” She lifted her head and stared at me. I waited a beat before nodding and going back to cooking. “Better. Now, where is the gun?”

“Upstairs,” she answered, and I grunted.

“While you are eating, I’ll grab it and put it in your bag,” I nodded, then went back to cooking. I knew the gun was on the nightstand where I left it, but I wanted to see if she would admit it. Even with us practicing damn near every day, I still saw the hesitation whenever I brought up her carrying it. I needed her to be comfortable around guns especially once Jamel was out of the picture and she was riding with me.

“Now, like I was saying; he’s gonna try you. It’s been a few weeks, and from what you’ve told me about his weak ass, he’s gonna show face if he hasn’t already.”

“He has,” she mumbled, and it took everything in me not to spaz. I slammed the spatula down on the countertop and stared at McCoy. I hated she was hiding shit from me, but I wouldn’t show my ass because I didn’t want her to think I would ever take

my anger out on her.

“Laila, my secretary, told me he’s been there a few times over the last three days, looking for me. She told him I was out of town for work and should be back today.”

“Yeah, he gonna show face, then,” I said once I got myself together. I started fixing her plate and thinking of how I was going to handle this shit. Once she was gone, I was going to have to check in with Fire again. He’d been looking for Jamel but his stupid ass had been MIA. “If it ain’t to do nothing else, it’s gonna be to intimidate you.”

“And that’s when you want me to make it go ra-ta-ta?” she asked, trying to make me laugh.

“If he steps to you wrong, then yeah,” I answered, then set her plate in front of her. I’d been up for a few hours, worked out, and sat around until my nerves started to get the best of me. I hated to admit it, but I was nervous about her going back to work. I couldn’t get to her if she needed me.

Her house was locked down. The windows, doors, and even her garage didn’t open until she disarmed it. If push came to shove, I’d break a window if I needed to get out, but I’d need somebody waiting for me because cops responded quick in this neighborhood. “But if not, play that shit off. Be cool with him and let him play that shit like it ain’t no beef.”

“I know,” I sighed. I could tell she hated to admit that she knew the drill when it came to dealing with showing her face after getting her ass kicked. “I’ve been down this road before.”

“And it’ll be your last fuckin’ time,” I said, then sat next to her at the table. “Now eat your food. Shit ain’t gonna be hot forever.”

“I’ll clean up before I leave.” She picked up her fork and dug into her food. I’d probably gone overboard with the eggs, bacon, hot links, pancakes and cheese grits, but none of the food would go to waste.

“I got it,” I said in between bites. “You just eat, get your mind right for work, and let me handle the shit here at home.”

“I can do it, it’s not a big deal.” She laughed but I wasn’t trying to hear shit she was saying. I wanted our meal to be enjoyable and her trying to keep herself busy instead of eating and going to the office wouldn’t do shit but make my irritation worse and I’d end up changing my mind about her going to work.

“Let me handle this, Coy,” I said, shaking my head. “Now eat.”

CHAPTER 15

MCCOY

I'd been back to work for almost a week, and the first day back, I had to be in court. When I got back to my office, I had a message from Jamel saying we were going out at the end of the week. At first, I wanted to say no, but then I remembered what Earth told me over breakfast the morning I went back to work. Jamel acted as if he hadn't beaten me, and everything was cool, so I played along. His telling me he would be at the condo later this week to take me out was a surprise.

I'd missed his party celebrating his supposedly killing Earth. Why he was going out again was beyond me. I wasn't going to ask any questions because I didn't care.

"You look decent, I guess," Jamel said. I looked up from the mirror in the bathroom to see him standing near the doorway. He wore black jeans with rips in the knees, a white shirt that fit his body, showing his little muscle, and a pair of black and white Jordans. In my opinion, Jamel didn't dress like a grown-ass man should; he dressed like a young nigga with little to no fashion sense but knew labels caught people's attention. And there was no doubt everything he had on from his underwear to his socks and T-shirt were all name brands.

"Thank you," I said, knowing his words weren't meant as a compliment.

"How much longer do you need?" He looked at his watch and then up at me as if he had an attitude. "I got shit to do."

“I’m ready,” I replied, standing. He looked at me up and down before nodding. I paired black leather pants with a fitted, long-sleeved matte green shirt. I’d picked it because it covered all of my scars but also gave off a sexy vibe. My hair was pulled into a top knot just in case Jamel got handsy later and wanted to grab on it.

“Hurry the fuck up,” he said, then walked out of the bathroom. I followed him, grabbed my small clutch, phone, and keys, and put on my Mahogany fashion stilettos that matched my outfit perfectly. “Follow me in your car.”

I didn’t argue with him about not riding together. Instead, I nodded, and we left the condo. The ride to the garage was quiet. He was on his phone and would look up at me occasionally, but he never said anything.

Once in my car, I pulled out my phone and brought the cameras up. Earth sat on the bed, watching *My 600-Lb. Life*, looking as if he didn’t have a care in the world. His seeming so peaceful and comfortable in my house made me smile. As if he knew I was watching him, he pulled out his phone and called me.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Where are you going with that nigga tonight?” he asked. When I got off work, I went home and sat in his bed. Earth calmed me with just his presence. We talked while I straightened my hair.

“He wants to go to The Basement,” I answered, knowing it was a prime DBB spot.

“That nigga got a death wish, for real.” Earth laughed. “He’s gonna endanger your life by taking you somewhere that ain’t safe?”

“He doesn’t care about my safety, Earth,” I sighed.

“Another reason for that nigga to die,” he replied. “Look, be careful out there, alright? And don’t take the gun inside, either. The only people security will let carry is DBB. If shit starts to move weird, find Constine. He usually works at the bar. Tell him I sent you. He won’t question shit, and he will get you to Fire.”

“Your brother doesn’t know about me,” I replied as I turned.

“Fire knows how I am,” Earth vaguely said. “Just do what I said to do.”

“Earth, you don’t?—”

“Do what I’m asking you, Coy,” he interrupted me. “I don’t ask for shit else while you got me locked up in here, do I?”

“No,” I answered. A piece of me felt guilty for having him locked in my house, especially since we’d been talking and getting to know each other. But I was desperate for my plan to work, and I knew my guilt would eventually fade away.

“Then do what I’m asking now. If some shit happens, find Fire.”

“Okay,” I agreed, knowing I wouldn’t. The last thing I needed was to be linked to any of the DBB.

“Alright, cool,” he said, sounding relieved. “Look, I’m about to go to sleep. Call me when you leave the club.”

For the rest of the drive, I followed Jamel as he sped to the club. At one point, I think he was going over a hundred miles per hour, but I wasn’t going to rush. I arrived probably ten minutes after him and took my time walking into the club. I knew this was DBB territory, but I walked in with my head high and shoulders back.

On the way up, I stopped by the bar and ordered a drink I had no intention of drinking to know what Constine looked like. I found Jamel in the VIP section with a woman sitting on his lap and another standing behind him, rubbing his shoulders.

“What the fuck took you so long?” he asked as I sat down across from him. The fact he wasn’t even hiding this other woman should’ve pissed me off, but it didn’t.

“Traffic,” I answered, and he stared me down as if I wasn’t shit.

“Do you think this is a game?” he sneered as he sat forward. He slapped me across the face before I could even think to react. The vein in his forehead pulsated wildly. “Play with me if you want to, and I’ll kill you!” He jerked me close to him. “Unless you want a replay of what happened last time we saw each other, you might want to calm the fuck down.” Jamel let me go and pushed me away. “Get the fuck outta here before I forget I’m in a good mood, bitch.”

I wiped the corner of my mouth, not surprised to see blood on my fingertip. Jamel stared at me, his eyes wild, and I could tell he got off on shit like this.

“One last thing,” he said to my back. I stopped walking but didn’t turn around. The sound of a woman giggling, then Jamel’s footsteps as he came toward me, rang in my ear. “This is your engagement ring.” He grabbed my hand, twisted it behind my back, and pushed a ring onto my finger. “You’ll wear it from here on out. It’s a family heirloom.” He let my hand go and then kissed my shoulder. “Now take your ass home. I’m tired of looking at your fuckin’ face.”

“That was quick,” Earth said as soon as I entered the house. The living room was dark, but I knew the layout of my house, so I didn’t see the point of turning on any light. “What happened?”

“He got in a mood as soon as I walked into the VIP suite and showed his ass,” I

answered as I sat on the couch. My eyes had adjusted to the dark so I could see his outline, but nothing else. “I was probably there for five minutes before he put me out.”

The light came on, and I had to shield my eyes to allow them to adjust. I heard Earth walk toward me; his large hand moved my hand from over my eyes. “The fuck happened to your face?” he asked, and I dropped my eyes. “Nah, look at me.” When my eyes settled on him again, he bit his bottom lip and sighed. “This is why he sent you home so fast, huh?” Earth let go of my wrist and gently grabbed my chin to move my face from side to side. “Alright.” He nodded, then let me go. “Go take a shower.”

“Earth—”

“McCoy, please do what I asked you to do,” he said. I could tell he was struggling to keep his temper together, and instead of arguing, I nodded and did what he asked.

After I got out of the shower, I went looking for Earth. I found him sitting on the couch, head back, eyes closed, and gun in his hand. “Come here, Coy,” he said without opening his eyes. As I approached him, Earth reached over and turned the light off next to him. I tried to move past him to sit on the couch, but he grabbed me with his free hand and pulled me into his lap. He buried his face in my neck, and we sat in the dark, listening to each other breathe. Tears I didn’t know I was holding back fell from my eyes, and I let them with no shame. I was so tired mentally, physically, and emotionally. Jamel was killing something in me that I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to get back.

“I’m tired, Earth,” I said softly.

“I know,” he replied with a slight nod. “But I swear this shit ain’t permanent.” He let out a breath that tickled my skin and wrapped his arms around my waist. That small gesture made me feel safe, and for the first time in my life, I realized I’d never felt

that with anyone but Earth.

“I want to go lay down,” I said, believing him.

Earth stood, easily picked me up, and walked to my room. He placed me on my feet, and we got into bed. Earth sat up, leaning against the headboard. I got into his lap, rested my head on his chest, and he covered us up.

“That nigga brought you there to embarrass you,” he said after a while. “It’s a weak nigga move.”

“I figured that,” I responded. I lifted my head and looked at Earth. “I meant what I said earlier.”

“I know,” he replied with a nod.

“I just don’t know how to get out of this.”

“Yeah, you do. That’s why you got me involved. I don’t know how you decided to come for me, but I’m glad you did.”

I wanted to tell him about the night Prince died. His best friend knew he wouldn’t leave that warehouse alive but decided I was worth saving. I wasn’t sure if it was because of his hatred for Jamel or because he saw something in me I didn’t see in myself, but I’d forever be indebted to Prince.

“Tell me about yourself,” I said, resting my head on his chest. Over the last few weeks of us getting to know each other, I usually did the majority of the talking. Earth always asked questions, never giving me a chance to do anything but answer before he asked something else.

“My favorite color is white, but I think you already know that.” He chuckled. “I’ on like fish, but Fire does. I got a shit load of cousins; my family is big as fuck. My mama has six siblings, and they all have at least three kids. My pop got five siblings, and they all got at least four.”

“What’s it like growing up with family?”

“Loud,” he answered, making me laugh. “Even as adults, we are around each other all the time, and the shit be loud as fuck. None of us have kids yet.”

“None of you?”

“Well, Shaka is pregnant, but ain’t nobody running behind a kid yet,” he replied, and I could feel him shake his head. “I know our parents will give us the side eye once she has her baby.”

“Who’s your favorite cousin?” I asked.

“Shaka,” he grunted. “I’d never tell her big head ass that, but she’s legit my favorite. She’s a chef, funny as fuck, you’d like her. I’ma introduce y’all when all of this is over.”

“Why? She needs a lawyer?”

“Fuck nah.” He laughed, then stopped and sucked his teeth. “Shit, knowing Shaka, she might. But it would help if you had strong women around you after all this is over. Shaka has been in your shoes before. Her ex had a hands problem, but her new nigga took care of that before we found out.”

“She’s lucky,” I mumbled.

“Why do you think that?”

“‘Cause she has people in her corner. Even when she felt alone, she wasn’t. And she had a man step up and protect her,” I replied. “Not everyone has that.”

I expected Earth to respond, but he didn’t. I looked up to see him staring at the ceiling with his bottom lip in his mouth. He shook his head and then sighed. “Tell me about you.”

“I don’t like fish, either,” I said after thinking about what he told me. “My favorite color is matte green.”

“I figured that shit out,” he said, pointing around my room. “Tell me something nobody knows.”

“I’m scared I won’t survive this,” I answered honestly. “I’m scared I bit off more than I can chew, and this is going to blow up in my face and get us both killed. Your family will mourn you, and I’ll be laid to rest by my best friend, but eventually, I’ll be forgotten. I’m afraid?—”

My words were cut off by Earth lifting my chin to look at him. He crashed his mouth into mine, cutting off the air going to my lungs, and I gladly let him. I wrapped my arms around his neck at the same time he pushed his tongue into my mouth, and I felt myself moan in pleasure. He kissed like he’d been doing it for years. He led, and I followed without hesitation.

“I got you, Coy,” he said when we finally separated. “Them fears ain’t gonna become reality.” Earth rested his forehead against mine and exhaled. “All I need you to do is let me lead. I swear on everything I love, I’ll protect you.”

“Okay,” I finally agreed. “Okay.”

Earth kissed me again, his hands sliding up my shirt, and I moaned in pleasure. For the last few years, all I'd experienced was pain, and even though his hands were rough, his touch was gentle. I lifted, shifting my body so I could straddle his lap. Our kiss never broke; it was like I wanted to breathe in all of him, and the only way I could was to keep our lips connected.

Earth wrapped his hand around my neck and slightly pulled back. "If I fuck you, ain't no going back," he said lowly. I nodded, and he chuckled. "You don't know what the fuck you just signed up for, Coy. But don't worry, I'll show your ass better than I can tell you."

Earth let go of my neck, grabbed my waist, and lifted me off his lap. I wanted to protest, but before I could open my mouth, he ripped my shorts off and threw them on the floor. I stood before him, my pussy directly in his face. He ran his hands up and down my legs and kissed my thighs.

"Earth—"

"Stop talkin', baby," he interrupted. He moved the pillows from behind him and then laid back. "Sit on my face."

"What?"

"This your throne from here on out." He licked his lips and then turned his head to kiss my left ankle. "Whenever you feel any way except like the queen you are, this is where you'll sit. If I gotta remind you every fuckin' day of who you are, then so be it." He turned his head and kissed my other ankle. "Now bring your pretty ass pussy down here so I can worship you like I'm supposed to." I hesitated briefly, and that was all it took for Earth to let out a small laugh. "Oh, you think I'm joking?" He looked up at me and smirked. "Cool, hold on to that headboard 'cause I'ma make your fuckin' knees buckle."

He lifted and latched onto my pussy. I grabbed onto the headboard and dropped my head. Earth buried his face in my pussy, spread my lips with his tongue, and pushed onto my clit with the tip of his tongue. "Shit, Earth!" I moaned as he pulled my clit into his mouth. My knees started to buckle, but he slapped my ass and shook his head.

"Stand the fuck up," he growled, then went back to sucking my clit.

"I-I-I-I can't," I whined as I rode his face. Every time my legs started to give out on me, Earth would smack my ass to get me to stand up. Even though I had a problem with men putting their hands on me, there was something about the way Earth spanked me that caused pleasure to ripple through my body.

"You can do whatever the fuck you think you can, plus more," Earth replied. He fell back on the bed, then pressed his thumb into my clit. My body shook with pleasure, and my legs started to shake. "Coy, look at me." I looked down at him and bit into my bottom lip. "You a fuckin' queen, baby. You're unstoppable. Now come the fuck down here and sit on your damn throne so I can worship you."

I lowered my body until I was resting on my knees. Earth wrapped his arms around my thighs, and his mouth latched onto my pussy again. He licked, sucked, and nibbled on my pussy as if he were on death row, and I was his last meal.

"Earth!" I moaned as I ran one hand along his waves and the other held tight to the headboard. "Fuck, baby!"

"Let that shit out," Earth prompted as he softly kissed my pussy. His goatee brushed against my clit as he kissed around my pussy. "I already told you, baby, this is your throne. You run this shit." He flattened his tongue and licked up my pussy, making my body shake. "Pretty ass pussy, just glistening and crying for me." He brushed against my clit with his index finger. "Cry for me." He had me so wet I could feel my

pussy dripping. “There you go, come on. Cry for me.”

“Earth!” I moaned as I felt my orgasm starting to take over. “Shit!”

“Let her cry, Coy. That’s all I’m asking, baby,” he said, then pulled my pussy back into his mouth. His tongue moved against my clit in fast circles. My hips moved in the same direction and rhythm. When my orgasm hit, I threw my head back and cried out.

“Shit!” I screamed as I continued to rock against his mouth. Earth didn’t stop just because I came; he started to suck on my clit harder as if one orgasm wasn’t enough. I pushed his head away from me and tried to stand. “Earth!”

“Move your fuckin’ hand, Coy,” he growled as I pushed against his head. “Real talk, you fuckin’ with my meal, and I’on like that.”

“I can’t.” I panted and shook my head. Even though I was saying no, my body was saying yes and was still rocking.

“Yes, the fuck you can, baby,” he said and kissed my pussy lips. “You can do whatever you set your mind to.” He spread my pussy lips and stuck two fingers inside me. “Now you got two options: dick or some more tongue. You can pick.”

“Dick!” I moaned.

“Good fuckin’ choice,” he answered with a chuckle, then pulled his fingers from me. He kissed my pussy three more times before smacking my ass, then lifted me by the waist. My body lowered to the bed, my back resting against the bottom half. “Take this shit off and let me see you.” Earth pulled my shirt over my head and threw it on the floor. He stared down at me for a few seconds before shaking his head. “That nigga tried to destroy you because you’re a work of art.” His hands gently caressed

my body, only stopping to pinch my nipples. His words, soft touch, and look in his eyes made tears fill my eyes. I'd never been worshiped this way.

No one had ever catered to me.

Earth pushed my legs open with his and rested his body on top of mine. His dick pressed against my pussy, and in one smooth motion, he pushed inside of me. "Earth!" I moaned and arched off the bed.

"You're beautiful, smart, amazing." He buried his face in my neck and groaned. "You deserve everything your heart desires, plus shit you can't even imagine."

"Earth!" I cried out as another orgasm started to build. "Shit!"

"It's alright," he coached me. "I got you. Just let that shit out." Earth started to move faster, pushing his dick into spots I didn't even know I had. My body started to shake, and my eyes rolled into the back of my head. "Earth!" I clawed at his back and bit into his shoulder.

"I got you. Let it go, baby."

CHAPTER 16

EARTH

“You think you can get me out?” I asked Nine, and he grunted. “For real, nigga, this shit is annoying.”

“No, what’s annoying is your punk ass brother who thinks everything is a damn joke. Between him and Krude, I feel like I have been sitting in the middle of a damn comedy show.”

“You need to laugh, nigga,” Krude said, patting him on the back. I watched them through the front door and shook my head. “It ain’t my fault you don’t know good jokes when you hear them.”

“You’re the damn joke, Krude,” Nine replied, and I laughed.

“Get some pussy already.” Krude sighed and shook his head. “And hurry the fuck up, I gotta pee!”

“Nigga, rush me again.” Nine looked up from his phone and mugged Krude. “I swear on everything I love, I’ll shoot your ass.”

“Shoot me then, nigga, ’cause I’m going to rush you until we in the house!” Krude yelled, throwing his hands in the air. “I’m an open target! Blast the fuck off!”

“Krude!” I hit the door to get his attention, and he looked at me with a smirk on his

face. "Leave that nigga alone before I break your damn jaw, nigga."

"How the fuck you gonna do that if you locked in that bitch?" he questioned as he dropped his arms. "Nigga, you are in there." He pointed to the house. "I'm out here!" He pointed to his surroundings. "We are not the same!"

The alarm disengaging echoed through the house, and I unlocked the doors. "What the fuck you say?" I questioned as I stepped out of the house. "Repeat it for me."

"Nigga, I'm not scared of you!" Krude laughed. "I'll say that shit again!" He took off running, pushing me aside to get in the house. "After I pee. The baby is killing my bladder!" He made it about six steps in before turning around and facing me. "Where the fuck is the bathroom?"

"Down the hallway to the right," I answered with a laugh.

"Appreciate it!" he replied, then disappeared into the house.

"I swear I hate taking that nigga places," Nine said, shaking his head.

"Yet you do every time," I said, then dapped him and Fire up.

"I'm gonna stop one day," Nine grunted, making me laugh harder.

We made our way into the house.

"Alright, bitch ass nigga, who the fuck we gotta kill for this shit?" Fire questioned as he looked around McCoy's house. "I mean, this ain't a bad look when it comes to being locked away, but that's beside the point. They gotta answer for this shit."

"I got this shit on lock," I answered with a laugh as I sat. Krude made himself

comfortable on the other couch with a fruit bowl and started flipping through the apps. Nine stood off to the side, shaking his head, and Fire sat across from me, already in go mode. “I need y'all for something else.”

“What’s that?” Fire questioned. His locs hung over his face like a curtain, but I could see the slight smirk on his face.

“Jamel finally started showing his face again,” I said, and Fire nodded. “I wanna snatch his ass and make him suffer.” He’d been waiting for the go since Prince was killed.

“What you got in mind?” Fire asked, rearing back. “I can have somebody snatch him up tonight with no questions asked.”

“Nah,” I said, shaking my head. “I want that nigga to sweat. A one-hit kind of move won’t do it. I want this shit to be torture.”

“Why?” Nine asked. “You been putting the brakes on anyone going after him since Prince was killed. What the fuck are you waiting on?”

“Her,” I answered, nodding at McCoy as she walked through the front door. Her steps faltered at the sight of Fire, Krude, and Nine in her house, but she squared her shoulders and stared me down. The boss in her wouldn’t let them see her as weak, and I loved that. I knew this shit would be a surprise to her. I had plans for her, especially after seeing that bruise on her face last night and putting my dick in her. This shit was now beyond him killing my boy—he’d touched my wife.

“Well, shit,” Fire said lowly, causing me to chuckle. “I get it now, nigga.”

“What’s good, fam?” Krude said to her, then popped a grape into his mouth. “Yo’ spot nice.”

“Thank you,” McCoy replied, then turned to look at me. Her dark brown eyes sparkled with questions, and I shook my head. My friends and family didn’t move like most niggas. They didn’t take minutes, hours, days, or weeks to figure out if they fucked with you. It took seconds. They moved off energy, and even though I knew McCoy was silently questioning me, they watched her to see how she moved. Her energy in those brief seconds determined how they moved, and since they were all relaxed, I knew she was good. “Earth?”

“That’s Krude,” I said, nodding to Krude, who threw his hand up but kept watching The Lion King II as if he wasn’t a grown- ass man. “Beside you is Nine.” Nine nodded with a smirk on his face. “And that’s Fire. The one who would’ve killed everybody without a second thought.” Fire stood, walked over to her, and put his hand out.

“Not one thought, shorty,” he said, shaking her hand. “You got the right brother.”

“The fuck you mean, got the right brother?” Krude asked as he paused the TV and turned to face us. “She went looking for you or something?”

“She had me snatched,” I answered, knowing Krude would have a field day with the information. “In broad daylight.”

“Get the fuck outta here! I was just joking about that shit earlier!” he yelled. “She’s little as fuck, nigga! How did she get your big ass?” He slid off the couch, laughing the entire time. “I swear on everything, I’m callin’ the fam! You are never living this shit down!”

“It’s cool.” I shrugged. “Ay, come here, Coy. Let me holla at you.”

“Make yourself at home,” McCoy said to the fellas, and they all nodded.

“Legit, we are, but don’t worry, I won’t break shit!” Krude yelled as we made our way to the kitchen.

“Talk to me,” I said, leaning against the counter and crossing my arms over my chest.

“How did they get into my house?” she asked, setting her purse on the counter.

“Nine,” I answered with a shrug. She already knew that he was good with computers so there was no need to explain any further.

“And your brother?”

“Fire goes where I go.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I mean, how is he handling all this?”

“Fire cool.” I wiped my hands over my mouth. I liked the fact that she was worried about my family.

“Why are they here?” She washed her hands at the sink and then started grabbing food from the fridge to start cooking. I noticed she used cooking to escape when she was about to overthink a situation. “We had an agreement. You stay hidden, your family does what they need to do, and once Jamel is dead, I’ll let you go.”

“Change of plans,” I said, shaking my head. McCoy’s eyes locked on me, and I saw the tears forming. “We’re still going to kill that nigga, but this hiding shit is dead. We are doing this shit my way.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “We have a plan.”

“We got a new one.”

“No!” She slammed her hand on the counter. “We have to do this my way!”

“Nah, that's not happening, Coy,” I told her. I got that she needed this control, but this shit was moving too slow for me. Jamel was putting his hands on her without a second thought, and in public, which let me know this nigga didn't give a fuck. The last thing I would ever be able to live with was him killing her, and I was locked in her house with no way out.

“Damn it, Earth!”

I walked over to her, closing the space between us, and pulled her close. “Chill, and let me handle this,” I said into her ear. “I wouldn't do shit to have you out here looking crazy and won't shit be linked back to you. You wanted a killer in your corner, and you got it. Now, let me do what I do.”

McCoy turned around and stared up at me. Tears pooled in her eyes, and when she blinked, they slowly fell. “I'm scared,” she softly replied, and I nodded.

A big piece of me wanted to scream at the top of my lungs that she didn't have shit to fear, but I knew that wouldn't do shit. McCoy needed action; she'd never had a nigga in her corner who was legit just there for her. I didn't want anything from her but her heart, but I knew I had to prove that.

“You asked me to trust you in the beginning of all this and now it's my turn to ask the same of you,” I said, wiping her tears. “You've been through enough and now that shit is over. I'm not gonna lie to you and say I knew from jump you were ready to leave Jamel, but I see that shit now. You've made the first step and now it's on me to finish it. I won't move without you knowing first, okay?” She nodded, and I chuckled. “Nah, Coy, open your mouth. Is that cool?”

“Yes,” she said, nodding.

“Cool.” I dropped a kiss on her lips and let her go. “Let me go talk to these niggas real quick, then I’ll be back.”

“Oh, we’re about to get put out,” Krude said as soon as I walked into the living room. “I’ve seen that look before. I’ve had that look before.”

“Nigga, what?” Fire questioned, looking up from his phone. He took one look at me, laughed, and stood up. “Never mind, you’re right.”

“I know,” Krude said without looking up from the TV. “Let me hear my song real fast, then we can head out.”

“Your song?” Nine questioned. “It’s a fuckin’ Disney movie!”

“ Deception! Disgrace! ” Krude started singing, ignoring Nine. He turned the TV up as loud as possible and dropped the remote on the couch. “ Evil as plain as the scar on his face! ”

“I swear I hate this nigga,” Nine said, shaking his head. “I’m calling Ex and tellin’ him to get another DeCorte to keep me company so he knows I haven’t killed his damn cousin yet.”

Fire started to laugh and headed toward the door.

“ He asked for trouble the moment he came! Deception! An outrage! Disgrace! For shame! You know these outsider types. Evil as plain as the scar on his face. See you later, agitator! ” Krude walked out of the living room, singing at the top of his lungs.

“That nigga is wild,” Fire said as he dapped me up. We pulled each other into a hug and then let go. “Let me know what you need me to do.”

“I will.” I dapped him up again, loving that even though I knew my brother wasn’t 100 percent sure what I was doing, he didn’t hesitate to back me up.

“She's fine, though,” Fire said, nodding toward the kitchen. “I knew you had taste.”

“Get the fuck out, nigga,” I said, pushing him toward the door as we laughed.

“Call Mama and tell her you're good,” Fire said once we were at the door. “She has been stressing and shit, and you know how that fucks with her sickle cell.”

“I’ll call her tonight,” I said.

“Nah, go see her,” Fire said, shaking his head. “Bring her with you, too, so she knows this wasn’t no bullshit and Shorty legit. She gonna have to deal with Mama and Breeze.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Alright,” Fire agreed. “Call me so we can get this shit together.”

“In the AM. I gotta handle this shit with her.”

“Oh yeah, I heard her yellin’ at yo’ ass.” Fire laughed. “You in trouble.”

“Fuck you, nigga,” I said, then closed the glass door in his face before he could respond.

Fire laughed and flipped me off before walking to Nine’s truck and getting in. I didn’t move from my spot until they pulled off, and the alarm system alerted me it had been re-engaged.

Laughing, I went back to the kitchen to find it empty. The oven was on, and I smelled something cooking, but I didn't open it to see what it was. I flipped off the light and headed to McCoy's office, only to find it empty. Surprised, I made my way to her room. Her phone rang from the bathroom, but I didn't attempt to move. The shower was cut off just as I sat on the end of the bed and waited for her to come out.

"No, Lynx." She sighed as she grabbed the jar of body butter off the end table next to her bed. "I can't do lunch tomorrow. I need to handle something here." She dropped her towel, and I bit into my bottom lip to keep from groaning. Her body was perfect. She had thick thighs, a fat ass, big ass titties, more than likely a G cup, and her stomach had a little pudge just like I loved. Even the scars and bruises couldn't take away from how bad she was.

When I grunted, her eyes locked on me through the mirror. I stood, not giving a fuck that she was on the phone. Her best friend was about to hear her get fucked the fuck down.

"Lynx, I'm not hiding anything from you," McCoy said as I stepped behind her. I pressed my body against her, my back to her front, and buried my face in her neck. I knew she could feel how hard my dick was, and when she pushed her ass back some, I chuckled. I backed up, then lowered to the ground and turned her around. I kissed each scar on her front before turning her around again and kissing all the wounds and bruises on her back. I stood and wrapped my arms around her as I bit into her neck. My fingers found her pussy, and she was so damn hot and wet, I groaned when I stuck them inside of her. McCoy's breath hitched as I pressed into her clit. "Nothing is wrong."

"You better not fuckin' scream 'til I tell you to," I said into her ear, then kissed it. McCoy nodded as I pulled my fingers from her pussy and stuck them in her mouth. I watched her through the mirror as she sucked her juices off my fingers. "Get the fuck off the phone unless you want your best friend to hear you get the best dick you've

ever had.”

“Let me call you back, Lynx,” she said, then hung up without letting her reply.

I stepped back, pushed her forward, and smacked her ass. I dropped my shorts and boxer briefs and lined myself up. I thought her pussy was hot on my fingers, but feeling it on the tip of my dick, upped it to another level.

“Fuck!” McCoy yelled as I slammed into her. She dropped her phone on the dresser and gripped its edge. “Oh, my fuckin’ goodness! Damn it, Earth!”

“Shut that shit up!” I groaned as I grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled it so that she had to look at me through the mirror. “I told yo’ ass not to scream until I told you to!” I pushed into her harder, knocking into her body with so much force, the mirror slammed into the wall.

“Earth!” she moaned.

Her pussy clamped down on my dick so hard, I had to stop moving for a second or I was going to nut. I stared at her through the mirror. The bruise on her face was starting to form, and the shit pissed me off. “I’m a kill that nigga myself, you understand me?” I pulled out of McCoy and slapped my dick against her pussy. She was dripping wet; my dick was coated with her cream. I slammed back into her, making her scream again. “Yeah, this pussy is mine. Fuck that nigga Jamel. Matter of fact, fuck his entire family. You belong to me, McCoy, do you understand?”

“Yes!” She moaned as she threw her ass back.

“Say it then!” I grabbed her leg, lifted it, and set it on the dresser to give me better access to her pussy. “Say this shit is mine! Say you belong to me!”

“I’m yours!”

“Nah,” I taunted as I cupped her pussy and pressed into her clit. “Scream that shit for the world to hear!” I slammed harder into her pussy. “Say I belong to Earth Marcel Carlson! The head of DBB! I’m his fuckin’ woman now! I run the nigga that runs DBB!”

“I belong to Earth Marcel Carlson.” She sobbed as I fucked her. I wasn’t letting up. She was going to scream my fucking name because she was mine.

“What the fuck else, McCoy?” I smacked her ass, and she hissed in pleasure. “Huh, baby? What the fuck else did I tell you to say? Declare that shit!”

“I belong to Earth Marcel Carlson! The head of DBB. I’m his fuckin’ woman now! I run the nigga that runs DBB!” Her head dropped forward, and her body started to shake. Her pussy milked my dick, and I loved that shit. I was home; her pussy was my place of solitude. “Shit!”

“Yeah, baby, let this pussy cry for me!”

“I’m cummin’, Earth!” She moaned, and I pulled out of her. I grabbed her other leg, lifted her body so she was doing a handstand on the dresser, and buried my face in her pussy. The taste of her was better than I ever expected. Her pussy would forever be my favorite meal. “Earth!” She came hard, squirting into my mouth, and I drank her juices like I was dying from thirst.

I didn’t give her a chance to get herself together before I lowered her to the ground and slammed my dick back into her. “Fuck!” I groaned and shook my head. She felt tighter and wetter since cumming. “Where do you want this nut, baby?”

“Inside me!” she moaned. “Cum inside me.”

Her words were like music to my ears. My nuts tightened, and my body got hot. Even though I'd fucked raw in the past, I'd never nutted in a woman, not even last night. But I didn't want my nut anywhere else but inside McCoy.

"Earth!" McCoy moaned. "Cum, baby!" She slammed her hand onto the dresser. "Shit! I'm cummin' again."

"Let that pussy cry for me, Coy," I said as I bit into her back. "Let her cry again, and I'll cum."

"Shit!" she moaned as her body started to shake. I let her orgasm take over her body, then I pushed my dick fully into her and nutted, making sure she got every drop of me.

I pulled my dick out of her, hating I wasn't still in her warmth, then grabbed her hand. "Take this fuck nigga's ring off." I stared down at her hand. I wasn't going to do it for her. If she was going to ride with me, then she was going to declare that shit.

Without hesitation, she pulled the ring off her finger and dropped it on the dresser. When she looked up at me, I grabbed her around the neck and pulled her close. My lips hovered over hers, and I chuckled. "You're mine for real, Coy. I don't give a fuck about shit else. You belong to me." I crashed my mouth into hers, kissing her with all the passion I'd just fucked her with.

CHAPTER 17

MCCOY

“Let me get your keys.” Earth had his hand out, waiting before I could respond. “Legit, baby, come on.”

“Where are you going?” I asked as I dug into my purse. I was trying my hardest not to spaz out. He’d asked me to trust him and let him lead, and I was trying to do just that.

“We are going to see my mama,” he answered as I dropped the keys into his hand. I reared back, surprised, but didn’t say anything. “You thought I was playing last night?”

“About?”

Earth stepped into my space and pulled me by the bottom of my shirt to him so I could close the little space we had between us. “You belong to me, Coy. What’s mine is yours, and that includes my family. Me being locked up here for weeks and not talking to my mama is probably killing her. That’s gotta be fixed ASAP.”

“I’m sorry,” I replied, shaking my head. “I didn’t think this all the way through.”

“It’s cool.” He dropped a kiss on my lips. “Mama might be a little standoffish, but she will understand why you did what you did once we tell her.”

“You sure?” I questioned him, not believing his family would be so understanding. Yes, his brother and friends seemed to be yesterday, but his mother and father would be a different story. Even though he was grown, it was their job to protect him.

“It’ll be cool.” He laughed and kissed me again. I wanted to climb up his body to keep this feeling, but I didn’t. He pulled back, wiped the corner of his mouth, and smiled. “Bring your fine ass on so you can see I’m a man of my word.”

Earth drove my truck to his parents’ house, less than ten minutes from mine. The house was precisely the type of home I pictured for his parents. wrought-iron fence with a long driveway that led to a beautiful three-story house. Earth parked in front of the back garage he said his parents had built a few years ago so they didn't block their driveway when he and his siblings came over.

A tall man with skin the color of melted chocolate, dark eyes, a long nose, full lips, a goatee, and a mean expression on his face came out the back door, a big gun in his hand. Earth chuckled, then shut the truck off. The windows were blacked out so we could see, but no one could see in. “That’s my pop,” Earth said, leaning back in his seat and shaking his head. “Young Carlson looks mean, but nigga is a teddy bear to every woman in the family.”

“You sure?” I questioned him, not believing what he was saying.

“Yep, watch this shit.” Earth kissed me again, then got out of the truck. I watched as his daddy stared at his son for a few seconds, then dropped his head and visibly took a deep breath. Earth walked over to his father and hugged him. His shoulders shook as he cried and patted his son’s back. He spoke into Earth's ear, and he nodded before stepping back. Young looked over his shoulder, and Earth nodded before running his hand over his face, then turning to face me. He walked back over to the car and opened the door. “Get out, Coy.”

After I got out, Earth closed the door, took my hand, and walked me over to his daddy. Up close, I saw the resemblance between father and son, but something told me Earth looked like his mother.

“You’re the woman who stole my son?” Young asked, and I nodded. “Was it for a good reason?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered with a nod.

Young nodded his head, not needing any more information. “Alright, well, come on. His mama is in the house sleep, so y’all might as well get this over with. She’s probably gonna cuss a lot, so be prepared.”

“She been feeling alright?” Earth asked, and his daddy nodded. “You sure?”

“She good,” he answered with a laugh. “She sat up all night on the phone with your sister. You know how Breeze is. She throws herself into work when she’s stressed, and your mama ain’t want her up alone, so they sat on FaceTime all night.”

“I’m sorry, Pop.” Earth sighed.

“No reason to be sorry,” he replied. We walked into the living room, and I realized I was right. Earth may have had some of his father’s features, but he was his mama’s twin.

Earth didn’t let my hand go as he kneeled next to his mama and rested his forehead against the side of her face. “Mama, open your eyes,” he said softly. The gentleness in his voice made tears fill my eyes. There was no doubt in my mind this was an action Earth did a lot with her. His mama stirred for a second, and Earth chuckled. “Come on now, old woman, open your eyes.”

“Earth, move.” She groaned and tried to push him away.

“Mama, Pop in your kitchen trying to cook.” Earth chuckled, then stood up.

His mama's eyes popped open, and she looked around. “Young, if your black ass is in my kitch—” She stopped talking and jumped up from the couch. “Earth!” She threw her arms around Earth and let out a small cry. “Thank you, God!”

“You missed a nigga, huh?” Earth laughed as he hugged his mama. “I was gone a week.”

“Earth, I thought you were dead!” she fussed as she pulled back from him. Her small hands went to his face, and she stared at him. “Do you know what that was like? Why the fuck would you do that?”

“I can explain,” he replied with a smirk. She let his face go and hit him in the arm. Earth let my hand go and rubbed the spot she hit. “Damn, I forgot how hard you hit!”

“I should beat your ass for scaring me like that!” she fussed as she hit him again. “I’ve been worried sick, and you’re standing here, talking about I hit hard?” She threw her hands in the air and shook her head. “Young, give me your damn belt!” She turned to her husband and put her hand out. Her husband laughed and started to take his belt off.

“Damn, it's like that, Pop?” Earth questioned him.

“That’s my wife, Earth. You’d do the same shit,” his daddy replied as he handed his wife the belt.

“Now explain to me why I shouldn’t beat your ass!” his mama said, turning to face him with the belt in her hand.

“Because—” Earth started to say, then stopped talking when he felt my hand on his back.

“Because what?” his mama questioned. She pushed past him and stared at me with a surprised look. For a brief second, I wondered what she saw when she looked at me. Earth had told me not to wear any makeup to allow my skin to breathe, but I knew my lip was swollen and my cheek was bruised. “Baby girl, what happened to you?” She dropped the belt, pushed Earth entirely out of the way, and cupped my face in her hands.

“Mama, this is McCoy Toliver,” Earth said, but she waved him off. “Coy, this is my mama.”

“Earth, what happened to this baby?”

“I ain’t do it,” Earth replied.

“I know you aren’t stupid,” she said, waving him off. “Come on, Coy, let’s go talk.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, nodding. My eyes went to Earth, and he nodded before his mama pulled me out of the living room.

CHAPTER 18

EARTH

“She’s in good hands with your mama,” Pop said, and I nodded.

“I already know,” I replied, running my hand over my face. I needed a shave and haircut. “I need y’all to keep an eye on her while I go do some shit.”

“Take your brother with you.” Pop handed me the gun in his hand, and I nodded. “Don’t do shit that can be linked back to y’all.”

“Never,” I said, shaking my head. I dapped him up, pulled him into a quick hug, and went to find Mama and McCoy.

“Breeze will be here in a little while,” I heard Mama say as I pushed open her bedroom door. McCoy sat on the edge of the bed while Mama paced in front of her. I knew how my mama was. She didn’t give a fuck about pissing anybody off, but she was loyal to a fucking tee. That was why I knew bringing McCoy here was the smartest thing to do.

“Coy?” I called out, and she looked up at me and smiled. “Come here, baby.” She got up from the bed and walked over to me. I pulled her to me and kissed her lips. “I gotta make a run, go pick up Fire, and make some shit happen.”

“Are you going to kill him today?” she asked, getting straight to the point.

“Nah.” I laughed and shook my head. “I want to make that nigga suffer. I’m take down his whole crew, then come for that nigga.” There was no reason to beat around the bush and play like she didn’t know what the fuck I was going to be on. “After I get back, we are going out to dinner. Dress in something sexy.”

“I—”

“I’ll call Shaka and Mahogany,” Mama interjected before Coy could turn me down. I nodded, then dropped another kiss on McCoy before leaving.

“Fire outside,” Pop said when I returned to the living room. He was sitting on the couch, smoking a blunt and watching SportsCenter. “He got Domo and West with him.”

“Appreciate it, Pop.”

My brother stood, leaning against McCoy’s truck while Domo and West Donovan talked. Domo was a cool nigga, goofy just like the rest of Fire’s crew, but he had a little bit more of a serious side, especially since he’d gotten with Aurora Cooper. West Rollin was just as crazy as Fire. Nigga was trigger-happy and had a mean streak a mile long.

“If we ain’t killin’, I’on need to be here,” West said as I dapped him up. “I ain’t had pussy, and I’m short-tempered.”

“Soren still ignoring your ass?” I asked with a laugh. Soren was his friend who didn’t give that nigga the time of day. She hooped professionally in the WNBA with Krude’s cousin. She was good as hell, too. She was one of those women who played ball with the fellas growing up, so her game was different. I had nothing but respect for her and loved seeing her shine.

“She won’t give a nigga the time of day even after she saw me drop all my hoes a few weeks ago,” West answered, and I laughed. “I swear as soon as her season is over, I’m snatching her ass up, and I don’t give a fuck who got something to say about it.”

“This nigga was kidnapped by his woman, so he can’t say shit.” Fire laughed, and I mushed his head. “Don’t be mad at me ’cause you got snatched.”

“Fuck you, nigga,” I replied, then dapped up Domo, who was laughing. “The principal let you out to play, nigga?”

“Plum put my ass out as soon as she saw this nigga name pop up on my phone.” Domo shrugged. “Said I’m stressing her out or some shit like that.”

“Tell me what’s going on while we ride,” I said, unlocking McCoy’s truck.

We climbed in and drove to the city and into Jamel’s neighborhood. Domo broke down his issues with his woman on the drive over, and I listened. They’d been through some shit, and their relationship was pretty new, so I knew my boy was going through it. But he loved Aurora and wasn’t about to let shit change that.

“What’s the plan?” Fire asked as we sat in front of one of Jamel’s trap houses. I didn’t need his drugs or money, but I was going to take shit on the principle. He couldn’t keep his hands off McCoy, then I was going to give that nigga something to stress over. “We just going in there, snatching and knockin’ them niggas off?”

“Yep,” I answered with a nod. It wasn’t dark, so the block was active. Niggas sat on porches, talking and smoking. Bitches walked up and down, trying to get niggas’ attention, and kids played.

“It’s kids over there,” Fire said, nodding toward a small group of kids three houses down.

“They know how to scatter,” West said as he checked over his gun. “But just in case, I’ll shoot once into the ground to get them moving.”

Nothing else needed to be said as we got out of the car. West let off a round into the ground near us, and just like we expected, everyone scattered. I kicked the front door of the trap house in, and without a care as to who was there, started shooting. I killed the first two niggas I saw sitting on the couch while Fire killed the two standing in the back. We moved through the house. Each room had at least two people in it that we killed, but we all paused at the last room. A baby crib sat in the middle of the room, and a little boy no older than one sat in the middle of the crib. He was filthy and stunk.

“This nigga had a kid in here?” Fire asked, picking the little boy up. He didn’t even cry; he stared at Fire, then smiled, showing a few teeth in his mouth. Fire looked at me and shook his head. “I’m not leaving him, man.”

“The fuck you gonna do with a kid, Fire?” I rebutted, knowing it didn’t matter. My brother wasn’t letting the little boy go. Fire stared at me with a twisted expression on his face. “You know what, take him. Grab whatever you think you gonna need.”

“I’on want none of this shit,” Fire said, kicking at boxes in the corner of the room. A little boy identical to the baby in his arms crawled out from behind them when they fell. “It’s two of y’all?” Fire stuffed his gun in his pants and picked up the other little boy. “Let’s get the fuck outta here.”

“You got the money?” I asked Domo, who nodded. He looked over at Fire, then back at me, and I shook my head. “He ain’t gonna leave them here.”

“This nigga pulled two kids out of thin air and Krude walking around, talkin’ about he pregnant by Megan. Plum giving me a baby for sure now,” Domo replied.

We made our way out with the money, drugs, and two babies. I knew no one would say shit to the police if they came, but for good measure, I made sure the block saw my face. This might have been Jamel's neighborhood, but niggas knew not to fuck with me. Plus, I wanted Jamel to know I'd done this shit and for the streets to see he was a fucking liar. He'd told them he'd killed me; now he was going to have to explain me taking out one of his trap houses.

"Nigga, let's go. I gotta get these babies in some water! They stink!" Fire yelled from the passenger seat. I nodded, got in, and pulled off, ensuring I took my time leaving.

"He stole a baby, Young!" Mama yelled as she paced in front of Fire and me. The babies were bathed and fed and now sleeping on a pallet on the floor next to the couch. "Oh no. Not just one but two!"

"They were in a trap house, Mama," Fire said as he patted the boys on their backs so they wouldn't wake up. "I wasn't about to leave them."

"Did you find a birth certificate?" Mama questioned, and we shook our heads. "Did you look for one?"

"Nope," Fire answered with a smirk. "I can get that shit if I need it."

"If you need it?" She stared at Fire like he had two heads. "How the hell do you expect to raise two kids without one? Or a social?"

"I'll get that shit made, too," Fire replied with a grunt. "It ain't hard if you know the right people, and I know the right people."

"Fire!"

"Mama." He cut her off and shook his head as he stood. "They are my boys now.

You're either going to accept and love them like they came from my nuts, or we're out. It's simple. You ain't gotta agree with how they got here, but I wouldn't be the man I am if I left them there."

Mama and Fire stared at each other for a second before she nodded and pulled Fire into a hug. "Name them, and it better be something good, too."

"Ocean and Lake," Fire said, hugging Mama back. "We already got the other elements. We might as well finish it off."

"Whatever!" she said, pushing away from him. "Get into contact with whoever you need to get in contact with and get the paperwork together. The last thing you need is to get caught up with two kids that aren't yours."

"Yes, ma'am." He laughed. "Now start loving on them babies 'cause I bet they need it."

"Let them sleep," Mama said, staring down at them. "I bet this is the first time in their short lives they've slept on a full belly and in a clean diaper."

"No doubt," Fire agreed, then clapped his hands. "Well, let's start shopping then 'cause I don't know what kids need, and they gonna need a lot of shit."

I left Mama and Fire talking in the living room and searched for McCoy. I told her to be ready to go when I returned, but I hadn't gotten a chance to do the same. I found her in my room, fast asleep. I took a quick shower, dressed in ball shorts and a wife beater, and climbed in the bed with her.

"You're back?" she asked without opening her eyes.

"Yeah, Coy," I answered as I pulled her close.

“You okay?”

“Now I am,” I answered honestly as I buried my face in her neck. “Ay, I gotta ask you something.” She rolled over and stared at me. “Does Jamel have any kids you know of?”

“No, why?”

“There were two babies at the trap house we went to,” I said as McCoy sat up. “We didn’t leave them; they’re downstairs.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding.

“You wanna go see them?” I asked, trying to figure out where her head was. There was a chance her nigga had kids on her. Even though they had a fucked-up relationship, I knew shit had to hurt to some degree.

“No,” she denied, shaking her head. She stretched her arms over her head, making her shirt lift and pushing her titties up. I licked my lips.

“Why not?”

“I always knew Jamel wasn’t shit, I can’t deny that, but they aren’t his kids.” She shook her head.

“How do you know that?” I reared back to get a good look at her face. “Nigga’s nuts didn’t drop something?”

“They did but got pushed back up there when he was ten.”

“What?” I laughed.

“He said he had an accident when he was younger. He was riding his bike and slipped somehow and dropped onto the middle bar instead of the seat and fucked himself up.” She shrugged like it was no big deal. “He can’t have kids, so those babies aren’t his.”

“Man, that’s crazy.” I continued to laugh. “But get up, we ’bout to head home.”

CHAPTER 19

MCCOY

“Nah, Shaka, this shit is perfect,” Earth said to his cousin. The beautiful woman stood next to the stove, cutting peppers. Every so often, she’d look up at me and smile. Her big belly prohibited her from moving too fast, but she worked at a speed that made me want to sit here and watch her work her magic. She was efficient with her knives and time, and I loved watching a black woman work in the kitchen. I spent hours watching cooking shows and doing just that on social media. “Like I ain’t gonna ask you for nothing else, watch.”

“No.” She shook her head and pointed the sharp knife at him. “You’re going to buy me an amazing baby shower gift.”

“Man, what you want?” Earth sucked his teeth. Even though he tried to pretend he was annoyed, I could tell from the slight smirk on his face he’d give his cousin whatever she asked for. “Whatever it is, it comes from my whole group, too.”

“No, it’s not,” Shaka replied. “Auntie, Uncle Young, and Breeze already gave me their gifts. It’s just you and Fire left.”

“I’ll drop a stack in your account tomorrow.” Earth laughed, and she rolled her eyes. “For real, I don’t have time to shop.”

“Make it two,” she countered, and Earth reared back in his seat. Shaka crossed her arms over her chest and stared down her cousin.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he replied, and she giggled. I could tell from their banter they were close. The stories he told me over the past few days were only a glimpse into their relationship. Seeing their banter in person was cute.

“You good?” she asked him when he started rubbing his knees. “Have you been stressed?” Shaka’s eyes bounced from me to Earth with evident concern. I bit my bottom lip, trying to figure out what was happening.

“This crazy ass girl kidnapped me. What do you think?” Earth grunted. Shaka nodded and let out a deep breath. Earth noticed her hesitation and shook his head. “I’m cool, Shaka. Stop trippin’ and tell me how you are going to protect my honor from her kidnapping me and shit.”

“That was just foreplay, is all,” Shaka said, waving him off. Earth sucked his teeth, and it took everything in me to keep from laughing out loud. “No, but seriously, you okay? No flare-ups or anything?”

“Nah, just a little stiff,” Earth denied. “You actin’ like you worried about a nigga. You must’ve missed me, huh?”

“Hell nah,” Shaka denied and rolled her eyes.

“Lies.” Earth laughed. “Just admit that shit.”

“You got me over here cooking while I’m eight months pregnant, knowing how Keefe is, and you asking me if I missed your black ass? Double them two stacks.”

“Leave me out of this, baby,” Keefe said from the corner. He hadn’t said much since they arrived, but I could tell he’d been paying attention to their conversation just like I was from how he would grunt every so often. “You know, just like I do, you weren’t going to tell Earth no. Especially since talking to Breeze earlier, and she

mentioned his new girlfriend.”

“Speaking of a new girlfriend,” Shaka said, smiling. Her dark eyes sparkled with excitement as she stared at me. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Not much to tell.” I shrugged. “I’m a lawyer.”

“Oh yeah, we need one of those in this family.” Shaka laughed. “Any siblings?”

“Not that I know of,” I said, shaking my head. I hesitated for a second, then glanced over at Earth. His family had welcomed me, knowing what I’d done. Yet I was holding back from them. Whenever someone asked me about my personal life, I’d give one or two-word answers. They deserved more than that. “I was put up for adoption when I was a kid, grew up in the system. For all I know, I could have a bunch of siblings out there, or I could be the last of my lineage.”

“How’d you get your name?”

“It was the last name of the cop who found me.”

“Found you?” Earth asked. I’d never gone into detail about what I knew about my past, except with Lynx, and even she didn’t know the whole story. “You weren’t born in a hospital?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I was dumped outside of a police station. My umbilical cord was still attached and wrapped in a Lincoln University t-shirt. The police believe I was dumped there by a college student who didn’t know what else to do.”

“How did you get those bruises?” she said, pointing at my face. “I know it wasn’t Earth, so who was it?” I opened my mouth, but no words came out. “You know what,

don't say anything. I have a friend that will handle that for you. She's a little hot-headed, but she has good aim. I'll introduce you two; we can do lunch this week." She nodded as if it were decided, and I had no choice.

"You're not introducing her to Paxton," Earth said, shaking his head. "She ain't ready for all that."

"We will see about all that," Shaka said, waving him off. She turned, mouthed that she would call me later with details, then went back to cooking.

"Come here, Coy," Earth said, pulling my chair close to him. He buried his face in my neck and took a deep breath.

"You okay?" I ran my hand over his smooth cheek. Most women might have loved a full beard on a man, but I preferred Earth to have a goatee.

"Yeah," he answered. "You good? My family ain't too much, are they?"

"No," I answered with a small laugh. "They are everything I thought a big family would be like. It's a lot of moving pieces but nothing I can't handle."

"You sure?" He lifted his head and looked at me with a serious expression. "Fire and Shaka are a lot to handle sometimes, even for me."

"They are fine," I said, smiling.

Earth looked over at Shaka, who was finishing up the food. "Just say the word, and I'll put her out."

"She's fine." I laughed, and Earth grunted.

“Alright, come on,” he said, then stood. I was a little apprehensive but simultaneously curious about what he had up his sleeve. I stood up; Earth took my hand and pulled me out of the kitchen. “Shaka, make sure you lock up. Keefe, it was good seeing you, my guy. Hit me up this week. I got some shit I wanna discuss.”

We went to his bedroom, and he closed and locked the door. “Alright, so you know where most of everything is, right?” Earth said after he started to strip.

After we left his parents' house, Earth took me home and told me to pack for at least two weeks. I didn't think twice about his request as I threw clothes into suitcases. My work laptop went everywhere with me, so I wasn't worried about work. His house was different from mine; size-wise, it was close, but the feel was more of a home instead of a place to lay your head.

“No.” I laughed, and he grunted. “I've been to the kitchen, the room you said I could use as an office, in here, the living room and garage.”

“The important rooms,” he replied as he walked to the closet in the corner of his room. He returned with a towel in his hand, dressed in white swimming shorts, and looked at me with a blank expression. “Why are you still dressed?”

“Because you didn't tell me what we were doing.”

“Oh, we are getting in the hot tub.” He dropped the towel on the bed as he walked past it. “Come on, my body is getting stiff, and I need to relax.”

“Then get in without me,” I suggested, and he grunted. “What's the noise about?”

“I want you to get in with me,” he answered. Earth moved quickly to strip me out of my shirt and shorts. I stood in front of him in my boy shorts and bra, covered in bruises and scars, yet Earth looked at me as if I was perfect. “Come on.”

The hot tub sat in the corner of his balcony, overlooking his backyard. His yard was beautiful, with flowers surrounding his property, a large saltwater pool he said he used year-round as we pulled up, and a basketball court in the corner. The garage he parked my car in wasn't attached to the house, but he said a three-car garage was connected. He planned to park my truck in there once I decided which of his cars I'd be driving.

Earth sat in the corner, his arms stretched out, his head back, eyes closed. I wanted to let him relax, but he wasn't having it. As soon as I stepped into the water, he reached for me and pulled me into his lap.

"If you're stiff, I shouldn't be in your lap," I said, trying to get up.

"Man, be still," he said softly. "You're cool. I like having you close."

"You'll get tired of me," I mumbled softly, and he lifted his head to look at me. The scowl on his face made me bite into my bottom lip. Before Jamel, I could never be described as a timid woman. It had taken him years of mental and then physical abuse to beat me down to the unsure person who was sitting in Earth's lap.

"Let's have this conversation right now so we ain't gotta have it again, cool?" he asked, and I nodded. "Alright. I get that nigga fucked up your head, but I'm not. I got thirty years on this earth, and the entire time I have been here, I have been a real nigga. I'd never play games with you or your mind. It's not in me to do that shit. You are too fuckin' special for that shit. But I need you never to underestimate yourself again. You're not allowed to down yourself. I don't play when it comes to my woman. I'll protect you, no matter what, even if that means I gotta protect you from yourself. You got me?"

"Yeah."

“Nah, man, I don’t think you do,” he said, kissing me. The second his lips touched mine, I melted. Earth kissed me so passionately, I had no choice but to believe his words. He wasn’t Jamel; hell, Jamel could never be compared to Earth on his best day, and I had to remember that.

“Okay,” I said once we pulled apart. My pussy was throbbing, and I could feel how hard his dick was through his shorts.

“Raise up a little,” he instructed. I lifted my body a little, and he pulled my boy shorts off and dropped them over the side of the hot tub. “You the type of woman niggas spend their childhood dreaming about, and when they become men, they search for.” He ran his hands up and down my sides. Every scar, bruise, and tender spot on my body seemed to scream for his attention, but Earth never took his eyes off mine. “Yeah, the way we met was a little crazy, but shit was meant to happen. You were supposed to be sent to me. I’ on know if it was my guardian angel or Prince sent you, but I know both of them niggas knew I needed you to give me peace.”

“How do you know it was your guardian angel and not mine?” I asked as I ran my finger along his jaw. I wanted to yell Prince was his guardian angel, or more so, mine, because he sent me to him.

“Well, whoever it was, they knew what the fuck they were doing,” he said with a laugh. “But the shit doesn’t matter now. Yours or mine or hell, even my mama’s, I’m gonna protect you from here on out.”

Earth had always controlled our kisses in the past, but this time, I wanted to lead. I pushed my tongue into his mouth, and surprisingly, Earth let me take control. He pulled my body closer to him, and I straddled his lap. I wasn’t sure when his shorts had come off, but the feel of his dick pushing against my pussy had me ready to explode.

Earth broke our kiss, reached between us, and stuck his fingers into me. Even if we weren't in the water, I knew I was soaking wet. I leaned my head against his shoulder and moaned. "You're it for me, Coy. That nigga Jamel's bitch ass didn't know what to do with you, so he beat you to keep you from growing. That's some weak nigga shit. 'Cause my grown ass ain't ever going to put my hands on you to hurt you."

I bit into his shoulder as my orgasm pushed forward. "Shit, Earth," I moaned. Tears filled my eyes, and I happily let them fall. His words hit parts of my heart I knew he was aiming for. He constantly reminded me he was here to protect me.

"Let that shit out, baby." He chuckled and pushed his thumb against my clit and kissed my neck. "Your body has been starving for affection and attention. I'm just giving it what it needs. Nut, it's cool. I don't have plans to stop any time soon."

"Your family is downstairs," I weakly argued.

"Girl, Shaka has been fuckin'. How do you think she got pregnant?" He laughed. "She knew what time it was when we left the kitchen and I told her to lock up."

"Okay," I whined as my orgasm washed over me. My pussy clenched against his fingers, and my body shook. "Shit."

"That's one," he said, kissing my shoulder. "Give me three more."

"I want dick," I said as I continued to ride his hand.

"You gonna get some, I swear, baby." He kissed my shoulder again, then bit it. Goosebumps rose on my skin, and I shuddered. "But before all that, I need you to tell me you heard what I was saying to you."

"I heard you!"

“What did I say, baby?” he questioned as he leaned back. My head dropped, and I bit into my bottom lip as I rode his hand. This man was going to make me kill him with all these damn questions every time we had sex. I didn’t give a damn as to what he was talking about. “Huh, baby? What I say?”

“Jamel doesn’t mean shit.” It was the first thing I could think of.

“He doesn’t.” Earth spread his legs, which made me open my legs more. I watched as he stroked his dick with his free hand. “But it’s more important shit I told you.”

“Umm.”

“You are what niggas dream of,” he said with a laugh as he lined his dick up to my opening. “You hear me? You are that bitch, and I ain’t saying that shit to be disrespectful either.”

“Ohh shit.” I moaned as he filled me up. My pussy burned for a hot second as it got adjusted to his size.

“Fuck!” He grunted as he rested his forehead against mine. “Listen to me, Coy. You listenin’, baby?”

“Yes,” I answered, even though I wasn’t. His words were going in one ear and out another.

“You are beautiful.” He grunted as he started pumping into me. “Smart, brave, the strongest woman I’ve ever met. That nigga doesn’t matter. He isn’t on your level and couldn’t handle watching you grow. You are more than he could ever be, and his bitch ass knew that.”

I rocked my hips, catching the rhythm Earth was working. “Okay, Earth.” I nearly

cried. His words and his movements were doing too much to my system. “Okay, baby.”

“Nah, ain’t no okay,” he said, shaking his head. “Tell me what the fuck you know, Coy!” He slammed into me, making my head fall back. Earth cupped my head, bringing his mouth to my ear. “Tell me, baby.”

“I’m beautiful, smart, brave, and strong.” I moaned.

“What else?” He grunted as he pushed into me harder and harder with each stroke. “What else, Coy?” My body slammed into his, making my clit brush against his pelvic bone, which gave me added pleasure.

“He doesn’t matter. He wasn’t on my level. He couldn’t handle watching me grow.” I moaned and rested my head on his shoulder. “Shit, Earth!”

“That’s right, beautiful,” he growled into my ear. “From here on out, you ain’t alone. You got a nigga that’ll ride for you, you understand that?” I nodded in response. “Nah, baby, let me hear that sexy ass voice. Tell me you understand, and you got me.”

“I have you, Earth!” I panted. “I have you.”

“Hell yeah, baby, you got me.” He sped up his movements. “Now cum on this dick so I can feed you and show you the kind of nigga you got in your corner.”

My orgasm rushed through my body as if it was waiting on permission from him.

“Shit!” I screamed.

“That was just two.” He chuckled as he continued to pump into me. “Now, on to your

next lesson.” Earth leaned back to look at me. His low eyes searched my face before he smirked. “Repeat after me. My body is a sacred place. The only man worthy of ever touching it is the man who honors, loves, and respects it and my mind.” With our bodies still connected, Earth stood, walked us into his room, and lay down. He hovered over me, his bottom lip between his teeth, his dark eyes filled with more emotion than I knew what to do with. “And the only man that’ll ever be is Earth Marcel Carlson. Can’t no other man love me like he does.”

“You don’t love me,” I mumbled. I could feel the tears filling my eyes. “You can’t love me.”

“Bullshit, Coy.” He chuckled and shook his head. “I loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I knew it when you said my name for the first time. I knew it when I let you keep me locked up in your house for a week. I knew it when I was ready to kill that nigga when he put his hands on you. I knew it when you came back to the house and looked at me. I knew it when you looked at me with all that pain and anger and told me you were tired. I knew it when I realized you trusted me to keep you safe. I knew it when I put my dick in you the first time. I knew it when my family and friends accepted you without a second thought. Shit, Coy.” He put my legs in the bends of his arms and pumped into me. “You’re it for me, and I understand you gotta learn how to love a nigga, but I was born to love you, so that shit came naturally. You ain’t gotta be there just yet, but I know you’ll get there one day, and when you do, I’ll make you my wife. You’ll carry and birth my babies, and we’ll grow old together.” He leaned down, putting his mouth to my ear. “But until then, let me love you and help you grow. Like I told you, that nigga doesn’t matter, and I’ll never let him hurt you again. I’ll die before I let anything happen to you.” He rose and stared down at me as he pumped into me. “All I’m asking you to do is learn how to love a nigga, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

CHAPTER 20

EARTH

“Kill everybody,” Fire suggested as he bounced one of the twins in his arms. I watched my brother, trying not to laugh but loving the fact he was taking this baby shit serious as hell. From the moment I walked into his house, he’d been holding one of the boys. The other baby was strapped to his back in some kind of wrap.

“That’s the only option,” I replied, and he nodded. “I just gotta think of how to do that so it's flawless. The last thing I wanna do is get caught up afterward and leave Coy by herself.” I ran my hand over my hair and sighed. We’d set up an appointment with Corinthian to have her come through and cut my hair and line Fire up. “I love her too much for that shit.”

“You have Stockholm syndrome, nigga. I swear you do,” he said, shaking his head. “How the fuck you love this girl after two weeks? Keep in mind, the first week, you were locked in her house with a damn kiddy Tracphone that only let you call her.”

I laughed and shook my head. “You’ll see when you find a woman. It will be instant, just like it was with me and Coy.”

“Doubt it!” He laughed. “The only love I got in me is for my boys and you all. A woman ain’t it.”

“You like niggas?” I asked, knowing Fire would go the fuck off. My brother wasn’t homophobic at all, but he didn’t play around with that shit, either.

“Make me fuck you up in front of my sons.” Fire mugged me hard, and I laughed. He didn’t scare me, and he knew it.

The doorbell rang, and a few seconds later, Krude’s loud voice echoed through the house. “Twins, where the fuck are y’all at?” He stepped through the archway and stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of the babies. “Where the fuck did they come from?”

“Surprise, nigga,” Fire gloated, showing him the boys. “You an uncle!”

“Nigga, what?” Krude took the twin from Fire and held him in the air to get a look at him. “When the fuck did you get some kids? Who they mama?”

“Oh, shit. I’ono who they mama is.” Fire shrugged. He moved with ease as he bent forward slightly, reached back with one hand to hold the baby, and used the other to untie the wrap. Once the baby was loose, he brought him around to the front of him and completely unwrapped him, then threw me the wrap. “Ocean and Lake ain’t got one.”

“Ocean and Lake?” Krude repeated. He took the other baby from Fire and stared at them in amazement. “That shit dope.” He looked up at Fire and nodded before returning to the boys. “Alright, y’all. I’m y’all Uncle Krude. I’m cool, but understand I won’t be the one y’all drink and smoke with. But I am the one y’all will play the game with, eat with, and kick it with. Y’all got a cousin named Judah, but that silver tooth little nigga bad as fuck.”

“Stop talkin’ about my baby, Krude,” Corinthian said, entering the kitchen. She looked at her cousin and then at the babies before looking at me, confused. “What did I miss?”

“Not mine,” I replied with a laugh.

“Yours?” she questioned Fire, who nodded and smiled. “I don’t even want to know.” She set her black travel bag on the counter before approaching the babies. “Ohh, aren’t y’all cute!”

“Aht the fuck aht!” Krude said, moving away from her. “Don’t get no damn ideas. You got a badass kid right now; you don’t need no damn more.”

“I don’t want any more!” Corinthian laughed and walked away from her cousin. “I can admire them, though.”

“That’s all the fuck you doin’ too,” Krude replied.

“Where the fuck you goin’, nigga?” Fire asked as Krude walked out of the kitchen with the twins.

“In the living room. She is about to cut y’all hair and shit. You don’t want them around all that flying hair,” Krude replied, and I hated to admit it, but what he said was smart. “Now mind yo’ fuckin’ business while I get off my feet and hang out with my lil homies.”

“I can’t stand his black ass,” Fire said once Krude was gone. Corinthian laughed and started setting up to cut my hair then line Fire up. “Alright, so how are you going to handle this Jamel shit? We already hit one of his trap houses. What’s next?”

“I wanna walk into his house and blast him,” I said, laughing.

“That would be quick and easy,” Fire replied with a shrug. “But we don’t do quick or easy.”

“Not at all,” I agreed. I sat still as Corinthian worked on my hair. She moved quickly and silently. She’d look at her work occasionally before stepping back up and cutting

again. For twenty minutes, I sat in silence and let her work while I thought of how I would embarrass Jamel again.

“Done,” Corinthian said as she cut off her clippers.

I got up, grabbed the small handheld mirror, and checked her work. Like I knew it would be, my line was straight, and taper was perfect. She even lined up my goatee just like I liked. Fire and I switched places, and she quickly lined him up. After she was finished, I swept the floor, and Fire wiped off the counter while Corinthian packed up her equipment.

“That nigga good with kids, I can’t even front,” Fire said once Krude and Corinthian were gone. “He fed, changed them, and put them down without a struggle.”

“I don’t question that nigga.” I laughed, and Fire nodded. We sat down in the living room and relaxed. Fire grabbed his weed from the table and started breaking it down so he could roll a blunt. “But I think I figured out what to do next.”

“What’s that?”

“We are throwing a block party,” I answered, and Fire looked up at me in confusion. “In his neighborhood. Right in front of his house. I want to shut down his entire block. A few food trucks, a DJ, and some mini horses and shit for the kids.”

“I like it.” Fire laughed. “I need a sitter, though.”

“Coy can watch them for you.” I shrugged, then pulled my phone from my pocket to text her.

“She not gonna be at the block party?” Fire questioned.

“Nope,” I denied, shaking my head. “I refuse to put her in harm's way. If that nigga gets a hair up his ass and wants to jump stupid, she not going to get caught up in the crossfire.”

Me: Baby.

Coy: Yes?

Me: Can you watch the twins for Fire in a few days?

Coy: Does he mind if Lynx is with me?

I looked up at my brother. “She asked if you cared if her best friend was with her,” I asked him.

“You met her before?” he asked, and I shook my head. “Tell her we gotta meet first.”

Me: He wants to meet her first.

Coy: Okay, tell him we usually do brunch on Saturdays, so he is welcome to join us.

Me: Just him?

Coy: I'd already planned for you to be there.

Me: Bet. See you when I get home.

Coy: Okay.

Me: Love you.

“Brunch on Saturday,” I said, putting my phone away. The phone vibrated in my pocket a few seconds later, but I didn’t check the notification. “You can meet her then.”

“Cool,” Fire agreed. “But if I’ on like her, she ain’t gonna be around my babies.”

“Cool with me.” I laughed. Fire handed me a blunt but smacked my hand when I lit it. “The fuck, nigga?”

“Take that shit outside. Ain’t no smoking in my house. I’m a father, nigga.”

“This is okay?” McCoy asked me, looking down at her outfit for what felt like the hundredth time. The matte green wrap dress with a high split hugged all her curves and had me adjusting my dick every few seconds as I drove.

“Baby, that dress is dope as fuck. You look good.” I took her left hand in my right and interlaced our fingers. “Why are you doubting shit?”

“I don’t know,” she replied lowly. I brought her hand to my lips and kissed it.

“Well, you look good. Stop trippin’.” I laughed. When we arrived at our destination, I parked, shut the truck off, and turned in my seat to look at McCoy. Her makeup was flawless and natural, and her hair was pulled into a high bun. She wore diamond studs, her M necklace, and two small diamond-encrusted rings on each thumb. “Give me a kiss, Coy.”

“I have on lip gloss,” she said, laughing. Her deep dimples pushed into her cheek, and I chuckled.

“I don’t care, baby. I just wanna feel your lips, is all.” I watched her as she leaned against the armrest and puckered her lips, but I didn’t move. “You gonna give me a

little innocent kiss, or you gonna get nasty?”

“Which one do you want?” she asked as I moved close to her.

“Nasty, baby,” I replied. My lips brushed against hers. “Always nasty.”

McCoy grabbed the collar of my shirt, pulled me to her, and closed the little bit of distance we had between us. I pushed my tongue into her mouth and chased hers. There was no doubt we swapped spit, and I loved that shit. Our teeth clashed with each other’s, and she moaned lowly. With each passing day, McCoy was unknowingly coming out of her shell. I knew I was right when I first saw her and thought she was a boss. She just didn’t have the right nigga beside her to pull shit out. My dick was so damn hard by the time she pulled back, I thought it was going to break through my zipper.

“That nasty enough?” she asked, wiping lip gloss from my mouth.

I took her hand from my mouth and sat it against my dick. “What do you think?” I questioned. Her lips spread into a smile, and her eyes got low. She was horny as fuck right now, just like I was, but I knew we didn’t have much time to waste. When she started stroking my dick through my pants, I almost started the truck back up and headed back home. Instead, I moved her hand and kissed her palm. “But that shit gotta wait. We got a few reservations.”

“A few?” she asked with a laugh, and I nodded.

“Fuck yeah. Now, let’s go.” I exited the truck, ensuring I had my keys, phone, and gun before closing the door. I walked around the car, opened the door for McCoy, and helped her out. We walked hand in hand into the building. There was no reason to check in because I was the only person on the books tonight.

I nodded at the woman at the front desk and walked to the back, where the helicopter was waiting.

“Earth, what is this?” McCoy asked as we got closer to the helicopter.

“We seein’ the city from a different view tonight,” I answered with a shrug. It took me a minute to determine what kind of date to take McCoy on. I wanted her to know that even though she was dealing with me, and I had my hand in some street stuff still, I wasn’t always a hood nigga. I owned businesses, legitimate businesses, and paid my taxes. She was a lawyer. We would be looked at like a fucking power couple and nothing else. “You scared of heights?”

“No,” she denied as I helped her into the helicopter. She constantly looked around, even though we hadn’t even taken off yet.

“Well, let’s enjoy this shit then,” I replied after I was situated.

The pilot gave us headphones, reviewed instructions, did a last-minute flight check, and then we were off. The entire time we were in the air, McCoy held onto my hand and stared out the window. She’d point out different places she knew about, and I showed the shit she’d missed.

An hour and a half after we took off in the helicopter, we landed on the roof of a building, and we got out. McCoy looked around, confused, and I laughed.

“Chill out, we’re where we’re supposed to be,” I said, then took her hand. We walked to the open elevator and descended to the first floor.

The doors to the elevator opened, and McCoy gasped in surprise at the sight before her. I had to give it to West Donovan. He knew what he was doing when it came to owning and operating a botanical room. The twenty thousand square foot building

was a sight to see. The part of the building could be rented out was some shit you would see in a movie. It reminded me of a bird dome with glass walls and ceilings. A waterfall sat in the middle of the room, and water flowed freely under the glass flooring. Fish, turtles, and other aquatic life swam under our feet. The walls were covered with flowers and trees in the room's corners. Our table sat on a platform near the waterfall, but it wasn't close enough that we would have to worry about water splashing on us. I was initially worried the room would smell, but West assured me there was no fishy smell, and he was right. The air was clean and fresh, and the temperature was perfect.

"How did you find out about this place?" McCoy asked after we were seated and our waitress had taken our order.

"A homeboy of mine owns it," I answered. "I told him I wanted to do something special, and without hesitation, he offered this."

"This is beautiful," McCoy said, smiling. The way she looked at me had me ready to do shit like this for the rest of our lives. "I didn't even know we had a place like this."

"It's not open to the public yet," I replied, picking up my water and drinking some. "He said it opens at the top of the year."

"I'll have to remember that," she said, looking around.

"Whenever you want to return, just say the word, and it'll happen." I put my drink back on the table and relaxed in my seat. I'd hit up West tomorrow and let him know I'd need a standing appointment to bring her back.

"The flowers are amazing." She ran her fingers over the orange lilies on the table. "Their colors are so vibrant."

“Krude’s cousin Psalms is a botanist. She hooks him up,” I mentioned, and she nodded. “They are pretty.”

I picked up my phone off the table and texted Psalms, letting her know I’d be around to see her tomorrow. Usually, Psalms supplied my weed, but I had no problem ordering flowers from her. She replied, letting me know she’d been in the office all day and to come by whenever.

“Who is the chef?” McCoy questioned. “I’m not going to lie; I’m going to compare everything to Shaka.”

“West’s sister, South, is the chef,” I answered with a laugh. “She and Shaka are cool. They trained together, so you don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Okay.” McCoy nodded.

The waitress came out with our food, and for the rest of the night, I listened to McCoy talk and enjoyed her food. I didn’t care what she talked about as long as she kept a smile on her face and looked at me like I was the best nigga in the world.

CHAPTER 21

MCCOY

“No, friend.” I laughed as I pushed my shopping cart. Lynx rolled her eyes as she threw paper towels in the shopping cart. “Seriously!”

“Girl, whatever.” Lynx waved me off, not caring about what I was talking about. “You keep a smile on your face now, and I haven’t heard from you except two times in the last week.”

We moved through the aisles with ease. We always moved in sync when shopping, no matter what we were looking for. Lynx was the person who taught me to shop. In the past, I didn’t spend money unless I had to. Lynx taught me spoiling myself was necessary.

“I’ve responded to every text you’ve sent me!” I laughed. It was my turn to cook for Earth, and I was kind of nervous. I’d cooked for him before, but now I wanted to do something special for him.

“A text,” Lynx said over her shoulder as she looked through the different types of steaks laid out. “Each time I call you, you send me to voicemail and text me.” She held up two packs of steak, and I pointed to the one in her right hand.

“I’ve been busy.” I laughed.

“With whom?” She looked at me with suspicion. “Don’t tell me Jamel’s bitch ass is

trying to be good now.”

“I haven’t seen or spoken to Jamel in almost a week,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Saying out loud how long it had been since I’d seen or spoken to Jamel made me pause. A week. Seven days didn’t seem like a long time. But it was for me. My life had changed drastically in those seven days. Honestly, my life changed when I laid eyes on Earth.

“Where the hell have you been then?” Lynx questioned. Her dark eyes narrowed in suspicion before a smile tugged at her lips. “The hell is going on with you, McCoy?”

“I met someone,” I answered shyly. Lynx’s left brow lifted as she waited for me to continue. “And he’s different.” Lynx’s opinion on Earth mattered to me. She was the only person I had in my life for so long who mattered. If she didn’t like Earth, I’d be heartbroken.

“How different?”

“Just different,” I said, trying not to laugh. “I want you to meet him.”

“Oh, I plan to.” Lynx pulled me into a hug and breathed a sigh of relief. She didn’t fully let me go as she leaned back and looked me in the eyes. “I’ve worried about you since you got with Jamel. What you were being put through was never a secret, but I knew you wouldn’t leave him until you were ready, so I only pushed so much.”

“I know,” I replied softly.

“No, you don’t, McCoy, because you weren’t watching your best friend slowly die like I was. I gave you shit earlier about being MIA because the look on your face when I saw you let me know you were at peace. Whoever this guy is, he’s good for

you. So, whenever you're ready to introduce us, I'll gladly meet him and thank him for bringing you back to me."

"Bringing her back?" a voice said from behind me. I looked over my shoulder to see Jamel standing beside a woman who looked annoyed. She mugged both Lynx and me before crossing her arms over her chest and sucking her teeth. Jamel glanced at her with a scowl on his face. "Take your ass on while I handle business with my bitch." The woman mugged me but did what he said. He turned back to me after she was gone. "Now, where the fuck have you been?"

"Nigga, that ain't your business," Lynx said before I could respond. She let go of me and stepped around me to block Jamel.

"Ay, shorty, don't make me beat your ass," Jamel replied with a laugh. When he realized she wouldn't move or back down, he shrugged. "I have been wanting to go upside your fuckin' head for years anyway." He took a step toward us.

"I wish the fuck you would," Lynx said.

"McCoy, is that you?" Shaka's loud voice rang through the aisle. I looked up to see her shuffling toward us with two other women, one of them pregnant. I couldn't and wouldn't be responsible for them getting hurt because of me. "That is you!" She hugged me and whispered in my ear, "Don't trip. We got you."

"Hey, friend," I said when she pulled back. I waved at the other women with her before turning to Lynx, who was still staring Jamel down. I tugged at her arm. "Let's go, the girls are here." When Lynx didn't move, I tugged at her arm slightly more. "Come on, Lynx. They found what they needed." Lynx finally broke eye contact with Jamel and nodded.

"Let's go," she said as she grabbed the basket handle.

“Nah, she ain’t going nowhere!” Jamel said, reaching for my arm.

“Oh no, that’s not about to happen,” Shaka said, pulling me to her before Lynx could.

“I swear on everything, Exodus is giving me my damn gun back tonight!” a voice said from behind us. I glanced back to see the third woman throwing her hands in the air. “Matter of fact, let me call his ass right now because I refuse to be out here without a damn gun, looking like Mahogany’s ass.”

“Really, Paxton?” the other pregnant woman with red hair said, then rolled her eyes.

“Yes!” Paxton replied and pulled her phone from her purse. She shook her head as she dialed a number and put the phone to her ear. “Exodus! Give me my damn gun back! We are in the store and had to pull our shit, and guess whose hands are empty? Mine!”

“We have about five minutes before he shows up,” Mahogany said, shaking her head. When the phone in her hand started ringing, she sighed. “And we have less than two before he shows up.”

“I don’t give a fuck about none of that,” Jamel said. “McCoy, bring yo’ fuckin’ ass!”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “You need to leave, Jamel.”

“Leave!” He puffed his chest out and mugged me. “The fuck you say to me? Bitch, if you don’t bring your ass before I drag you out of this store.” He reached for me again but was snatched from behind and thrown against one of the shelves. Food fell on top of him, and Jamel groaned in pain.

“Watch out, lil bit,” a man said, stepping around me. I moved out of his way and watched as he walked over to Jamel and grabbed him by his collar. “My nigga, have

you lost your fuckin' mind? What the fuck would possess you to step to a group of women like that?"

"That's my bitch," Jamel groaned as he pointed to me.

"Yo' bitch?" He looked over at me with wild eyes before sucking his teeth and shaking his head. "You with this nigga?"

"No," I answered.

"I didn't think so." He stood up, adjusting his black button-down shirt and slacks before returning to Jamel. "McCoy Toliver is taken care of and protected, and my nigga, I know for a fact she ain't under your protection." He kicked Jamel in the face, knocking him out, and turning to me. "Earth said send him your shopping list, and everything will be delivered to the house by the time you arrive."

"Memphis, how is Nyla and the baby?" Shaka asked as if Jamel wasn't lying next to him, bleeding from his mouth and nose. "You settled into fatherhood, okay?"

"They good as fuck," Memphis replied with a big smile on his face. "Coen looks exactly like her ass, though, so I know I'm going to end up killin' some hard-headed ass lil boy."

"I know you have pictures," Shaka said, laughing. "We FaceTime all the time. I love looking at that little girl, so show me some." Memphis pulled his phone from his pocket and swiped the screen. In that instant, he went from looking like a killer to being a proud father. The first picture he showed us was a woman holding a little girl who looked exactly like her. They shared the same pecan-colored skin, small button noses, chubby cheeks, and big brown eyes. The baby was more than likely three or four months old, but I could tell she would break some hearts. "Oh man, Coen is looking more like Nyla every day."

“Tell me about it.” Memphis chuckled. Jamel stirred beside him, and Memphis kicked him in the face again. “I told her the next one gonna look like me.”

“She’s pregnant again?” Shaka asked, surprised.

“We found out this morning,” Memphis replied, shrugging his massive shoulders. His phone rang, and he chuckled. “That’s probably her now telling me to come get Coen. Shorty isn’t fuckin’ with her mama right now. She a daddy’s girl, and I love that shit.”

“Nyla gonna kick your ass.” Shaka laughed.

“Probably, but she loves a nigga, so she’ll be cool.” Memphis looked around the group and shook his head. “Y’all get the fuck outta here, though. Knowing y’all niggas, they probably pullin’ up now, and I don’t need them fuckin’ up my store.”

“True.” Shaka laughed.

Shaka looped her arms through mine and Lynx and pulled us away.

“Ay, McCoy?” Memphis called out. We stopped walking, and I looked over my shoulder to look at him. “Welcome to the family.”

“Thank you,” I replied softly. We left the store and walked toward the truck Earth had me driving. “He’s not upset, is he?”

“Who?” Shaka questioned as she looked around. Her eyes stopped on Memphis, and she laughed. “Memphis?” I nodded, and she waved me off. “Hell no! He loves shit like that. The only reason he didn’t kill that nigga is because Earth has plans for him.”

The other three women walked behind us, talking. Lynx and Mahogany talked to

each other, and Paxton continued to fuss on the phone.

“I owe y'all an apology,” I said once we were outside.

“For what?” Shaka questioned. “We are family. We’re supposed to look out for each other.”

“No.” I shook my head. “You all don’t need to be dragged into anything. I already hate the fact that I dragged Earth into this. You two are pregnant, and I would never be able to live with myself if something happened to any of you because of me.”

“We are fine,” Mahogany said. She stuck her hand out for me to shake. “I’m Mahogany. The one over there fussing is Paxton.” Paxton threw me a friendly wave as she continued to talk on the phone. “And you owe us nothing. We look out for each other.”

“And I would’ve shot his ass if Exodus would stop taking my gun out of my purse!” Paxton yelled with the phone still stuck to the side of her face. “Plus, we like Earth, so if he’s your man, then you’re family, like Memphis said.”

Earth pulled up in an all-white Benz as if he knew he was being talked about. He didn’t even shut it off before getting out and walking toward me with a scowl. “That nigga touched you?”

“No,” I denied, shaking my head. “He tried, but Lynx grabbed me, and Memphis showed up.”

“I called that nigga when Shaka texted me saying she saw you in there,” he retorted, and I nodded. As if he didn’t believe me, Earth looked me over, even turning me around a few times to ensure I was okay. “From here on out, you don’t move without me.”

“I have to leave your sight sometimes,” I said with a laugh, and Earth grunted. I grabbed his chin and made him look at me. “Earth, you can’t always protect me.”

“Aww, that’s so cute,” Shaka said beside us. I looked over at her to see her smiling and shaking her head. “I just love this for y’all. You kidnapped my cousin and he’s in love with you. You’ll probably have a baby soon, and our kids can grow up together like we did, Earth!” She looked over at Paxton. “Can you and Exodus get pregnant, so it’ll be a group thing?”

“I’ll have my baby right after Krude,” she replied, rolling her eyes.

“Expect his baby shower invite soon,” Shaka retorted with a smirk, and Paxton rolled her eyes.

CHAPTER 22

EARTH

As soon as Shaka texted, saying some nigga was following McCoy around the store, I knew it was going to be some shit. I planned to talk to her about having security with her while she was at work, but now, that was happening no matter what.

I wasn't crazy enough to think Jamel wouldn't eventually pop back up. He was used to dealing with McCoy when he wanted to, and he always expected her to be at his disposal. His being MIA for a few days didn't mean shit.

The drive to the store was quick, but I still smashed on the gas to get there. Memphis being there was a blessing, but I feared I wouldn't get there in time. The entire drive, I was on the phone with Fire, planning how I was going to kill that nigga.

"Ay," I said, pulling McCoy's attention to me.

"Yes?" McCoy looked up at me as if I was the best thing moving.

"You like gold?" I questioned her as I thought about her wedding ring design. The fact the entire drive here, I was panicking and feared I wouldn't get to her in time was proof enough I loved this girl. In the past, I didn't care about a female or her safety unless she was related to me. I knew I was moving fast, but I didn't care. This was my fucking wife, and I was going to make sure the world knew it too.

"No." She shook her head. "It goes best with my favorite color, but there's something

about it I can't stand.”

“Cool.” I nodded. The door to the grocery store opened, and Memphis stepped out. He pulled the blunt from his mouth and gave me a slow nod before heading to his truck. He knew to let Jamel stay alive. Killing him sounded great and even like the right thing to do, but I had plans for him later. I threw Memphis a nod and turned my attention back to McCoy. “Let’s get out of here. I got a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” Her left brow lifted, and I chuckled. “What do you have in mind?”

“You’ll see.” I stepped back, hating our bodies weren’t touching, and took her hand. “Let’s go.”

“Your car,” she said, not moving. I looked over at the truck and sucked my teeth, not giving a fuck about it. “I drove here with Lynx, remember?”

“Where she at?” I looked around the small group of women and knew who she was as soon as my eyes landed on her. Tall, probably about 5’10, curvy, and thick in all the right places. She had an oval face, full lips, a small, flared nose, dark, slanted eyes I could tell didn’t miss a damn thing, and her hair was loc’d. What stood out the most was her skin. She was the color of sepia but had blotches of lighter skin. She was probably one of the baddest women I’d ever seen, even with vitiligo. “Let Lynx drive it to her spot, and I’ll come pick it up.”

“That okay with you?” McCoy asked Lynx.

“Yeah, that’s fine, but you’ll have to come to the daycare and get it since I’m going back there,” Lynx answered.

“I’ll be there later to get it,” I said, nodding. “I appreciate it for real.”

“No problem,” Lynx said, then turned to McCoy. “Call me later?”

“Okay,” McCoy replied. She let my hand go and went to hug her friend. I could tell they were talking from how McCoy’s head was moving. I let them, enjoying the fact she was happy and carefree even after having to deal with bitch ass nigga Jamel in the store.

“Ay,” I called out to Shaka, who was talking to Paxton and Mahogany. Shaka looked up at me with a smile on her face. “Six bands.”

“Put two in my account,” she replied. “Two in Mahogany’s and two in Paxton’s.”

“Bitch, I’m not having a baby!” Paxton yelled, and I laughed.

“I got you!” I said, not caring what Paxton was talking about. I knew Exodus was ready for a baby, and as much as she fussed, she probably was, too.

McCoy and Lynx finally let each other go. I opened the passenger door for McCoy, and she got in the car. I closed the door, walked over to Lynx, and knocked on the driver's window.

“Yes?” she said after rolling the window down.

“My name is Earth Carlson. I’m in love with your best friend and plan to marry her as soon as she hints she loves me, too,” I said. There was no reason to beat around and bullshit with this woman. She was McCoy's best friend; she knew her better than anyone else. I knew I had to step to her correct to show her I was the one for her friend.

“Oh really?” Lynx replied, and I nodded. “Well then, Earth Carlson, I only ask you not to hurt her. She’s been through enough and deserves happiness.”

“And that’s what I plan to make sure she gets every day I’m on this earth,” I said, and this time, Lynx nodded. I looked over my shoulder to see her watching us. I winked, then turned back to Lynx. “Be careful out there. Call McCoy when you get back to your daycare.”

“Okay,” she agreed.

I didn’t move until all the women pulled off from the parking lot. Memphis’ boys pulled up. I gave them a nod, got in the car with McCoy, and pulled off.

CHAPTER 23

MCCOY

“Baby, I’ll be ready in about an hour.” I finished closing out the files I’d been looking through and turned to the phone. Earth stared at the phone with a mug on his face before cutting his eyes back to the road. “What’s with the attitude?”

“An hour is a long ass time, Coy,” he fussed, and I had to hold back my laugh. Earth was spoiled, probably worse than I initially thought. He didn’t like me being out of sight for long periods, and if I were, he would call to check up on me. “Why can’t you be done now?”

“Because I’m working.” I laughed. “You know, the same thing you’re doing right now? Or have you forgotten?”

“Man, I’ll drop all this shit and come straight to you. Fuck all that,” he replied with a grunt. “All you gotta do is say the word, and it’ll happen.”

“What’s the word, Earth?” I questioned as I got up from my desk. I grabbed the phone and headed out of my office. None of my employees were here, and the office was quiet. I enjoyed the stillness of the office because it allowed me to get work done without being interrupted.

“Earth, take me home,” he answered. “Shit, come get some pussy will get me there faster though.”

I heard his smirk through the phone, and I rolled my eyes.

“Shut up.” I laughed as I pushed the door to the breakroom open.

I gave a slight wave to two DBBs sitting there, waiting for me to tell them I was ready to go. Since the incident at the store the other day, Earth insisted I always have someone with me. He gave me two options: he could be there or hire security. I agreed to the security.

“I’m serious as fuck.” He laughed. “Say that shit and see how fast my ass gets to you.”

“I’ll be home in an hour. Earth, there’s no reason to rush it,” I replied, leaving the breakroom.

“But them folks gonna be at the house,” he fake whined, making me laugh harder.

“Them folks, as you affectionately called them, are your family.” I sat at my desk and positioned my phone to lean against my computer screen. Earth grunted in response, and I smirked. “And you invited them over.”

“Nah, they invited themselves,” he replied, and I sat back in my seat. “Shaka sent a text to all her bald-headed friends, and the next thing I knew, she called me, saying they were coming over.”

“They aren’t bald-headed.” I laughed.

“How the hell you know?” He smirked. “Have you seen them before?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “But the two I met weren’t.”

“Paxton loves saying she got Indian in her family; that’s why her hair is long. Mahogany owns a million-dollar company, and her nigga a rapper so she gonna have a thirty-two-inch bust down if nobody is.”

“Whatever, Earth,” I said, getting myself together. Whenever we talked, I ended up laughing at something he said. How I got any work done was beyond me, but I felt freer than ever. The security alert flashed on my computer screen, and I sat up.

“The fuck you looking like that for?” Earth asked. My fingers flew over my keyboard as I tried to figure out what caused my security system to alert me.

“My alarm system sent me a message?—”

“Ay, where the fuck is Carl and Mel?” Earth interrupted me. I shrugged my shoulders and continued to look through the different alerts. I hated this system because it wasn’t as advanced as I needed. Instead of telling me exactly where the problem was, I had to go through each camera POV to find the issue.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” Earth roared. “I pay them niggas to be there because I can’t be!”

“They are in the breakroom,” I said as I switched the camera view to outside my office. Nothing seemed out of place, so I moved on to the condo.

“The breakroom?” he yelled. “If you aren’t in there, they don’t need to be.”

“I asked them to step out while I was on the phone with a client,” I said. I switched to the camera in the bedroom in the condo and saw Jamel’s cousin sitting in the bed with a woman standing in front of him. “This nigga.”

“What?” Earth growled. “He there?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “His cousin Leon is at the condo.”

“Doing what?”

“Entertaining some woman.” I picked up the phone and flipped the camera so he could see.

“That nigga ever did that while you were there?” Earth questioned.

I switched the camera back to face me and sighed. “No, but he doesn’t know I have cameras in there, but I know he’s done it before.”

“In your bedroom?” he asked with a twisted expression. “That nigga has had bitches in your bed?”

“I haven’t slept there in months,” I replied. “Not since Jamel poured scalding hot water on me.”

“That’s how you got them burns on you?” Earth questioned, and I nodded. “What else that nigga do?”

“A lot,” I answered, running my hands over my face. “More than I ever want to admit.”

“Alright,” Earth said, nodding. His eyes were on the road, but I saw the vein in the middle of his head start to throb. “I ain’t gonna ask you to go into details ’cause I can tell you ain’t ready to go there yet, but understand, when you’re ready, I’ll be here to listen.”

My phone buzzed, indicating I had a text.

Shaka: Leave your office now! It's time to have some fun!

"Your cousin is texting me," I said, trying to change the subject. "She's ready to have some fun." I switched out the text thread to see Earth still driving. His jaw was clenched, and he kept rubbing his hands over his goatee. "Baby?"

"Yeah?" he mumbled without looking at me.

"I'm okay," I said, trying to reassure Earth. Whenever I needed him, whether or not I felt like I needed it, he reminded me he had my back, and I was safe. Now, it was my turn to tell him. "You hear me, Earth?"

"Yeah."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Tell me what you heard me say, Earth."

"You safe," he said.

"And why am I safe, Earth?" I questioned. "Huh?"

"Because you got me."

"Right." I nodded. "I have you. So stop stressing over something you can't change. It's in the past. He can't hurt me." I tapped the screen as if it was him. "Look at me, Earth."

"What's up, baby?" he said, looking at the phone.

"Tell me again."

Even though he didn't want to, I could tell he was fighting a smile. Earth realized I

was doing to him what he always did to me. I was reassuring him I was good. I lifted my brow and waited.

He let out a small laugh and finally smiled. “You safe.”

“And why is that?” I questioned.

“Because you got me,” he answered, and I nodded. “Fall in love with a nigga already, Coy, so I can marry your ass.”

“I’m getting there, Earth,” I said, and he nodded. “And you’ll be the first person to know when I do.”

“Cool.” He nodded. “When you leave the office, go straight home. No bullshitting around. Shaka knows the code to the security system, so you ain’t gotta let her in.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding.

“I love you, Coy,” he said, then hung up.

CHAPTER 24

EARTH

“You can find this nigga?” I asked Nine, who nodded. “How long will it take?”

“Give me a few,” he said, not looking up from his computer. I can’t even lie; his fingers flew across the keyboard as he typed and all I could do was watch his ass. I was good at computers but not like this nigga. He made his living hacking shit and creating security systems. “I don’t know what weak ass security system she got, but this shit needs to be ripped from her fuckin’ walls.”

“That’ll be what you can do next.” I walked away from Nine and leaned against the wall. I was already on my way over there to watch the game and give the girls time to kick it, but when McCoy told me about Jamel’s bitch ass cousin, I was ready to snatch that nigga up.

I already had Jamel sitting in a room at Krude’s family’s warehouse. He’d been there since he ran up on McCoy at the grocery store.

“I could’ve told you her system wasn’t the best when we were at her house,” he said, and I grunted.

“Put her on your books,” I replied and Nine nodded. I knew my nigga would have McCoy’s office, house, and condo upgraded to his best system by tomorrow.

Nine’s office was nice as fuck. His desk was set in the middle of the room with big

ass bay windows behind him, showing his backyard that looked like it was nothing but woods, and directly in front of him was a wall full of screens. Some showed his property while others had running codes. There was one that kept drawing my attention; it was blacked out, but every so often, a red dot would flash. When one screen stopped showing rolling codes, he let out a low whistle, then shook his head. “This nigga is bold.”

“What you mean?” I asked, pushing off the wall.

“While I was looking for his cousin, I started running background on Jamel,” Nine answered. He nodded to one of the screens, then started clicking on his keyboard. “From the outside looking in, Jamel appears to be a decent businessman. He owns two laundry mats and donates to a few local youth teams.”

“I know all that shit.”

“You know he’s married?” Nine asked and I reared back, surprised as hell. I knew Jamel wasn’t shit, but to have a wife and a fiancée shocked the shit out of me. “Her name is Sienna Douglas, thirty-four, lives down south. No family, college educated but doesn’t appear to have a job, or at least one she pays taxes on.”

“This nigga is wild.” I laughed and ran my hand over my face. “But what else can you find out?”

“Shit, what you wanna know?” He chuckled, then looked at his watch. “I got about an hour before I go show my ass real quick.”

“Where the fuck you goin’?” I asked. Knowing this nigga, he was probably about to go talk the panties off some nigga’s baby mama before he killed him.

“My business,” he vaguely answered. “Just know I’ma enjoy the fuck outta doin’ it,

though.”

“If you like it, I love it.” I shrugged. “But until then, find me everything you can on this Sienna Douglas. I want all her information.” Nine nodded, then went back to beating the hell out of his keyboard. “I’ll catch you later.”

“It gets worse, Earth,” Nine called out, making me stop.

“What do you mean?”

“You know that nigga has a few life insurance policies on McCoy?” he questioned, and my face twisted in confusion. “Not only life insurance on her, but property insurance on her condo and office too.”

“How much?”

“Roughly around six million,” he answered.

“Too fuckin’ much.” I wiped my hand over my face. “How long has he had it?”

To the outside looking in, I knew it looked like he was just making sure she was all set, but I knew niggas like Jamel well. Him having insurance on her and her businesses for that much meant he had plans to make her disappear.

“Everything is new,” Nine answered. “Less than six weeks old.” He looked at me and shook his head. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but this nigga more than likely planned to kill her and collect on the money.”

“I know.” I chuckled as I grabbed my bag off the floor. “You know what? Fuck getting the information on the wife. Can you have her here by the end of the week?”

“Yeah, that can happen.”

“Have her here by Friday. Lock her in a room at Citrine’s hotel.”

“Alright.” Nine nodded.

I left Nine’s house and made my way to the warehouse where I had Jamel. On the drive over, I blasted Focus’s newest release and smoked a blunt. I had a million and one things running through my mind but the biggest one was making McCoy happy. She’d been handed a raw deal even before she linked up with Jamel. She deserved some happiness, and I was the nigga to give it to her.

When I got to the warehouse, I parked in the back and headed inside.

“What’s up, Cross?” I said, nodding at the quietest member of the DeCorte family. She looked up from her computer with her normal blank expression on her face.

“What’s up, Earth?” she replied, then went back to looking at something on her laptop. “What are you doing here?”

“Came to check on my guest,” I answered, then sat in the chair across from her. “What you been up to?”

“Working,” she replied, and I nodded. Cross usually never stayed around for long periods of time, so I was kind of surprised to see her here. This had to be the longest I’d ever known her to be around and that wasn’t saying much since it’d been less than a month since she showed her face the first time. “I visited your guest earlier today.” She looked up at me and smirked. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t.” I chuckled. “You probably saved that nigga’s life.” I sat back in my seat and shrugged.

“How so?” Cross tapped her short nails against the hardwood table. The rhythmic sound was soft but relaxing. My eyes traced over the puzzle piece tattoo on her hand that led up her forearm and stopped at her elbow. It was different. Dope as fuck but still different. What caught my eye the most was the small nine on the top of her ring finger. I looked up at her and lifted my brow. “Don’t ask questions you aren’t ready to be answered.”

“What’s your story, Cross?” I asked, slightly intrigued. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the table and let out a small laugh. “Huh? Where have you been? What have you been doing?” I laughed at the sly grin that spread across her face as I asked her questions. I knew she had stories, probably some so damn gruesome it would turn my stomach, but I still wanted to know.

Cross’s computer started to beep, making her look away from me to it. Her face twisted, and for a brief second, I swear a look of fear flashed across her face before it went blank. She bit into her lip as her fingers flew across the keyboard. Every so often, her eyes would bounce from the computer to her watch, then back to her computer. “Fuck!” she yelled. She slammed down her computer screen, then pushed away from the table.

“You cool?” I asked as she snatched her jacket from the back of her chair and put it on. “You need my help with something?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. She looked at the closed computer one last time before looking at me. “I’m a killer before everything, except one thing.”

“What’s that one thing?”

Another scream sounded from one of the rooms in the warehouse. Cross looked in the direction the sound came from and smirked. Whoever was behind that scream was hurt, more than likely dying from whatever she’d done to them before I got there.

“If I told you, then it’d be you screaming like that,” she answered. “I’ll be back.”

“What about the nigga screaming in that room back there?” I asked as she walked away.

“Let’em die!” she replied, then pushed the door open. “He wasn’t useful enough to live.”

“Fuckin’ cold.” I laughed as she walked out the door.

CHAPTER 25

MCCOY

“Nooo!” I laughed as I pushed away from the table. Tears from laughing so hard fell from my eyes and I shook my head. For the last hour, we sat around, laughing, talking, and getting to know each other. Shaka, Mahogany, Paxton, and Breeze were probably the funniest women I’d ever met. “You’re telling me that man cut your door out the wall. Like, for real?”

“Yes!” Mahogany laughed. She sat back in her seat and slowly rubbed her stomach. She was almost seven months pregnant with her first child, and if the glow on her face was any indicator of how happy she was, then I knew this wouldn’t be her last. “All because he doesn’t like talking through a damn wall.”

“How wasn’t this on the news, or at least the blog sites?” I collected our plates and took them to the sink. Focus was a big deal in the rap industry and Mahogany’s fashion line was one of the biggest black-owned lines out. She catered to the community in a way no one else did and because of that, we stayed buying her clothes. I owned at least twenty of her exclusive women’s business suits.

“Because no one was going to tell on him,” Paxton said. “Even though she was mad, there was no way she was going to ever embarrass him and run to the blog. That wasn’t the first time he showed his ass about her and it won’t be the last.”

“How mad was she?” I asked, laughing. There was no doubt that at the moment, Mahogany was upset because any sane person would be, but she had forgiven him.”

“Super pissed.” Paxton laughed. “I mean, she called me going off. Seriously yelling and cussing and all I could do was laugh because low key, it was kind of romantic.”

“Romantic?” Breeze questioned with a laugh. “Please explain to me how that was romantic. I mean, I love Focus like a brother, but that shit was lonely.”

“It was a gesture of love,” Paxton retorted in a dreamy, sing-song-like voice. We all looked over at her, then busted out laughing. “Okay, okay, I’m lying. That shit was funny because it wasn’t happening to any of us.”

“Exactly!” Mahogany said after pulling herself together. “Because it wasn’t happening to you, y’all thought it was funny. But when y’all men were showing their asses, nobody thought it was funny.”

“Because they are lunatics!” Paxton replied and I shook my head. “Exodus burned down a restaurant because I was on a date.”

“He didn’t burn it down,” Shaka said, waving her off. “He just did a few spot fires is all.”

“Yeah,” Mahogany agreed. “He just did a little razzle-dazzle.”

“Razzle dazzle?!” she screeched, making me laugh harder. “That man?—”

“Loves you!” Mahogany interjected with a laugh. “He loves you, and if my memory serves me correctly, you said you would love to fall in love with a man like Exodus not even a year ago.”

“She did say that,” Shaka agreed. Paxton looked between her two friends, then flipped them off, making all of us laugh again. “Don’t be mad at us because you got what you wanted.”

The doorbell ringing caught me by surprise, and I turned and looked at the door. I wasn't expecting anyone else because Lynx couldn't make it due to work, but I had no clue who else Shaka invited.

"Oh, that must be Sasha and Corinthian!" Shaka said, standing.

"My best friend is here!" Breeze said, dancing in her seat.

"Let Krude find out you callin' the madam your best friend," Shaka replied with a laugh and walked out of the room. A few seconds later, Shaka came back with two very beautiful women following her. "McCoy, this is Sasha Jones and Corinthian DeCorte. Ladies, this is McCoy Toliver, my future cousin-in-law."

"It's nice to meet you," I said, shaking both of their hands.

"You too," Corinthian said. She handed me a bottle of wine, then went to the table to hug all the other women. "I brought a little something. I know they can't drink but that doesn't stop the rest of us from enjoying ourselves."

"You'll have to excuse my gift. I was out with Krude before coming here, and well, if you know Krude, then you know." Sasha handed me a large gift bag. I looked down at it, surprised to see edibles, dipped fruit, bags of weed, and fruit juice inside. I set the bag on the counter and turned back to Sasha. I was trying to hold in my laugh but the embarrassed look on her face was making it hard. "I'll have something better for you tomorrow. I promise."

"Nooo." I laughed, shaking my head. "I swear this will be used."

"Oh shit, you get down, McCoy?" Corinthian asked, surprised. "If I would've known, I would've brought you something from Psalms' store!"

“I don’t, but Earth does,” I answered with a shrug. “So, like I said, none of that will go to waste.”

“That’s true,” Shaka agreed. “And knowing Krude, he probably had Psalms send all his favorite stuff.”

“He did.” Sasha laughed as she took a seat next to Breeze. They playfully bumped shoulders, then giggled before turning back to me. “I told Krude it wasn’t needed, but he didn’t care. We’d been running around all day, so we stopped by Psalms’s, and he ran inside before dropping me off with Corinthian. He was more focused on shopping for his baby shower than anything I had to say.”

“Oh, his girlfriend is pregnant?” I asked, surprised. Earth had mentioned the only people expecting besides Shaka were Mahogany, someone named Monica, and now Memphis’s wife, Nyla, whom I hadn’t gotten a chance to meet. Shaka said Monica wasn’t feeling well and Nyla was out of town for the rest of the week, but I’d meet them soon.

“He’s pregnant,” Sasha said with a laugh.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s a long story. Just know Krude is pregnant, he’s going to be a single father and his baby mama is a stem who he swears left him,” Sasha tried to explain. “But nobody has heard from Megan in like two weeks, besides Nyla, who is her best friend. I plan to go by there sometime this week because he is going to drive me crazy if I don’t.”

I looked at her, then turned to the rest of the ladies, who were all laughing.

“And Krude is your best friend, right?” I asked and she nodded. “But Breeze is also

your best friend?”

“Yes, and Krude is Corinthian’s cousin, and her other cousin, Exodus, is dating Paxton.”

“The one from the grocery store that was fussing about her not having her gun,” Mahogany explained, and I nodded. “She’s our best friend.” She pointed to herself and Shaka. “And her partner, Exodus, is also my best friend.”

“Wait, what?” I laughed. “You’re best friends with a couple?”

“Yeah.” Mahogany laughed. “I met Paxton first, while in college. Exodus came later through my fiancé.”

“Focus, right?”

“Yep. Tobias is best friends with Exodus and Nine, who is also my cousin.”

“Hold on.” I threw my hands in the air to stop her from talking and laughed. “Your cousin Nine is best friends with your fiancé, who is also best friends with your other best friend, who is also dating your other best friend.”

“You’re thinking too much into it.” Mahogany laughed. “We all have large families. I’m a part of the group that everyone calls the Numbers because of our birthday.” I waited for her to explain because what? “Our dates and months match. So, I’m One because my birthday is January first, then there’s Four who’s April fourth, Six who’s June sixth, Nine who is September ninth, and then Zero who was born October tenth.”

“Zero?”

“He didn’t want to be called Ten, so we call him Zero.”

“And I’m a part of the Bible Thumpers,” Corinthian interjected. “Our grandfather is a preacher and all of his kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids are named after something in the Bible.” She shrugged, then started counting on her fingers. “There’s Krude, whose real name is Genesis, Exodus, Judge, me, Mercy, Psalms, Cross, and my son, Judah.”

“Then there’s us,” Breeze said. “We don’t have a nickname, but it’s me, Earth and Fire. Shaka and her brother, Khan.”

“What about you?” I said, turning to Sasha. “I mean, I know you’re dating Corinthian’s cousin and best friends with Krude, but are there any other connections?”

“Yes.” She softly laughed. “My cousin Monica is engaged to Focus’s DJ and other best friend, Armani, who we call Baby.”

“Hell, that’s a lot to take in.” I laughed and rubbed my face. “Y’all are connected one way or another. Doesn’t it get confusing?”

“Sometimes,” Shaka answered and shrugged. “But it works for us because we know everyone here and not here has each other’s back. I can walk out the house and not have an ounce of fear because of them and my man.”

“Right,” Breeze agreed. “My brothers’ connections are deep. You never know who they may or may not know.”

“Like the guy who owns the grocery store,” I said, nodding. “He’s friends with Earth, right?”

“Yeah, Memphis. He’s married to Nyla, but he also has two sisters. One’s name is Dove and she’s married to CJ. His other sister isn’t married, but I think she’s dating. He has a brother, Dallas. He’s engaged to Galaxy. She has two sisters, Nova, who is dating Zero, Mahogany’s cousin, and Aurora. She’s dating Domo.”

“Domo and Aurora made it official?” Shaka asked, sounding surprised.

“Even if they didn’t, they did in my mind. I’ve seen them together; that cougar loves that boy.” Breeze laughed.

“She’s older than him?” I asked, even though I couldn’t point out either one of them if I saw them walking down the street.

“Yeah, by like eight or nine years.” Shaka laughed. “She’s having a birthday party soon. I know Earth is going, so you’ll meet her and the rest of the astrology sisters then.”

“Is there anybody else I need to know about?”

“Domo’s brothers, Bizzy and Bohdi.”

“And Symphony and her sisters.”

“It’s too many people,” I said, throwing my hands up again. They all started to laugh, and I shook my head. “I’m going to have to make a chart or something to know who is who and who they are dating.”

“What about you?” Mahogany asked. “Any brothers or sisters?”

“Not that I know of.” I shrugged. “I grew up in the system.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said, sounding genuine.

“Don’t be,” I said, waving her off. “I can’t change the past and I’m good with it at this point. I do have a best friend that’s like a sister to me, though. We met in college and have been connected at the hip since.”

“Why isn’t she here?” Shaka asked.

“Work. She owns a daycare and has a few teachers out due to being sick, so she’s been covering for them. They have an overnight program, too, for a few parents, so she’s there tonight.”

“What’s her daycare called?” Corinthian asked. “Judah goes to Ms. L’s Center, but I know she’s full and Fire is looking for somewhere for the twins to go until she has an opening.”

“Lynx Williams.” I laughed. “She owns Ms. L’s.”

“Get out of here! I love Lynx! She’s taken care of my baby since he was six weeks old, and I had to put him in daycare!” Corinthian replied and I nodded. “Oh, tell her I’m sorry too.”

“Shit, me too.” Paxton laughed.

“About what?” I looked between the two women, trying to figure out the joke they obviously knew, and I didn’t.

“Exodus goes in there at least twice a month and drops off ice cream and candy to the kids before he snatches Judah and runs,” she said, and I nodded. For the last few years, Lynx has had a love-hate relationship with one of the uncles of a kid who went to her center. She said he was great with the kids, but he was bossy and never

followed directions.

“He does drive her crazy but it’s because he knows she is good,” I said, waving her off. “Plus, I’ll be honest with you; she looks forward to seeing how he’ll try to sneak Judah out of the building. She said last time, he put him in a gym bag.”

“He did.” Paxton laughed. Corinthian popped her in the shoulder and rolled her eyes.

“My baby swore for a week afterward that’s how he was supposed to travel. Shit was annoying.” Corinthian playfully rolled her eyes.

CHAPTER 26

EARTH

“You’re going to behave,” I said to Fire.

He grunted but didn’t take his eyes off his boys. Every time I saw my brother with the boys, I knew he had made the right decision. Blood didn’t make you a daddy. I’d seen niggas father a dozen kids yet were never damn daddies. Fire took care of Ocean and Lake as if they came from his nuts and carried his blood.

“Fire?”

“Nigga, I can’t make one promise,” he replied.

Ocean started to fuss, and he took him out of his car seat. Fire moved like a seasoned pro as he checked to make sure he wasn’t wet, before deciding he probably was hungry and handing him to me.

“If her vibe ain’t right, she can’t keep them. I’m gonna always do what’s in the best interest of my sons.”

“She’s McCoy’s best friend.” I laughed. “My woman’s word isn’t good enough?”

Fire mugged the hell out of me. “Nigga, you saying that shit like that damn girl didn’t kidnap you and have your ass sitting in her house for a damn month.” He pulled everything he needed to make a bottle from the diaper bag and went to work.

“Her situation called for something drastic.” I shrugged. On the outside looking in, I understood why Fire had the mind frame he did about McCoy. But I knew her, knew what she was going through and probably would’ve done the same shit if I were her.

“Why?” he questioned with a skeptical look on her face. “Cause it ain’t too much I can think of that would have me kidnapping a nigga.” Fire finished making the boys’ bottles, then put all the supplies away.

“Jamel has a problem with his hands,” I said. Fire looked up at me with murder in his eyes. We all had a sore spot when it came to abuse, especially after finding out Shaka had been a victim of it for years without us knowing.

“Where he at?”

“At the Bible Thumpers’ warehouse,” I answered, and Fire ran his tongue over his teeth. “Cross went to see him last night.”

“We paying him a visit after we leave here.”

“Nah,” I denied, shaking my head. “Save that anger for tomorrow.”

The sound of the doors opening pulled us from our conversation and we laughed at the sight of Exodus walking into the room. He closed the doors, looked around, nodded, then came to our table. “Everything cool?”

“It’s straight,” I replied as I stood and dapped him up. Ocean started squirming in my arms as I pulled back. “Chill, nephew, he good people.”

“Man, I thought Krude was playing when he said you were a daddy, Fire,” Ex said as he dapped Fire up. “That nigga is stressed now, for real, talking about he can’t be a single father. Especially after seeing you struggle.”

“Struggle?” Fire laughed. “That nigga was here for about two hours the other day and he hogged the twins the entire time.” He handed me a bottle for Ocean and shook his head. “Tell yo’ cousin to stop lying to me before I call up Megan and ask her to come chill.”

“Ohh, nah.” Ex laughed and shook his head. “You not about to get me caught up in they shit. He already getting on everybody’s damn nerves about that girl, and you want to add fuel to the fire.”

“Then he better get his shit together.” Fire grunted. I started feeding Ocean while he fed Lake. “But for real, this place is nice as fuck. I like the new look.”

“Yeah, it turned out nice,” he said, nodding as he looked around. “I had Yuri do the decorating and shit, and you know that girl ain’t cheap.”

“At all,” I agreed. “She did my office at the beginning of the year, and even though it cost me, every damn person who walks into my office says the shit is nice.”

“You think she could do the twins’ room?” Fire questioned and I shrugged. “I’mma call her tonight and see ’cause I want my boys’ shit to be top-notch.”

“Yuri is your girl. If she can’t do it, then she’ll definitely steer you in the direction of who can.”

Exodus’s phone started ringing and he pulled it from his pocket. He smiled, shook his head and put it away. “I’m about to head out. Hitta on her way so we can do lunch before going to see some venues.”

“Venues?” I questioned and he nodded.

“Yeah, she thinks it’s for her birthday party, but I plan to propose soon and want to

go look for places to get married.”

“That’s what’s up,” I said, genuinely happy for him. “Check out West’s new spot. I took my girl there and she loved it.”

“We definitely will,” Ex replied. “I gotta get out of here but I just wanted y’all to know I let Terres know y’all bill is comped, so enjoy.” He dapped us up, making sure not to interfere with the twins eating.

“Appreciate it,” I said as Ex headed to the door. As soon as he got to the door, it was pushed open and McCoy and Lynx came inside. “What’s good, Ms. L?” He gave her a quick hug, stepped back, and shook McCoy’s hand. “I don’t know you, but I definitely have seen you before at the center. How you doing? I’m Exodus DeCorte.”

“McCoy Toliver,” McCoy replied with a laugh. “It’s good to finally meet you.”

“You too.” He looked over at me and nodded. “You here for which one? The mean one or the crazy one?”

“The fine one, nigga,” I said, laughing. Exodus grunted and turned back to the ladies.

“Bullshit, ’cause I’m already taken,” Fire joked.

“Hey, Ex,” Lynx replied with a laugh. “How are you?”

“I can’t complain,” he replied. His phone went off again and he shook his head. “I would stay and chop it up for a little bit, but if she calls me again and I don’t bring my ass, Paxton will show the fuck out.”

“She just gonna do a little razzle-dazzle,” I said, laughing.

“Bullshit,” Ex said, then opened the door. “Y’all have a good evening. Earth, I’ll see you tomorrow at the cookout.”

“For sure,” I said, then he left.

I stood, being mindful of Ocean in my arms. “What’s good, baby?” I said, watching her walk to me. She lifted on her tippy toes and kissed me. “You have a good time shopping today?”

“Yep,” she answered with a nod. Her eyes lit up at the sight of Ocean. “Oh, he is so cute, Fire.”

“Appreciate it, sister-in-law.” Fire nodded. His eyes went to Lynx, and for a brief second, my brother was stuck. I chuckled and shook my head.

“Fire, this is Lynx, Coy’s best friend and the owner of Ms. L’s center,” I said, introducing them.

“What’s good?”

“Hi.” Lynx gave him a small wave. Her attention was on Lake as he slept in his arms. “Your boys are adorable.”

“They take after their daddy.” Fire shrugged. He laid Lake back in his car seat, then looked over at me to make sure Ocean was good. “He probably not gonna go to sleep, just so you know.”

“It’s cool,” I said, shrugging. He finished his bottle and sat in my lap, slapping at the table. “He can kick it with me.”

“Can I hold him?” Lynx asked from her spot. I could tell she really loved kids from

the way her eyes sparkled as she stared at him.

“Nah, not right now,” Fire said just as I was about to hand him to her. I looked over at my brother to see him mugging the hell out of Lynx. “I gotta vet you first. I can’t have my babies with nobody I don’t like, and right now, you ain’t giving me good vibes polka dot.”

“Excuse me?” Lynx reared back and mugged the hell out of Fire. “What did you call me?”

“You heard me, leopard lady.” He shrugged. “As they daddy, I’m telling you I’on like how you look. You could scare my babies and they been through a lot already.” He shook his head. “I don’t need them traumatized.”

“Fuck you,” she hissed. I expected Lynx to blow up or even start crying from the way she was looking at my brother. “You have some fuckin’ nerve to talk about how I look, like you don’t look like a whole fuckin’ clown. You want to talk about my looks?” She let out a small laugh and shook her head. “Baby boy, you are nothing to look at yourself.”

“You a whole fuckin’ lie.” Fire laughed and shook his head. He looked over at me and shrugged. “This ain’t gonna work.”

“That’s the only smart thing you’ve said since I walked in here,” Lynx agreed.

McCoy and I sat there, confused as hell, as to what had transpired in that short amount of time. The only thing I’d been able to do was introduce them before the insults started up. Normally, Fire was laid back and just went with the flow. His snapping on Lynx when she hadn’t done anything was surprising as hell.

“Give me my son so we can go,” Fire said, standing. He took Ocean from me and

strapped him into his car seat. Every so often, he'd glance at Lynx, grunt, and shake his head. After he made sure both boys were strapped in properly, he put on the backpack he used as a diaper bag and turned to me. "I'd rather figure something else out for my boys than use 101 Dalmatians over there."

"Muthafucka!" Lynx yelled and jumped from her seat. "I don't know what the fuck your problem is with me, especially since we just met."

"Lynx, calm down," McCoy said as she stood.

"Fire, bro. Chill, for real," I said, shaking my head. I stood so we were eye to eye and sighed. "What's the problem? You don't even know that damn girl and you slangin' out insults like y'all got the biggest beef in the world. Chill, man."

"Fuck her." Fire laughed. "Her name fits her though." He mugged Lynx again. "A Lynx is a spotted cat, right?" He licked his lips. "Tell me, shorty, yo' pussy spotted too?"

"That's one question you'll never get the answer to," Lynx growled. She turned and looked at me. "Earth, we are good in my book. You love my friend and you're protecting her. I don't agree with how she went about this but I will never complain about you taking care of her. For that, I'll forever be grateful." She shook her head. "But your punk ass brother can go to hell and I mean that from the bottom of my heart."

Lynx grabbed her purse off the table and stormed out of the room.

"Baby, go check on your friend while I handle my brother," I said to McCoy. I dropped a quick kiss on her lips.

"Okay." She sighed and turned to my brother. "Fire, you—" She stopped talking and

shook her head. “I don’t know why you did that, but just so you know, Lynx is probably one of the best women I’ve ever dealt with. She’s loyal, smart, and good as hell with kids.”

“I’m protecting my heart,” Fire said as he tapped the boy’s car seats.

“She would’ve never hurt your boys,” McCoy denied sadly. She turned back to me and I kissed her again. “I’ll see you later.”

“For sure,” I agreed. “I’mma walk you out, though.” I turned to Fire. “Stay here, nigga.”

“Go on,” he said, waving me off. He sat back down in his seat and shrugged. “I’on wanna be out there with her any-fuckin’-way.”

I took McCoy’s hand in mine, interlaced our fingers, and headed out of the restaurant. Lynx stood next to McCoy’s truck, looking down at her phone. When she heard us approach, she looked up and put her phone away.

“Look, I’m sorry about my brother,” I said to her. I normally didn’t apologize to anyone on Fire’s behalf, but this time, I did. She didn’t deserve the way he spoke to her, especially since we were meeting so she could possibly do a favor for him. “I don’t know what got into his ass but we were definitely taught better than that.”

“It’s fine,” she said, waving me off. “I’ve been made fun of my entire life because of my vitiligo, so it’s nothing new for me.”

“You sure?” I asked, not really believing she was cool with it. Fire had said some fucked-up shit to her ass for no reason. “Because understand as soon as y’all pull off, I’m going in there to rock his shit.”

“I’m good.” She nodded. Her eyes cut to McCoy and I watched as they had some type of silent conversation. After a few seconds, she let out a small sigh and turned to me. “Like I said earlier, I appreciate what you’ve done for my friend. So, in my eyes, we are good. Now your brother, on the other hand?” She shrugged and shook her head. “That nigga better stay at least a hundred feet from me at all times.”

“I’ll try my hardest to make that happen.” I pulled her into a quick hug, then stepped back. “Again, I apologize for that nigga.” I turned to McCoy, who had a big smile on her face. “What are you smiling for, Coy?”

“Y’all!” She laughed. “My two favorite people are getting along.”

I threw my arm over her shoulder and pulled her to me. “Man, take your happy ass on.” I laughed and kissed her forehead. “Where are y’all headed to now?”

“To grab some food and then to the house to relax before we do some shopping,” McCoy answered. I reached into my pocket and took out my wallet. Without thinking twice about it, I handed her a black card.

“Ball out,” I said, putting my wallet back in my pocket. I had a band in my other pocket, so I got that and handed it to her. “Grab me something too.”

“You gave me your card plus cash?” she asked me, confused. “Why?”

“That’s your card,” I answered. I’d had her a card ordered a few days ago and it’d come in yesterday, but I hadn’t gotten a chance to give it to her yet. McCoy looked at the card, then back at me. “Don’t think too hard on it, baby, go enjoy y’all selves.” I dropped another kiss on her lips. “Get in, buckle up, and don’t hit them corners too hard.”

“Earth, this?—”

“McCoy, do what the damn man said and get your ass in the car,” Lynx said, cutting her off. I laughed and nodded at her. McCoy wasn’t used to a nigga taking care of her, so for me to give her a card and money without thinking twice about it threw her off.

“I jus?—”

“Coy!” Lynx took her keys from her hand, unlocked the doors, and stepped back.

I opened the passenger door, helped McCoy into the car, and closed the door. “Enjoy, Lynx,” I called out to Lynx as I watched her get into the car.

“See you later, Earth,” she said, then got in. She started the car and pulled out of the parking lot.

Once they were gone, I went back inside and found Fire sitting at the table, eating.

“The fuck is your problem, nigga?” I asked him. Fire looked up at me and smiled.

“I think I found my wife, nigga,” he said and shrugged.

“Nigga, what?”

“That spotted leopard,” he answered, and I stared at him like he’d lost his mind.

“That’s wifey.”

“That’s wifey?” I knew at one point Fire needed to be evaluated and I was wondering if I needed to follow up with that with Mama. “What the fuck are you talkin’ about? You just insulted that woman for absolutely no reason and now you’re telling me she’s wifey?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Fire replied. “You and your woman got your own thing on how y’all met and so do me and mine. Our love doesn’t have to be explained. Just know it’s real.”

CHAPTER 27

MCCOY

“Earth!” I yelled as I continued to ride his face. I slapped against the headboard, trying to get my bearings, but the feelings he was pulling from me were too much. My body got hot, and I bounced fast. “Baby, shit!”

“Stop playin’ and give me that nut, Coy!” He growled, then latched onto my clit. I wasn’t fighting my orgasm. If anything, I was ready to let it out, but my body was enjoying the feeling.

Earth smacked my ass and I moaned in pleasure. No one, absolutely no one on this earth, had ever made me feel this way before. Earth pulled away from me, flattened his tongue, then licked from my asshole to my clit. “You playin’. It’s cool, though, ’cause I want you to cum on my dick.”

He lifted me from his face, set me on the bed, got up, then flipped me over so I was on all fours.

“Baby, wait.” I moaned as he bent me more into the bed, making my ass lift higher into the air. Even though I was asking him to wait, I anticipated him being inside of me.

“Nah.” He growled as he lined himself to my opening. “You not running shit.” He pushed inside of me, and we both moaned in pleasure. “Fuck, Coy!” He smacked my ass again, then kissed the spot he hit. “Bounce that shit, baby.”

“Earth!” I moaned as I bounced on his dick. He was hitting every spot I had. “Shit, I’m about to cum.”

“Do that shit, baby!” he encouraged me. “Give me that shit.” I started to move faster as Earth held onto my waist. “There it goes. I can feel it. Give it to me, baby. All that shit.” He rubbed up and down my spine. “That’s it.”

“Baby!” I clawed at the bed and shook my head. “Shit!”

“Cum, Coy!” he demanded. He grabbed my waist again and started to pound into me harder. “I told you I got you, baby. Shit, just trust me.”

“I do.” I moaned.

“Then cum,” he said, smacking my ass.

“Fuck!” I yelled, then did what he asked. I bit into the bed and moaned loudly. Earth continued to push into me, then shortly after, he came.

I fell flat onto the bed, trying to get control of my breathing and body. Earth slowly pulled out of me, and I watched as he walked to the bathroom. A short while later, he came back with a towel that he used to clean me up.

“Don’t throw that towel in the corner, either.” I laughed, and he grunted. “Seriously, Earth, don’t.”

“I’m not,” he said, then went back to the bathroom. I heard him brushing his teeth. A few nights ago, after we had sex, Earth had been too tired to take the towel back to the bathroom and had thrown it in the corner of the room. He swore he’d get it in the morning and went to sleep. The next day when we got up, he realized he’d thrown it on a pair of house shoes he liked. He was pissed and said he couldn’t walk away with

nut stuck to the inside of them and had to throw them away. “What do you have planned for today?”

“Working on some stuff for work,” I answered, and he nodded. “You?”

“Gotta go see a man about a horse,” he said, and I rolled my eyes. “Nah, for real. Meeting up with Mama for a hot second, then going to help my boy Citrine with a few things at his hotel.” He dropped down next to me and laid back. I’d never met someone so comfortable with their nudity as I did Earth. My eyes roamed over his body, stopping briefly at his dick, which was still slightly hard. “Ay, stop lookin’ at my dick.” He reached over and smacked my ass.

“It’s just so pretty,” I whined and rolled over to my back.

“Don’t call my shit pretty.” He laughed as he climbed on top of me. Earth kissed my lips a few times, then stared down at me as he brushed my hair off my face. “You know how fine you are?”

“You’re biased,” I replied, playfully rolling my eyes. “You have to say that because you’re in love with me.”

“Even before I was in love with you, I thought you were fine.” His naturally low eyes bore into me. I reached up and brushed his eyebrows with my thumbs. Earth turned his face and kissed my palm. “When you walked into that warehouse like a fuckin’ boss, it was the first thing I thought.”

“What was the second?”

“That I was going to have to get some pussy before I killed you.” He shrugged.

“Earth!” I pushed at his shoulder, but he didn’t budge. “Are you serious?”

“Fuck yeah.” He laughed. “I mean, shit, what else was I supposed to think?”

“I don’t know.” I laughed. “Not that, though.”

“Shid.” He laughed and shook his head. “When a nigga’s life is in jeopardy and a fine woman is in his presence, he either wanna fuck her, save her, or kill her. You walked in too fuckin’ strong for me to think I needed to save you. So, I was down to fuck, then kill you.” He rested his face into the crook of my neck between my face and shoulder and took a few deep breaths. I knew if we didn’t move, he’d fall asleep in this position because he’d done it before.

I lay there, running my fingers through his waves and stared up at him. His saying that made me think of Prince. He’d seen him and knew I needed saving. I took a deep breath, then sighed. “Earth?”

“Yeah, baby,” he mumbled into my neck.

“I need to tell you something, but I don’t want you to be mad at me,” I said. He lifted his head and stared down at me. “I, umm.” I looked away.

“What’s going on?” He turned my face to make me look at him. “You can talk to me, McCoy. Even if you think I’m gonna be upset or whatever, it doesn’t matter. Always speak your peace.”

“I met Prince,” I mumbled. I felt Earth’s body stiffen and his eyes got dark. “The day he died. Jamel had him snatched. I don’t know why, but he did. The night before, Jamel and I had gotten into it; he called me all kinds of names and beat me up. The day Prince was killed, he had me brought to a warehouse by his cousin Leon. Prince was there, tied up to a chair.”

“He was already dead?” Earth asked and I shook my head.

“No,” I answered. “He was alive. Jamel hadn’t even touched him.”

“The fuck he have you show up for?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Maybe to show me I didn’t have a choice as to being with him. I’d told him I wanted to break up and he’d laughed in my face and told me he’d rather kill me than to let me go.”

“What happened?”

“Jamel made me watch as he and his boys beat him up.” I felt tears roll down my face and into my ears. “After he was done, he left us alone for a little while. Prince told me to find you, he said you’d be the one to get me out of this with Jamel. That you were a good man. Afterward, Jamel came back and had me dragged out of the room. The last thing I heard was a gun being shot before the door closed.” Earth stared at me for what felt like an eternity before he finally closed his eyes.

“Earth?” The last thing I expected was to see tears fall from his eyes when he opened them to look at me. “Baby, I’m sorry.”

“You ain’t got shit to be sorry for, Coy,” he said, shaking his head. “You ain’t do shit but what my boy told you to do.” He kissed my forehead. “You found me, and now I know for sure Jamel is responsible for his death.” He adjusted his weight, pushing my legs further apart, and settled between them. His dick, which I was surprised was still hard. “Prince knew you needed help and he knew he wasn’t getting out of there alive so he did what he was supposed to do. He sent you to me so I could take care of you.” He pushed his dick into me, making my back arch off the bed. “Now, I’mma do just that and kill Jamel. The last thing that nigga gonna see is you being happy with the nigga you were meant for.”

“Shit!” I moaned as he sped up his movements.

“I love you, Coy,” he whispered into my ear. “I swear on everything I love, I’ll take care of you forever. All you gotta do is love a nigga.”

CHAPTER 28

EARTH

“How many people did you invite?” Citrine asked me as if this shit was legit a big fuckin’ party and nothing else. “I mean, I know you got the permits and shit, right?”

“Permits?” Fire questioned and he nodded. “The fuck kind of permits do you get to kill a nigga?”

“For the block party, dumb ass nigga,” Citrine replied. I watched as people moved around the block, making sure everything was in place. The nosey-ass neighbors didn’t even try to hide the fact they were watching us, but shit, I didn’t blame them. If some nigga I knew didn’t fuck with the nigga who ran this area was sitting in the middle of the road while a party was being set up, I would be watching too. “I’m making sure he got the permits to block off the street and have all this out here.”

“Yeah, I got that handled.” I nodded. “The city is good with the petting zoo, jump houses, food trucks, and the DJ.”

“Baby gonna host this shit?” Citrine asked and I shook my head.

“Nah, Monica still not feeling good, so he said he’s gonna have to sit this one out.”

“She cool?” he asked, concerned. “The baby cool?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “But Baby not takin’ no chances and is putting her ass on bed

rest until the baby comes.”

“I already know Monica not feeling that shit.” Citrine laughed.

“Fuck nah,” I said. “She was cussing that nigga out when I talked to him earlier. He didn’t give a fuck, though.” I shrugged. “He said he’d meet us at the warehouse though.”

“Bet,” Citrine said. “Let me go make sure the lady at the food truck is cool though. She was struggling earlier. Something about the ice cream man being in her spot.”

“She must be fine,” Fire said, laughing and Citrine smirked. “I hope she got a nigga.”

“If she does, then that nigga can be handled.” He lifted his shirt to show us his gun, then walked away whistling.

“That nigga ain’t changed in all the years we’ve known him,” I said, laughing. Fire grunted, then went back to eating his food.

“He ain’t gonna change until he finds his better half, like we did,” Fire replied, and I cut my eyes at him. I wasn’t about to play into my brother’s delusional mindset. How or why he thought Lynx would be his woman after he disrespected her was beyond me. “Until then, let him be. He ain’t hurting nobody and them hoes be enjoying his attention.”

I couldn’t even lie, the block party was dope as fuck. It took a few minutes for the neighborhood to start enjoying themselves, but once they did, it was lit. The kids were having the time of their lives with all the shit that was here. The old heads sat around at the tables, eating and playing dominos or card games. The younger crowd sat around their cars, eating, dancing, making TikTok’s, and kicking it. Every so often, I’d seen a nigga who ran with Jamel, but none of them were bold enough to

step to me.

“Ay, Earth,” my boy Cash called out from the house we’d kicked in and found the boys in not too long ago. I got up from my seat with Fire behind me with a plate of food in his hand and went to the house. “This the nigga you been looking for?” Cash pushed Leon to his knees. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on the top of my leg, and stared at Leon. This was the nigga who made McCoy’s life a living hell when Jamel wasn’t around. There was a piece of me that thought he was in love with her, but I wasn’t sure.

“Yeah, that’s him,” I answered as I leaned against the wall. “Where you find him?”

“The condo,” Cash answered. “He was sitting in the bed, sniffing some panties, when I walked in.”

“Panties?” I questioned and Cash nodded. “Yeah, he said it was his girl’s spot.”

“His girl?” I laughed and shook my head. I walked over to Leon, grabbed him by his throat, and lifted him to his feet. His eyes bulged and he scratched at my hand, but I didn’t give a fuck. “That condo doesn’t belong to your girl, nigga, does it?” I pulled him closer to me. “That muthafucka belongs to McCoy Toliver.”

“She’s my cousin’s bitch.” Leon gasped. “He said he was done with her, and I could have her.”

“Have her?” I slammed him to the ground and kicked him in the face. His head snapped back, and blood poured from his mouth. “How the fuck can he give you something that doesn’t belong to him?” I paced in front of Leon as I tried to get myself together. “Who the fuck do you niggas think y’all are? Do you realize how fuckin’ special McCoy is?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, then spit blood. “I know, which is why I’m gonna make her my wife. I’m not gonna play around with her like Jamel doing.” He was on all fours with blood falling from his mouth. “I got the ring and everything already.”

“How the fuck you gonna make her your wife when she’s mine?” I kicked him so hard in the stomach, he lifted off the ground for a few seconds before falling onto his face. “She’s my fuckin’ wife!” I stomped into him. “I’m gonna give her my fuckin’ last name! She’s gonna be the mother to my children if she ain’t already pregnant! I’m gonna protect her from the world! I’m gonna be her sounding board, her shoulder to cry on. The last person she’ll see before she goes to sleep and the first one she sees when she wakes up.” I continued to kick him even though he wasn’t moving. “She. Belongs. To. Me. Nigga. I. Love. Her!” With each word, I smashed my foot into his face.

“He dead, nigga,” Fire said from beside me. I looked over at my brother, who was still eating his food. “You been stomping him into the ground and declaring your love for McCoy and that nigga dead.”

“He heard me in hell then,” I replied.

“I guess so.” He threw me a roll of paper towels. “Clean yo’ face, you got blood on you.” I ripped some paper towels off the roll and cleaned my face. “You was kickin’ that nigga hard. You got some aggression built up?”

“Shut up, Fire,” I said, shaking my head. I looked down at my clothes to see them splattered with blood. Normally, I wouldn’t walk around with this shit on me, but there was no reason to mess up two outfits since I planned to leave here and go see Jamel. “Call Kino and let him know he has some work.”

“Kino!” Fire leaned back and yelled.

“What’s good?” Kino stepped into the house and looked around.

“Clean up, nigga!”

“Already got a team movin’,” Kino replied with a laugh.

“Bet,” I said. “Have someone head to the warehouse too. I’m goin’ to pay that nigga Jamel a visit next.”

“No problem.” Kino dapped me and Fire up before we left.

I let Fire drive to the warehouse so I could have a minute to get my mind right. The entire drive, he blasted music and let me be. Once we were there, he parked in the back and we went inside.

“How long you been here?” I asked Nine as I dapped him up.

“About ten minutes,” he answered. “I was taking care of that thing you had me looking into.”

“Find out anything?”

“Yeah,” he said. “The file is in your email.” I was hesitant to pull my phone from my pocket to look at it. “It’s good news.”

“I appreciate it,” I said, nodding. “She needs a win.”

“She gonna get one,” he said, then sat down. “Now kill that nigga so I can go home and go to sleep. I gotta be on a flight in the morning.”

“Where you going?”

“To kill some people,” he answered.

“You takin’ Krude with you?”

“Fuck no,” Nine answered. “That nigga isn’t allowed within twenty feet of me.”

“Why?”

“Long fuckin’ story,” he said, shaking his head. “Just know if it weren’t for Mrs. DeCorte, I would’ve killed that nigga.”

“Tell me what happened,” Fire said, sitting next to Nine. “Cuz, he called me going off the other day.”

I walked away laughing because I knew how much Nine and Krude went back and forth with each other. They were good friends, but Nine was a serious kind of nigga and Krude didn’t take shit serious in life. How they worked so well, I didn’t know, but they did, and I wasn’t one to question shit that didn’t have anything to do with me.

Jamel was locked in the last room down a long hallway. I opened the door to find him hanging upside down with cuts on his chest. I shook my head and closed the door. This was Cross’s handiwork; I knew without her telling me she came to visit him. Jamel groaned as he spun in slow circles from the chain.

“Wake up, bitch boy,” I said, smacking him in the face. Jamel opened his eyes and stared at me. “Bet you didn’t expect to see me standing here, did you?”

“Fuck you.” He groaned, and I laughed harder. Even though he knew he was going to die, he was still trying to act tough.

“Damn, nigga, I just knew you’d be happy to see me,” I said, walking around him. Cross had done a number on him. Cuts, bruises, and chunks of skin were missing

from his body. “Or did you want to see Cross again?”

“Fuck her too.” He grunted, and I smirked.

“You want me to call her and tell her you miss her?” I taunted. I wasn’t stupid. He was hurting and more than likely lightheaded from losing so much blood. But he wasn’t going to die that easily. “Or you want me to call McCoy?”

Jamel’s eyes bucked open at the mention of McCoy’s name, and I laughed. “Where is she?”

“Who, Coy?” I pretended to act clueless. “Shit, I don’t know, probably at the house, waiting for me to come home and eat her pussy.” I shrugged as I continued to walk around the room. Jamel followed me with his eyes as I moved. Every so often, I would stop and look over at him. “You see, Jamel, you are a weak ass nigga who has a problem with his hands, which ultimately landed you here. I mean, don’t get me wrong, you would’ve died no matter what, but now you get a special kind of death.”

“Where’s McCoy?”

“I already told you,” I said, shrugging. “But you worried about my wife and that’s a no-go for me.”

“She won’t ever love you like she loves me, nigga,” he weakly replied. “That bitch belongs to me. I made sure of that.”

“Or so you thought.” I laughed. “From the moment we were in the same room, we been connected. Shit, I’ve been living with her for almost two months.”

“Nigga, you ain’t stepped foot in the condo. I know that for a fact.”

“And neither has Coy.” I laughed. “She has a house, a nice ass one, too, and she been at mine.” I sat in the chair across from him. “In fact, I been preparing her for us to live together.” I shrugged. “You know ’cause I plan to propose soon.” I pulled the ring I’d been carrying around in my pocket since I picked it up yesterday and showed it to him. “Nothing too crazy, but I mean, it’s nice, right?” I closed the lid. “It looks way better than that shit you put on her finger.”

“Let me down!” Jamel yelled as he jerked his chains. “I’ma kill you, nigga!”

“No, you aren’t,” I said dismissively. “Now back to our conversation. After I propose to Coy, we gonna have a big ass wedding, I’ma get her pregnant and I’ma make sure she grows as a lawyer and as a woman.” I leaned back in my seat. “You know she wanna open up more offices around the country? I have been looking at properties for her and snatching them up too.” I shook my head and smiled. “I can’t wait to see that shit.”

“Fuck you!”

“Aht, aht,” I said. “No reason to be mean, nigga.”

“I swear I’ma kill your bitch ass!”

I pulled my gun from my back and shot him in the right leg. Jamel’s dramatic ass screamed and I shook my head. “Stop all the dramatics and shut the fuck up.” I set the gun in my lap and waited for him to calm down. He didn’t stop, so I picked up my gun and pointed at his other leg. “Keep screamin’ and I’ma shoot you again.”

“I hate you!”

“That’s fine,” I said, shrugging. “As long as you shut the fuck up so I can finish talking.” I waited for a beat and Jamel finally stopped screaming. “As I was saying,

McCoy gonna be cool. I got her.”

“My cousin will kill you.” Jamel groaned.

“You talkin’ about Leon?” I asked, then waved him off. “That nigga dead. I killed him before coming here. See.” I pointed to my clothes. “Anyway, let’s discuss something else.” I sat forward. “You killed Prince, didn’t you?”

“Fuck yeah.” He laughed. “I put a bullet into his skull, then pissed on his body before I left him at the warehouse. I should’ve let the pigs eat him, though.”

“You should’ve just left him alone,” I said, shaking my head. “You know he sent McCoy my way?”

“What?”

“Yeah, the day you killed him, he told her to find me.” I stood and looked over at the tools Cross left on the table near Jamel’s body. A hand saw caught my attention, and I picked it up. “My boy was looking out for me, even before he died. He sent me my wife, and for that, I’ll always be grateful to him.” I looked at Jamel. “But you did three things wrong.”

“Just three?” He laughed.

“Well, three that involved me,” I answered with a shrug. “First was killing my boy. Our street beef didn’t need to involve death, but you are one of those stupid niggas that think they can have it all. The money, women, and street cred, not realizing you have to elevate after a while. The DBB elevated. While you sat around, wanting to just run the streets, we wanted the world. We aren’t the same.”

“DBB ain’t shit.”

“Yeah, we are, which is why you so mad,” I said. “Anyway, the second thing you did wrong was touching McCoy. She was out of your league more than likely from jump and you hated that shit, so you did what every fuck nigga does. You beat her down, mentally, physically and emotionally because you were weak. But don’t worry, I’ve been taking care of that shit.”

“McCoy wasn’t shit when I met her and she won’t be shit when I’m done with her,” he laughed.

“You a fuckin’ lie and we both know it,” I grunted. “Coy is top tier, it ain’t another woman on this earth that can hold a candle to her and that’s why you latched on to her the way you did.” I shook my head because this nigga was delusional if he thought otherwise.

“McCoy was a piece to the puzzle that I needed. Any good businessman knows he needs an lawyer on his payroll. I wasn’t for dishing out unnecessary money so instead of putting her on the payroll I fucked her. The bitch was lonely; had two friends and no other connections. A nigga like me giving her attention for a little while was all I needed to do. She fell in love with me, and I used her.”

“And that’s where you fucked up,” I replied. “You thought she wasn’t shit and would always be down for your weak ass until a nigga like me came along.” I shrugged. “She ain’t wanted for shit since the moment I claimed her. I dick her down on a regular, pay her bills, protect her, and honor her. It ain’t a nigga in this world that could step to her and make me sweat because I know what the fuck I did for her and who the fuck I am to her.”

“You want a cookie for making her your top bitch or something? I already told you that bitch doesn’t mean shit to me. I can have ten of her in a blink of an eye,” Jamel sneered. He could front all he wanted but I could tell that my words were fucking with him. He might not have loved McCoy, but he knew what she brought to the table

and how valuable she was.

“Yeah, okay little nigga keep goin’ with that lie,” I said. “You just talkin’ yourself into an early grave.”

“When I get out of here I’m do you like I did your boy,” Jamel said.

“You’re not getting out of here.” I laughed. “Anyway, you know what I found out that had me confused? You strung McCoy on for years, even though you had a wife.” Jamel clenched his jaw and mugged me hard. “It took me a day or two to find Sienna.” I tapped on the door and Fire dragged in Sienna. She was a beautiful woman. Short, curvy, dark brown skin and an innocent face. She looked at Jamel hanging in the middle of the room, then at me and Fire. “Have a seat.”

“Whatever he did, I didn’t have anything to do with it,” she said, sitting down in the empty chair. She looked scared as hell. From the information Nine got, Sienna was a victim just like McCoy.

“Damn, she don’t like you either?” I asked Jamel.

“Bitch!” he yelled at Sienna. She jumped from the chair and hid behind Fire.

“Ay, he can’t hurt you,” Fire said, shaking his head. “He just wanted you to know you’re free. This nigga never gonna be able to hurt you again. You can start your life over, go to college; shit, move to a different state. It doesn’t matter.”

“Fire, take her out of here,” I said, nodding at Sienna. “Have Nine give her the paperwork he has.”

“Cool,” Fire replied. He opened the door. “Let’s go.”

After they left, I turned back to Jamel and shook my head. “Anyway, the third thing you did wrong was letting me live. If you wanted to run the streets like you said you did, you should’ve killed me too. Leaving me alive was your biggest fuckin’ mistake.”

I turned on the saw and cut into Jamel’s chest. He screamed until he passed out, which only took a few seconds. I set the saw on the table, grabbed the rib spreader, and cracked his chest. His heart barely pumped as he died. I didn’t give a fuck about a slow, painful death. This nigga never cared when he was hurting McCoy. I reached into his chest, grabbed his heart, and pulled it out.

Fuck him.

CHAPTER 29

MCCOY

“Okay, so I don’t want you to panic,” Earth said, coming into my office. I looked up from the computer and took off my glasses.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing bad,” he answered as he rounded my desk. I sat back in my seat and stared up at him.

“Then why would I panic?” I swayed from side to side and waited for him to answer.

“I just want you to know I love you,” he said, and I nodded. “Like, legit love you. Will give you any and everything in the world without a second thought.”

“Earth,” I sighed. I’d been trying to get up the nerve to tell him how I felt for the last two weeks, but every time I opened my mouth, the words died on my lips. It wasn’t as if I didn’t love him because I did, I was just scared that once I said those words, things between us would change. It was the same way with Jamel. The second I said those three words, it was like a switch was flipped and he reared his ugly head. Don’t get me wrong, I knew Earth and Jamel were two different types of men, but that didn’t take away the fear I had.

“Ay, it’s cool,” he said, then kissed me. “I’m not rushing you to say nothing you’re not ready for. I just want you to know, is all, and to understand in this next phase of

your life, I'm proud to be your nigga and will help you through it." He put his hand out for me to take. "Now, come on. I want to show you something."

"Now I am nervous," I said, laughing.

"It's gonna be okay," he said, then helped me from my seat. We went into the living room where a brown-skinned woman sat on the couch. I looked at Earth, then back at her, slightly confused. "Coy, I want you to meet someone." The woman stood up. Her eyes bounced from Earth to me with the same look of uncertainty I know mine held. "This is your sister, Bradley Toliver."

"What?" I looked at her, this time taking in her full appearance. She was average height and curvy but it was her face that stopped me. Full lips, a small nose, slanted, dark eyes, full cheeks, and deep dimples that were all identical to mine. Her hair was cut into a cute pixie cut and she wore diamond studs in her ears. She was dressed in a pair of baggy blue jeans, an oversized khaki t-shirt, and matching tennis shoes. She had a cute tomboy style I loved. "Sister? Earth, what are you talking about?"

"I had Nine do some digging into your background." He ran his hand over his hair as if he was nervous. "Nothing too major, I just wanted to see if maybe you had some family out there. If you didn't, it was cool 'cause you are part of mine you know? But if you did and they wanted to get to know you, then I was down for that too. I know I didn't ask you but that was because I didn't want to get your hopes up about something that might not turn out like you want. But Nine found Bradley a few weeks ago and we flew out to talk to her."

"You found my sister?" I asked him and he nodded. "A sister I didn't even know I had?" Again, Earth nodded. "Why the hell would I be mad at that?"

"Because you never said you wanted to know." He shrugged and I shook my head. "I mean, shit, you ain't even said nothing to her now and she standing right there with

the same fuckin' face as you."

"That's because I don't know what to say!" I fussed and shook my head. "And I'm nervous."

"Man, Coy, turn around and talk to Ley. She cool as fuck." Earth laughed. He kissed my forehead, then turned me by my shoulders to face my sister. "Ley, this is your baby sister, McCoy Toliver."

"You're older than me?" I asked, surprised. Bradley didn't look a damn day over twenty-five. "I'm sorry for staring, but I'm trying to figure out why I don't remember you."

"Yeah, you were a baby when our parents died in a car accident," she answered. "I was five; you weren't even one yet when it happened. We were separated. The group home they sent you to was full by the time I got out of the hospital. When I got old enough and aged out of the system, I tried finding you. I reached out a little over two years ago but a man who said he was your husband answered the phone. He said you didn't want to meet me and was fine without me. It broke my heart, but I accepted it."

"Fuckin' Jamel," I mumbled and shook my head. He knew how much I wanted a family and took that away from me. I hated him more now than I did a few months ago. I was glad Earth killed him. "What he said isn't true."

"I know that now." She laughed. "Earth came to see me a few weeks ago like he said and explained everything. He said you and Jamel were no longer together and he was looking for me for you. He said he wanted you to have someone to have your back besides Lynx and his family." She paused and a bright smile spread across her face. "And just so you know, his family is amazing and Lynx will probably end up being both of our best friends."

“You met them?”

“Earlier today,” she said. “Earth thought it would be a good idea to meet them first so we would have time to get to know each other without them being curious and interfering with our bonding.”

“Did he?” I glanced at Earth, who was watching us closely. He was on go mode, waiting for me to show any signs that this was too much. I knew without a doubt if I said this was too much or I didn’t want it, Earth would escort Bradley out of this house and out of my life without a second thought. “What else did he say?”

“That you’re the love of his life and he’d do whatever he needed to protect you,” she answered. They shared a look for a brief second before she turned back to face me. “But he’s a good guy and I respect the hell out of him for loving you the way he does.”

“Ay, I’m a head out,” Earth said, and I nodded. “I gotta handle something with Citrine but I’ll be back.” He kissed my forehead. “I’ll call you when I’m on my way back to see what y’all want to eat.”

“Okay.” I nodded. He left the living room, and I turned back to Bradley. “Have a seat.” The sound of the garage opening caught my attention. “I’ll be right back.” Bradley nodded and I raced from the living room to the garage just as Earth was about to start his car. “Earth?”

“Yeah, baby?” He started his truck, then rolled down the window. “What you need?”

“I love you!” I spoke. Fear didn’t mean anything to me now because I knew this man loved me with everything in him. His actions, words, and intentions were always clear, and if I ever doubted anything, he’d proved it over and over.

Earth got out of the car, leaving the door open and walked over to me. His low eyes stayed on me until he was close enough to lift my chin with his finger. "Say that shit again."

"I love you." I laughed.

"Say it again."

"I, McCoy Elise Toliver, love you, Earth Marcel Carlson," I declared before his mouth crashed into mine. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him with the same passion he kissed me with.

"I swear on everything I have been waiting on you to say that shit," he said after breaking our kiss.

"I know, and I'm sorry it took me so long to say it," I said.

"You said it when you were ready. I ain't mad at that," he said, shaking his head. "Now take your ass in there and kick it with your sister."

"Be safe out there," I said as I unwrapped my arms from around his neck and stepped back.

"What's the worst that can happen, Coy?" he asked with a laugh. "My enemy is dead, remember?"

I made sure I was close enough to the door so that he couldn't catch me and smirked. "You know somebody could catch you slippin' and snatch you up." I laughed and took off running, making sure I slammed the door shut behind me.

I went back to the living room where Bradley was waiting and dropped down on the

couch. Bradley looked up from her phone and smiled at me. She was beautiful and I wasn't just saying that because she was my sister.

"I want to ask you something, but I don't want it to be awkward when I do," Bradley said, then bit into her bottom lip.

"Ask away," I replied.

"Can I have a hug?" she asked, and for a second, I was taken aback. I was prepared for her to ask me about Earth or my life but not that. "If it's too soon, I completely understand. I just?—"

I didn't let her finish her sentence before I jumped up from my spot and pulled her into a hug. Tears I didn't even know I was holding back started to fall from my eyes as soon as her arms wrapped around me. "I didn't even know I missed you until I knew you existed," I cried.

CHAPTER 30

EARTH

“You’re going to propose and get married all on the same damn day?” Krude asked me, for what felt like the millionth time. “What if she says no?”

“She’s not,” I said, shaking my head.

“She might,” he countered, and I mugged him. “Nigga, you can keep the scary looks for somebody who don’t know your future wife kidnapped you and had you locked in her damn house. You aren’t tough!”

“Ex, come get your fuckin’ cousin, man!” I yelled for Exodus.

“Krude, what the fuck are you doing, man?” Exodus asked, coming into the room with a bowl of fruit. How these niggas always managed to find food was beyond me. Between him, Krude and Domo, there was never an instance one of them wasn’t eating something. “I swear I can’t take you no-fuckin’-where without you showing out.”

“All I did was ask the nigga what he would do if she said no,” Krude said, mugging Ex. “And what the fuck you mean, you can’t take me nowhere? You rode with me, remember?”

“Because Madea said keep an eye on your dumb ass!” he replied and threw a grape at him. “You were just sliding down walls and singing love songs at her house not even

a week ago, or did you forget?"

"Because I was heartbroken," he said, shaking his head.

"And you not now?"

"Nah." He laughed. "Me and Megan back together," he answered with a shrug.

"Does she know that?" I asked. I tried my hardest to stay out of Krude's relationship issues, but that nigga made it hard. Every time I turned around, he was plotting ways to get back together with his ex, Megan, who, by the way, had declared she wanted nothing to do with him on more than one occasion.

"My baby not about to let me be a single father out here," Krude said. I looked at Ex, who shook his head but didn't say a word. He knew his cousin was slow. "Watch what I tell you. As soon as she finds out a new woman is gonna be around Jr., she gonna come crawling back. You know women don't like their baby daddy's girlfriends and shit."

"I'm not dealing with his shit today," Exodus said, shaking his head. "Where the fuck is Judge? It's his turn to watch your crazy ass."

"He over there with my best friend, trying to talk her into being like his whorish ass," Krude said, waving him off. I turned to see Sasha and Judge standing in the corner, talking. I couldn't even front; they looked good together. Judge had breathed life back into the former Madam and she radiated confidence.

"Judge!" Ex called out. "Come get this nigga."

"No," Judge replied. He was so serious with his answer, he didn't raise his voice. "Send him to Corinthian or Psalms."

“The heathen and the drug dealer?” Krude gasped as if he was offended. “Harlot, you got a lot of fuckin’ nerves.” Krude stood from his chair and looked around. When his eyes landed on his grandmother, he laughed. “Madea, we need to talk.”

“Yeah, Madea, y’all need to talk,” Exodus agreed. “Go on over there and talk to your grandma, nigga.”

“I am, hoe, and when I get over there, I’mma tell her Paxton is pregnant and y’all wasn’t gonna tell her.”

“Bitch, you better not!” Exodus hissed through clenched teeth. “She already side-eyeing us ’cause Mahogany had her baby and now she got baby fever!” He reached for Krude, but he was able to sidestep him and headed toward their grandmother. “Madea, that nigga lying!”

I laughed as they walked away. Fire made his way over to me and dapped me up. “What the fuck was that about?” he asked, nodding toward the DeCorte cousins, who were fussing at each other.

“It’s the Bible Thumpers,” I said as if that answered his question. I looked around for the boys. “Where is Lake and Ocean?”

“With Mama,” he answered with a shrug. “She said they needed to get away from me and all my anger.”

“They do.” I laughed, and Fire mugged me. “I told you being mean to that girl was gonna backfire on you, but you didn’t listen.”

“Who the fuck told her to get a damn boyfriend?” Fire asked. “That nigga ugly any-damn-way.” Fire had been in his feelings for the last few weeks since finding out Lynx had a boyfriend. On a daily basis, his temper was getting the best of him when it came to everything except the boys. With them, he was still his loving self but

everyone else got the short end of the stick.

“Get out your feelings, nigga.” I laughed and mushed his head. My phone vibrated and I looked at my watch to see a text from Lynx saying they were pulling up. “Alright, Coy on her way up.” I grabbed my brother’s arm and pulled him from his seat. “Get yo’ ass on, nigga.”

“Alright, y’all, let’s go!” Fire yelled and everyone started clearing the room.

Since West’s restaurant was our first date, I thought it was only right that I proposed to her here. The door was pulled open and McCoy walked in. She was too busy talking to Bradley and Lynx at first, but then she noticed me standing there and stopped talking.

“Come here, Coy,” I said. She didn’t hesitate to do what I said, and I smiled. She trusted me with everything in her.

“What is going on, Earth?” she asked, looking around.

Everyone was hidden in the back, though. I wanted my proposal to be intimate, just me and her. I looked over her shoulder to make sure Bradley and Lynx had left and they had.

“What did I tell you was the only thing you had to do?” I asked her. McCoy stared at me confused and I laughed. “Think, baby. I told you it was one thing you had to do, and I’d take care of the rest.”

“Love you?” she questioned, and I nodded.

“That’s it,” I said as I got down on one knee. “I told you I knew you were it for me from the moment we met. In that fuckin’ warehouse a few months ago, you were mine. I was just waiting for you to love me back.”

“And I do, Earth.”

“I know.” I chuckled. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the ring I had for her. “Now all you gotta do is say yes and birth my baby.” I nodded to her still-flat stomach. “And let me keep loving and protecting y’all. Can you do that?” I slid the ring onto her finger, not caring that she hadn’t answered me. “Huh? Can you do that, Coy?”

“Yes,” she answered, with tears falling from her eyes.

“Good ’cause we getting married today,” I said, standing.

The door to the back opened and everyone came inside. Pastor DeCorte walked right to us and opened his Bible. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony.”

The End.

Hold on. Turn the page. lol