



Emani's Way

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Description: Emani Jackson is a church girl who always does what her parents tell her. Even at 28, Emani has never been in charge of her life. But one steamy night brings out a part of Emani that nobody knew existed, not even her. However, that night wasn't the only thing that altered her life. Spilled family secrets, lies, and even murder made Emani want to do things her way.

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Chapter1

EMANI

“Emani Jackson, I swear you need to lighten the fuck up!” Shelby Banks, one of my best friends’ yells.

“Shelby, my goodness, do you have to cuss so much,” I reply, exasperated.

“See! That’s the shit I’m talking about. You and Kay are always trying to tell me how to behave. You’re twenty-eight, not seventy-eight. And whether you realize it or not, you aren’t my Mama.” Shelby points at me with a shake of her head.

I sigh and roll my eyes because Shelby and I both know if I didn’t rein her in, she’d act like a wild banshee in these streets.

“Shell, you know we aren’t telling you how to act, but screaming the f-word in the middle of a crowded restaurant could result in unwanted attention,” Kayla Jones, my other best friend, meekly explains.

Kay is the oldest of the three of us, but we treat her like our younger sibling because she was so sheltered. She’s also incredibly shy. I was so surprised when she started dating the outgoing hot guy at her office.

“Both of y’all need to chill. I’m not yelling; my voice just carries. Besides, it’s a Friday so everybody in here is letting their hair down and getting tipsy.” Shelby raises her glass in the air and blows a kiss to a group of men who are staring in our

direction.

Kayla slinks down lower in her chair in order not to be seen, and I just shake my head at how forward Shelby is. I don't comment this time because Shelby will only act more outrageous if I nag her.

"I'm sorry, Shell. Maybe you're right. I need to lighten up a little." I give in without much of a fuss. I do my best to always try to stay positive. I don't want to make anyone upset about something avoidable.

"Good. Now, let's drink to Kayla getting her proposal from Mr. Peanut—"

"Shelby, be nice." I widen my eyes at her, and she rolls hers.

"Her proposal from Warren." Shelby raises her glass, and we both tap ours against hers before she finishes her toast. "I don't care what you say; you know that dude has a peanut head."

"Anyway... since you have plans with Warren on your birthday, maybe we can celebrate the weekend after," I excitedly suggest.

"Oh, that sounds like a great idea. Then we can celebrate both my engagement and my birthday. Maybe we can go to that new Asian fusion place." Kayla sits up with a twinkle in her dark brown eyes, and I can feel that she's genuinely happy.

"Getting together will be fun, but I'll pick the place. We will not be at some sad little restaurant when we can be VIPs at the hottest spot in Dallas. Y'all thinking small. You gotta think biiiiiig!" Shelby shimmies her shoulders and rubs her hands together with a cackle.

I can't help but laugh, and Kayla joins in with a giggle. We know Shelby is a

character, and we love her outspoken ways. I wouldn't have her any other way, at least most days.

Shelby often says and does things that I only wished I could. But I would never have the nerve. Even though I'm twenty-eight years old. I still live by my parent's rules. Their way is the only way.

As the youngest daughter of Dr. Miles Jackson and first lady Tina Jackson, I have always been under my parent's thumb. You would think, as the youngest, that I would get to run wild because my parents would be tired from raising my three older sisters, but nope. I feel like they have watched me closer than anyone. And for whatever reason, no matter how much I toe the line and follow their orders to the letter, they still aren't satisfied.

All I can do is work harder to please them.

"Okay, enough about me. It makes me nervous to keep talking about Warren's plans. Emani, how are your students doing with their art projects this year? Do you think they will get to show their work at the district competition like last year?" Kayla turns toward me with a bright smile.

"Oh goodness! My babies this year are so talented! It's only the first semester, and they are already grasping concepts that took me until the last month of school to teach last year. I can't wait for Collins Middle School to represent and win this year!"

I can't help but get hyped up when I talk about my middle schoolers. Those kids bring me a different type of joy. They are innocent and sweet, well, sweet for middle school kids with crazy hormones, but once they realize you want what's best for them, they will give their all. And I love that. I love that I can be open and help my kids be open and able to express themselves.

Teaching is something that I will always cherish.

My career choice was also deemed “worthy” by my parents, so I didn’t have to fight with them about becoming a teacher like my sister, Amari, who decided to go against the grain and become a music producer. My parents were okay with her producing gospel, but once Amari started helping local rap and pop artists, our parents nearly disowned her. It has been almost three years, and Amari is successful, but that fact doesn’t cut through the awkward tension at our monthly family dinners.

I hate to say it, but I’m just glad that they stopped focusing on my work life so much. Although recently, they’ve been pushing for me to date more. Specifically, they want me to date a guy that they’ve picked for me.

I shake my head and come out of my thoughts before I go down that dark road of parental trauma and give myself an anxiety attack. That would be embarrassing and hard as heck to explain to my besties.

“So, Shell, when’s the next big event?” I ask, garnering Shelby’s attention back to our conversation. She’s still eyeballing the group of cuties, and I know she will be on a mission to get some new numbers if I don’t reel her back in.

“We have the Fall Ball coming up, and I get to take more of the lead this year, so...”

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Kay and I both start squealing before Shelby joins in. Shelby has been a junior executive at a marketing firm for years. She's been wanting to head the Fall Ball to prove she can be promoted to a senior executive.

"Shelby, that's awesome! Why didn't you tell us?" Kayla hugs Shelby and rocks her from side to side.

"I just did, silly. Besides, we'll have plenty of time to celebrate me. This month is about you because... go Kay-la it's yo birthday!" Shelby sings, and I join in.

"Guys, my birthday isn't the entire month."

"Biiiii, please! You know we celebrate the entire month," Shelby dismisses, and I nod.

We always do birthdays to the fullest, and that will never change.

"Oh, I forgot to tell y'all." I wait for the girls to turn their attention my way. "I have a date!" I wiggle my eyebrows up and down.

"That's great, Mani. Who with? Is it the cute Math teacher or the sexy guy from the gym?" Shelby lights up.

"Uhh, neither. I told you I am not interested in Mr. Corey, and I haven't even talked to the guy from the gym. I just said he was cute. Anyways, my date is with Darrius Calder."

“The goody-two-shoes church accountant. Nah, Emani. I veto this date. Don’t do it sis. Something ain’t right about that guy.” Shelby shakes her head with a scowl.

I roll my eyes, but inside, I agree. Something has always been a little off with Darrius, but my parents love him, so I push the thought aside.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Shell, Darrius is great. I can’t wait to go on a date with him.” I muster up the little white lie so my friends won’t see I’m only doing this for my parents. Again.

“Uhhuh. Like I said, you need to lighten up. Have a fling with somebody your parents didn’t choose for you. Have some fun for once, Emani!”

“Come on, Shell. Lay off. Darrius sounds like a great guy, Emani. I hope you guys have fun,” Kayla says, bumping my shoulder with hers.

I paste on a smile, “I know I will.”

But deep down, I’m second guessing myself and thinking Shelby might be right.

“I’m glad you asked me out, Darrius.” I smile at my handsome date, who’s stoically sitting across from me.

Darrius Calder has a light caramel brown complexion, a clean-shaven face, and a slight middle gap in his otherwise perfect smile. The trendy haircut of low fade on the sides and curls on the top compliments his face. D.C., as everyone calls him but me, definitely turns heads, especially tonight in his fitted slacks and button-up that stretches across his chest just right.

“I’m glad you said yes, finally.” Darrius. smiles at me and grabs my hand from across the table.

He is my parent’s dream guy for me.

I don’t know much about Darrius except that he is originally from Louisiana from some high society family. Rumor has it that his parents were pastors of some mega-church there, but they lost it all. I still haven’t heard the story of how though. No matter how mysterious his background is, he’s still important to my parents. Darrius has been working as the accountant for my father’s church for a few months now. I haven’t really questioned who he is because obviously my parents trust him enough for him to be over the finances of the church, which isn’t a small thing. My parents head one of the biggest Baptist churches in North Texas, and it’s a lot of money involved.

And although Darrius just started working at the church, he’s been pretty persistent in asking me out. I wasn’t really sure about him, but my mother was adamant that I accept his invitation to dinner. And being the parent pleaser that I am, I plastered a smile on my face and forced excitement into my voice as I said yes. Although he’s good looking and nice, something doesn’t feel right about him. But I push down my apprehension and focus on what’s good for me. A relationship with Darrius is what will make my mother happy, so I will do my best to make that happen.

“A girl can’t be too forward these days,” I finally answer as I bat my lashes.

“I like that about you. Women these days don’t let men lead. They want to control everything and be the boss. It’s a man’s job to be the head of the family,” Darrius spits out the words in a robotic tone like he’s reading from an antiquated script.

I’ve been taught the same thing, and it’s been drilled into me by my parents, well mostly by my mother, that a woman is to follow her husband, but it still takes

everything in me not to roll my eyes. But I have to remember that if I want a godly man who my parents approve of, then I already know this is how most of those types of men will think.

“So, how’s work going? My Mama said you were really busy, and that’s why I haven’t seen you around,” I ask after uncomfortably shifting in my seat.

From our previous conversations, we really don’t have that much in common, which is why I initially turned him down. But everyone can talk about their job, so hopefully, that will ignite some liveliness into this date even if the topic is accounting.

“Don’t worry your pretty head about all that. You won’t ever have to worry about finances when you’re with me...”

“Oh, no. Sorry, I didn’t mean anything like that. I was just asking because I hadn’t seen you. I would never ask about your money,” I rush to correct his assumption.

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The last thing I need him thinking is that I'm some sort of gold-digger. My parents would be mortified if anyone thought that about me. Both my mother and father have an image to uphold.

"Emani," Darrius chastises with a frown. "Don't interrupt me."

I take a deep breath and clear my throat once more, "I apologize. That was rude of me. Please, continue."

"I know what type of woman you are, Emani. Your parents raised you right. So, I'll let it slide. Anyway, as I was saying... I will take care of everything when we're together. You won't even have to continue working with those little underprivileged kids once we get established. Working with your parents has taught me a lot. I'll have my own congregation soon." Darrius pats my hand and then continues to eat his steak.

I feel like my head is about to explode because I've never had a man basically plan out our marriage before the end of our first date. Now, I know in all the books I've ever read and all the movies that I've ever watched, a woman is supposed to want a man to commit and fall in love on the first date, but this sure as heck doesn't feel like love at first sight. The thought of living the life as a first lady of a church makes my head spin. I didn't even know he wanted to be a pastor.

"I actually love my job. Teaching art is a passion that I've had my entire life." I try to keep my tone light, but I can tell by how the frown deepens on his light brown face that he doesn't agree.

“That’s great, Emani. You are a nurturer, but you don’t have to work in an unsafe environment to serve your community. You can always work at the church, be a Sunday school teacher or youth sponsor.” He smiles like he’s just solved the world’s hunger crisis.

I smile back at him because it’s easier to grin and bear it than to be the reason for an awkward disagreement. I would never quit my job. I worked hard for my degree, and teaching my kids how to express themselves and bring out their creativity is a joy that I would never throw away.

As Darrius continues to dictate to me what our life will be like, I nod and smile without commenting. It doesn’t seem like he needs my input anyway. I’m just the placeholder he needs to fulfill his dreams of a stay-at-home wife, mother to his five children, and subservient yes woman.

To be honest, he is saying all the right things; it’s just the way he’s saying them. At least, I thought what he was saying was what I wanted. But the more he speaks, the more I’m searching for a quick exit.

What does my mother see in this man?

“Emani? Are you listening? Or are you planning our wedding already?” Darrius has a little smirk on his face as if to say he’s guessed exactly what I’m thinking.

I fight hard to keep the grimace off of my face. I don’t want to show how turned off I am, but I also don’t want to encourage him either.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t hear what you said,” I try to let out a coquettish giggle to cover my nervousness. However, the sound that comes out is anything but a girlish flirtation. I sound like I’m choking on my dinner.

Darrius pats my back with a look of concern. “Are you okay?”

“Uhh. I don’t think that tres leches cake agrees with me.” I rub my stomach for emphasis.

“Um mm mm. I told you to choose something else. Let me get the check, and I’ll take you home.” Darrius waves down the waiter, and for the first time tonight, I feel relieved.

Maybe I should take Shelby’s advice and date outside of my parent’s picks.

Chapter2

EMANI

I grab my large glass of white wine and my bowl of kettle popcorn as I settle in for a nice, relaxing Saturday night. I turned down Darrius for a second date, saying I had a migraine. It was only a small fib, considering he would have given me one if I had to listen to his rules for another date.

I also made sure not to give any homework this week, so I don’t have any projects to grade or lesson plans to write. My weekend plans consist of binge watching Marvel movies, drinking wine, and sleeping. We have a few more weeks before break, so I don’t have plans to do anything until then. So, when Kayla asked me and Shelby to help her pick out an outfit for her birthday dinner, I was happy to help.

I was actually surprised that she called us. Even though she still didn’t take all of our advice, at least she wasn’t as buttoned up as she usually is.

Shelby thinks it would be a mistake to marry a man like Warren, and although I sort of agree, I just want Kayla to be happy. I’m only apprehensive because Warren seems

a little uptight and self-centered at times, but maybe I'm being too hard on him because if Kay loves him so much, he couldn't be that bad.

So, instead of being critical, I just do my best to keep my comments to myself. I know what it feels like to be criticized, so I try not to inflict that pain on others.

When the show is getting good, I pop a kernel in my mouth and snifle. "Damn, they really made this movie a tear jerker. How am I supposed to get through this without crying? Poor, Shuri," I say out loud as I wipe my eyes. I wasn't expecting the sequel to Black Panther to be so emotional.

When my phone rings, I click pause on the movie and answer the phone without looking to see who it is.

"Girl! I need you to getcho ass up!" Shelby's voice comes through loud and stressed before I can even say hello.

I sit up instantly because as crazy as Shelby is, she's not dramatic. "What's going on?" I question immediately.

"I'm on my way to scoop you up. Kay needs us. I didn't get all the details, but I'll be there in ten minutes. Be ready!" Shelby disconnects the call, and I look at my phone confused.

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“Lord, I hope Warren didn’t do anything stupid!” I say out loud as I jump up and throw on some yoga pants and a sweatshirt.

Kayla is such a sensitive soul, and I really hope it’s nothing bad. But deep down in my heart, I already know it is. There would be no other reason for Shelby to sound so concerned.

I’m just grabbing my shoes when my phone chimes with a notification that Shelby is already outside. I look at my watch, and notice it only took her five minutes to get here.

I lock up quickly and jump into Shelby’s Mercedes. I hang on tight when she burns rubber out of my driveway like a bat out of hell.

“My God, Shell! You’re gonna kill us before we even make it to Kayla! Ahhhh!” I squeal as I tightly close my eyes.

“Bitch! If you don’t stop screaming like a banshee.”

I open my eyes in time to see Shelby throw a frown my way.

“I think we were on two wheels,” I breathe out, trying to keep my voice even. “We are not supposed to be on two wheels, Shell!”

“All four of my wheels are on the ground. Stop being so dramatic, acting like I can’t drive. I’m sure my name was Mario Andretti in a former life,” Shelby says, smirking.

“I’m pretty sure Mario Andretti is still alive. Lord, Jesus!” I screech out again when she swerves around a slow-moving car.

“Of course, he’s alive. We race car drivers know how to drive fast and survive. Just sit back and relax.”

“How am I supposed to relax? Shell, why do you drive like somebody is chasing you?” I question, still holding on to the seatbelt for dear life. I hate riding with Shelby. I don’t know what the heck I was thinking.

“Sis, didn’t you know... somebody is always chasing me,” Shelby chortles, and I laugh along until she floors it through a yellow light.

Lord God, just get us to our destination safely. Amen!

I hold my breath until Shelby slows down a little. I’m just glad Kay doesn’t live far from me because I don’t think I can survive a long trip with Shelby’s driving.

We make it to Kay’s house so fast that I don’t even get to ask Shelby what’s going on. Shelby gets out of the car and rushes quickly to the door. I have to practically run to catch up with her.

Shelby bangs on the door like the police, and I frown until I see a haggard Kayla open the door.

“Oh my goodness! Kayla!” I wrap her in a hug, and she dissolves into tears in my arms.

I lead her inside, and we all sit down. I grab some tissue and give it to Kayla. I watch as my friend fidgets and sniffles, trying to get her emotions under control.

“Okay, so tell us everything that’s going on. You said you and Warren broke up, but what happened?” Shelby asks, and I’m shocked by the news.

“You and Warren broke up? On your birthday! That asshole! Sorry, Jesus,” I instantly amend because it’s really unladylike to cuss, but Warren is an asshole!

“We didn’t just break up. He was cheating on me with... a man,” Kayla hysterically sobs.

My eyes go wide, and my mouth drops open. I am actually speechless.

“Girl! A man? Warren was out here fucking a whole man?” Shelby’s shocked question took the words right out of my mouth.

“Yes, a man. You should’ve seen it. It was a mess. And the only thing Warren could say was that I should just accept it. Like— I would never do better than him.”

“Kayla, I don’t know what to say,” I softly reply, shaking my head.

I normally would find something positive to take away from all this, but even I can’t find the silver lining in this mess. Nobody deserves to be treated like that, especially Kay. She’s so innocent and kind. There’s a special place in hell for Warren Barnett!

“Me either, Emani. I was just so shocked. I mean, he’s never done anything to make me suspect he was...”

“Sus... pect,” Shelby draws out the word to finish Kayla’s sentence with a purse of her glossed lips. “Sis, I think you dodged a bullet. I mean, what if y’all had gotten married, had a house, a few kids, and then bam! Here this dude comes, popping up and talking that bullshit. It’s best that you found out now,” Shelby finishes.

“I agree with Shell,” I add. “It’s for the best that you found out sooner rather than later.”

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“I was supposed to be celebrating my engagement, not wallowing in self-pity.” Kayla sadly shakes her head, and my heart breaks for her.

“Then stop wallowing. No matter what that asswipe did, it’s still your birthday, and we have some major celebrating to do!” Shelby’s mischievous smile lets me know we’re about to be in for a long night.

“I don’t want to celebrate anymore. How about we stay here and watchNetflixand have ice cream?” Kayla’s hopeful tone is almost enough to get me on her side, but I know staying in and crying isn’t good for the soul.

“Girl, hell naw. Weare notabout to sit here andNetflixand chill with yo ass. We’re gonna put on some thot music and our best freak-em dresses and find somewhere to shake our asses!” Shelby exclaims, placing her hands on her narrow hips.

Just as I suspected, we are about to be at somebody’s club, dancing Kayla’s troubles away. As long as I can support my friend, I will do what’s necessary. At least Shelby didn’t suggest we slash Warren’s tires... not yet, anyway.

We stayed out all night, and what a time we had. Shelby and I fed Kayla so many drinks that her whole personality changed. She stopped worrying about Warren, his deceitfulness, as well as the short dress we talked her into wearing... heck, she stopped worrying about everything. Kayla was the most relaxed I have ever seen her. She danced and flirted and turned up like nobody’s business.

Now, however, we're sitting in Kayla's apartment, watching her freak out. I can understand why she would be a little worked up, but it's not like we left her to be devoured by wolves. Although, Anderson was looking at Kayla like he wanted to eat her up.

"I can't believe you heffa's let me sleep with a stranger!" Kayla is pacing back and forth, fidgeting and yelling.

"Girl, please. Your ass is grown!" Shelby interrupts with her signature high-pitched laugh.

"No, really, Kayla. You were adamant about going back to Anderson's apartment," I remind her again.

I'm doing my best to be understanding because she did have a traumatic experience, but maybe we shouldn't have given her so many drinks. I mean, none of us should've drank that much.

"We were all drunk," Shelby says when I tune back into the argument. "Besides, Andy took good care of you."

"He doesn't like to be called Andy," Kayla off-handedly replies before her eyes go wide.

"So, I guess Bucky Barnes does remember something," I say with a wide smile, nodding my head.

"Who the heck is Bucky Barnes?" Kayla questions, frowning.

I roll my eyes at my friend before answering, "he had amnesia in the Captain America movie."

“Emani,” Kayla sighs, shaking her head.

“Mani, we’ve gone over this. Your obscure movie references only make sense to you, honey,” Shelby responds with a chuckle.

“Hey! Captain America is not obscure. Anyways, Kayla is an IT nerd. She should know all about comic book stuff,” I defend myself. I am not the only nerd in this group. We all have our quirks, including cool girl Shelby.

Besides, these two are always acting as if they don’t watch Marvel movies. I know they do because I make them watch them with me. I can’t help it that my memory of all things cinema is better than theirs. Who wouldn’t remember Chris Evans and that booty?

“So, are we going to talk about how Andy looked like he might have had you walking bowlegged if you let him hit?” Shelby questions Kayla.

“No, ma’am, we are not.” Kayla folds her arms over her chest and shifts uncomfortably.

I can tell that Kayla needs a save because Shelby can be relentless sometimes. So, I interrupt the inquisition before she can get going good. “Let it go, Shelby. Why don’t we talk about your fast behind? I saw you give your number to Tobin and Jason.” I know how Shelby loves to flirt, but I have never seen her be that bold.

“Well, you weren’t paying close enough attention ‘cause I gave it to Brady, too.” Shelby snaps her fingers and sticks out her tongue, and all I can do is shake my head.

Shelby is so crazy!

I can’t say that I blame her. It’s not every day that we all get drunk and end up with a

group of guys so fine they could be models. I'm not as bold as Shelby, but maybe I'll take a page out of her book and find somebody to give my number to next time. Or maybe not. I should probably repent for all of the sins I committed last night.

We go back and forth, being silly to keep Kayla from freaking out about Anderson or breaking down about Warren, and it seems to work. I know how fragile Kayla is, and I want to make sure I am being as supportive as I can.

Kayla and Shelby are the sisters I chose. They are family, and I would go to war for both of them like they are my own flesh and blood. It's just my way. When I care about people, I'm protective of them.

Chapter3

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MADDOX

“Listen to me, Mr. Stewart. You don’t have a leg to stand on in this lawsuit. You were harassing a client at Mr. Dalonzo’s business and proceeded to get belligerent when you were asked to leave.”

I’m really tired of this foolishness with Ross Stewart. His ass knows he got off lucky, especially since Luca Dalonzo didn’t kill his ass. It’s not like Luca is the most stable human being in the first place. And for this numbskull to go into Dalonzo territory in their business and start shit and come away breathing is a fucking miracle.

“Now, wait one minute! I was not belligerent! My wife was in that building. He was holding her hostage.”

“Hostage? Have you lost your mind? Luca Dalonzo is an upstanding citizen and a highly respected member of this community. We have video evidence to prove that you came into the building, and Mr. Dalonzo had to defend himself and his girlfriend...”

“Girlfriend! That’s my motherfucking wife!” Stewart stands up and slams his fists on the table.

“Mr. Stewart! That’s enough. Now, sit down.” The arbitrator narrows her eyes at the man, and I already know I’ve won and we didn’t even have to enter a courtroom.

I’m damned good at what I do. I’m the greatest attorney in Texas, and my clients know it.

“This asinine complaint needs to be dropped, or my client will be forced to file his own grievances.” I sit back in my chair with a smirk on my face.

The asshole knows the Dalonzo’s could bury him both figuratively and literally. I don’t know who Stewart is taking advice from, but he needs to get rid of them immediately. They are going to get him killed.

Stewart jumps out of his chair with a red face and slams out of the conference room without saying anything. His lawyer is left blubbering and apologizing. I shake my head at how out of their league they are.

“Ms. Brown, I suggest you let your client know he has twenty-four hours to respond, or I will be filing with the court for slander, trespassing, destruction of property, and anything else I can think of.”

“Fine,” she huffs. “I’ll let Ross... umm, Mr. Stewart know.” She hurries after her disgruntled client, calling his name.

I shake my head, “He’s definitely screwing her.”

“Mr. Reid, it has been a pleasure as usual,” Marion purrs as she gives me a suggestive once over.

I hold in the smirk because that would only encourage her more. As the arbitrator over my case, Marion knows it would be unethical for us to sleep together. And although I love pussy, I can do without hers. No matter how hard she throws it at me.

“Have a good day, Ms. Cole.” I wink at her even though I know I shouldn’t.

Like I said, I love pussy. And even though Marion is thirsty, she’s got a sexy, bookish thing going for her that I like.

“Byeeeee,” she sings, twiddling her fingers at me.

I chuckle as I walk out of the room. Marion is by far the easiest arbitrator I’ve recently worked with. But to be honest, I like going to court. I love eating my opposition alive with my words and watching them crumble beneath my intellect. What can I say, I’m a theatrical bastard. At least that’s what my twin tells me.

I hop on the elevator and ride it down to the garage. I usually park on the street, but lately, I’ve been dealing with some undesirable characters, so it’s best I park where there are cameras present. Because if any fucker even thinks about messing with my Porsche, I’ll definitely have to whoop somebody’s ass. People are often fooled by my smooth outer appearance, boyish charm, and striking good looks. But that is their first mistake. I’m a shark. I came out the womb with killer instincts and a take no prisoners attitude. I was made to be an attorney, and if I do say so myself...I’m the best at this shit!

I make it back to my office in no time because I drive like I’m on the race track. I love the power of my car and the easy way it handles. I was almost a professional driver for an Indy team, but life happened.

“Afternoon, Mr. Reid. Your father would like to see you as soon as possible. And your brother called,” Lena, my very capable assistant, says, handing me my messages.

“Thanks, Lena. Tell my father I’ll be up in an hour. I need to check in with a few clients first.”

“Will do. Oh, and your mother called.” Lena grimaces with an eye roll.

“Which one?” I question out of formality, but by her reaction, I can take an educated guess.

“The former Mrs. Reid.” Lena rolls her eyes again.

My biological mother, Elizabeth, will not give up the Reid name, even though she’s been divorced from my father for over two decades. But that’s the least of her entitled ways.

“I’ll be sure to return her call whenever I feel like it.”

I hear Lena chuckle as I enter my office and close the door behind me. There isn’t any love lost between my mother and me. How someone could abandon her children because she didn’t get her way is beyond me. However, my stepmother, who would kill me for adding the step, loves Zane and me like she gave birth to us herself. Sarah is a wonderful woman, and I don’t know what I would do without her.

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As soon as I sit down at my desk, my phone rings. It's the norm for my phone to ring nonstop at all times of the day and night. But what's unusual is for my best friend to call me in the middle of the day.

"What's up, Sullivan? Shouldn't you be working?" I know it's about to be some shit if Jasper Sullivan is calling me.

Although we are as close as brothers, Jasper is more of a texter. I don't think his ADHD has ever allowed him to have a full-blown phone conversation. And since he moved back from Nashville after opening up his club, he's been too busy running his business and running after ass.

"I need you to come hang out with me tonight at Vibe. I've had my heart broken."

I can hear the humor in my friend's voice, but even if I couldn't, I would know that he's full of shit. Jasper would have to have a heart before it could be broken.

"So, I'm guessing there won't be any wedding bells for you and Marissa."

"You mean Ashley? Marissa was two weeks ago. You're my best friend, keep up man. Damn."

"What the hell ever. We aren't in high school. How the hell am I supposed to keep up with your revolving door of women."

"That's because you have to keep up with your merry-go-round of bimbos. Anyway, I don't have time to go back and forth with you. I have work to do. I'll see ya

tonight.”

Before I can say anything, the bastard hangs up on me.

“I guess I can make time in my schedule to go to Vibe. I need a drink or three anyway.”

I hate loud ass clubs and phony ass people. Yet, here I am once again in VIP, putting up with both. I knew Jasper was full of shit when he called, but I was bored, so I came to Vibe against my better judgment. The asshole already left with some chic he just met before I even ordered my first drink. I could’ve hung out with my brother who is going to have a fit when he finds out I blew him off again. I’ve only seen my twin a few times since he moved back to Dallas. That’s pretty shitty of me, but I’ll make it up to him.

My thoughts are interrupted by a loud, obviously attention seeking laugh. I continue sipping on my Bourbon and ignoring the desperation of the random chick beside me. I don’t want to be rude, but I’m fighting the urge to tell her to shut the fuck up. Nothing is that damned funny. Hell, who am I kidding? I am a rude son-of-a-bitch.

Right when I get ready to tell her to clamp her mouth shut, an even rowdier group comes into the VIP. The scowl on my face is instant. But when my eyes connect to a dark honey brown gaze, I freeze.

The woman is... no. Not a woman. She’s definitely not a woman; she’s a goddess—a goddess who has decided to grace this gray world with color.

I intently watch her as she walks by; the only acknowledgment she gives me is a shy smile before she looks away. That one little response has sealed her fate.

I won't chase her down and drag her ass out of this club so I can find out everything there is to know about her. That would be psychotic. My eyes stay trained on her and the group she's with. I watch as they are led to a section not far from where I'm sitting. I'm glad that I won't have to move to be able to see her. I can admit that I plan on stalking her ass for the rest of the night. Yeah, that might sound a little creepy. Oh well, I'll just be a creep.

"I've been trying to get your attention all night," the woman beside me finally speaks.

I was wondering if she was going to keep burning a hole in the side of my head. She's been giggling and dancing seductively all night. She's been putting on quite a show.

"I noticed." I sip my drink as I look her in the eyes, finally giving her the attention she wants.

"Well, why didn't you say anything if you noticed me?" She questions, giving me a flirty smile.

I didn't feel like entertaining her ass before the goddess walked into my view, and I sure as hell don't want to be bothered with her now. But, I have a choice to make now. Do I want to be an asshole, or do I want to let her down gently just in case the beauty is watching me? Decisions, decisions.

"Listen, sweetheart." I break out my charming smile, "I'm here to have a drink. As lovely as you are, I'm not here to meet anybody tonight."

"That's too bad because I promise I can be a good time. Here, take my card." She hands me a black and gold embossed card, "I hope to hear from you soon."

I don't even look at the name on the card. I smile and throw the woman a pity wink as

I slide it into the inside of my suit jacket pocket. Her pale skin flushes with a red blush before she saunters off.

I relax back into my seat, and my eyes automatically search for the goddess. My face breaks into a genuine smile when our gazes collide. I lick my lips and sit forward. The goddess doesn't break eye contact this time, and I see the challenge she's presenting without her saying a word.

A waitress drops off a round of shots, and without taking her eyes off me, she downs it. When she puckers her lips and blows me a kiss, I take the move as an opening to ask for a real one.

Blowing kisses my way is a dangerous game. She'll soon learn it's a mistake to tease a man like me.

I slowly put down my glass, and stand up. I take my time rising to my full six-four height, tug my sleeves down, and adjust my collar. With every move I make, her eyes never leave mine.

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I take my time walking across the small space to get to her. My deliberate steps stop when I'm right in front of her.

Nothing else matters at this moment except for me hearing her voice. I want all of her attention on me because all of mine is most definitely on her.

I bend down to get close to her ear so she doesn't miss anything that I'm saying. "Do you blow kisses to just anybody, or am I special?"

I lean back so I can get a good look at the expression on her face, and she does not disappoint. The twinkle in her deep-set eyes and the way she bites her bottom lip tells me everything I need to know.

"Oh, I think you already know you're special," her breathy reply has me smiling.

The raspy tone with the combination of her sultry words has my dick going firm in my slacks. I can sense that meeting this woman is exactly what I need. I also have a feeling in the pit of my stomach that says she's not like any woman I have ever come across. She presents a challenge that I'm down to conquer.

"Let me show you just how special I am."

Chapter4

EMANI

"Let me show you just how special I am," the sex on a stick rasps close to my ear.

I feel a shiver from the tickle of his breath on my earlobe and I try to hold in the gasp that almost leaves my mouth.

I am normally very reserved and I pride myself on making good decisions. I am level-headed and responsible, but Shelby's words echo in my mind at the stranger's boldness. Lighten up, Emani.

It doesn't help that I've been downing shots since we walked in the door. But since my coworker bestie, Alice wanted to really turn up for her thirtieth birthday, I didn't restrain myself as I usually would, so I didn't turn down any drinks. And because Shelby came through with the VIP treatment last minute, we've been getting free drinks.

When this man looks at me, I feel like all my clothes are going to melt away. I think about his question and if I really want him to show me what he's working with. I smile up at him before I let my eyes run the length of his body.

"So, is that a yes? Do you want me to show you?" He leans even closer to me and my head swirls with lust. I'm not going to be able to resist this man.

But deep down inside, I don't really want to resist him. And after my last disastrous date with Darrius, I can't keep doing the same things and expecting different results. That's the literal definition of insanity.

I keep the same type of guy in my dating rotation. The "nice guy", a man that you could take home and introduce to your parents, sweet, and dependable. I never have the dangerous, make your panties wet with a look type of guys. And before I laid eyes on the man in front of me, I was okay with that. Now, I'm not so sure. I think I've been missing out.

But without even knowing this man's name, I know that he's trouble. I can see it in

his sparkling blue eyes that he would give me all types of heartache and pain.

“And just how are you going to show me?” I stare at him, daring him to prove he’s not all bravado.

I would hate for him to be a dud after I’ve used all my nerve to talk to him without coming off as a blubbering idiot. However, with the rasp of his voice, the smell of his cologne, shoot even the way he walks, this man exudes sex like it’s his middle name. I know there’s no way on earth he is all talk!

I’m trying my best not to let my hormones rule me, but this man makes me want to act out of character in the worst way. And with these shots burning through my veins, it’s extremely hard to remember that I was raised in the church.

“Gorgeous, if you really want me to show you, all you need to do is say the fucking word. Not this back and forth sly shit we’ve been doing. I’m talking about really mean what you say because consent is a top priority. So, beautiful... what’s it gonna be?”

I gulp because I’ve never had anybody be so direct before. I want to tell him that I was just joking and run my hot behind in the other direction, but this could be my only chance with a man like him.

“Let’s get out of here?”

“Is that a statement or a question?” He quirks his eyebrow at me and I can feel my face burn.

“A statement?” I want to palm my face because even that sounded like a question.

“What’s your name beautiful?”

This time I do palm my face in embarrassment. I can't believe I'm ready to leave with a man and didn't even bother to ask him his name.

"Don't be embarrassed. We're adults." He pulls my hands from my face with a smirk.

I clear my throat, and push my shoulders back. He's right, we're adults and I need to pull on my big girl panties and take charge.

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“It’s not every day that I’m propositioned by a stranger without getting his name.” I return his smirk with one of my own.

“Damn. I was so blinded by your beauty, I forgot to be charming.” He smiles and takes my hand in his, and kisses the back while looking deeply into my eyes. “I’m Maddox Reid. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance...”

“Emani. Emani Jackson,” I supply.

Forgot to be charming my butt. I subtly fan my warm face and do my best not to giggle like a schoolgirl with a crush.

“So, Ms. Jackson— it is Miss, right?”

I nod with a smile, “Yes. It’s miss.”

“That’s good. I would hate to have to take you from your husband.”

The arrogance on anyone else would’ve had me rolling my eyes, but the words coming from him is sexy as sin. And for some reason, I don’t think he’s joking. He absolutely meant that.

“Something tells me you wouldn’t hate it at all.”

“What makes you say that?” Maddox questions. His eyes twinkle with what I suspect is humor.

“You strike me as a kind of man who likes a challenge,” I say, looking him up and down.

I can’t help but snap my mouth shut to keep the moan from escaping. Maddox Reid is a spectacular specimen. Live a little Emani.

“Never met a challenge that I couldn’t conquer. Are you going to be a challenge Ms. Jackson? Do you want me to conquer that sexy little ass of yours?” Maddox growls.

And like the heathen I convinced myself I wasn’t, I flush with desire. I have never been one for dirty words. Actually, I’m pretty sure nobody has ever spoken a dirty word to me. Maybe, that’s what I’ve been missing all my life.

“Yes,” the word tumbles from my lips before I can even think.

“Fucking fantastic. Tell your friends that you’re leaving. Call or text anybody my name and take a picture of me if you have to. Give me your phone.”

I absently hand him my phone, and he pulls me to his side and takes a selfie. I look at the picture and smile even though I look like a love-sick fool. I want to text Shelby, but she’ll blow my phone up asking questions, so I decide not to text her. And even though I decide not to text Shell, I’m not a complete idiot, so I text my sister Amari. She’s the only other person I can trust with anything without judgment.

“Let me just tell my friends that I’m leaving and we can go.”

Maddox nods his head before kissing the back of my hand. I hold my breath until he lets go. I head towards Alice to tell her I’m leaving. I hope I’m not making a mistake, but I have never been this excited in my life. I can tell I’m in for one wild ride.

The click of the door closing sounds louder in my head than it probably is in real life. I'm sure my nervous excitement is making this experience ten times a bigger deal than it actually is. But I've never experienced anything like this before. I mean, let's be real. I'm not a virgin and I'm not naïve, but my experience is limited. It took me going off to college and getting from under my parent's thumb to get a small taste of the dating scene. And even when my parents weren't around, more often than not, I stuck to their ways.

But this is definitely not something my parents would approve of. Don't think of your parents right now Emani.

"You don't have to be nervous, sweetie. We don't have to do anything you don't want to do." Maddox's smooth voice is like a lullaby to my senses.

I slightly relax. There's something about this man that makes me want to take chances. I mean it's not every day I go home with a complete stranger. I want to be carefree and wild. I want to be adventurous.

"Umm do you have some sort of alcohol?" I nervously ask. I'm so out of my element I don't even remember what I was drinking earlier. But a little liquid courage will go a long way in helping me calm down even more.

"No. We don't need any more liquor. I want you to be cognizant of everything I do to you."

Maddox's wicked words hit me right in my core, making me clench my thighs together in need.

"O-oh-okay," I stammer. I take a deep breath and do my best to get out of my head.

There isn't anything to be nervous about. I'm a grown woman who is attracted to a

grown man. We made a grown decision to leave the club and come back to his place. It's okay that we've only known each other for a couple of hours. Who knows what will happen after tonight? We could really have something... at least I hope.

"Come here," Maddox's authoritative tone brings me back to the here and now.

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My panties flood at his command. I had no idea I even liked bossy men. Well, Maddox is sexy when he's bossy, not like Darrius and his belittling.

I slowly saunter in Maddox's direction. Doing my best not to wobble on my heels and fall on my face. When I make it to stand directly in front of him, I silently exhale my relief that the alcohol didn't affect my grace.

"You know, when I first saw you I thought you were the personification of a goddess."

Charming. So, so very charming.

"Oh yeah?" I try playing it cool, but I can feel my heart beating out of my chest.

"Yeah," Maddox says then gives me an up and down once over.

He slips his finger under the spaghetti strap of my dress and moves it back and forth seductively. Slowly his gaze traces my body, and when his eyes land on my lips I involuntarily lick them.

I desperately want him to kiss me. I can't wait to feel his lips on mine. They look like they have the perfect firmness to plumpness ratio. Not too thin and not too much. I'm staring so hard that I don't miss when Maddox pulls his bottom lip into his mouth.

"Something you want, pretty girl?" Maddox leans in and licks my lips.

I moan and push myself closer to him. Maddox wraps his arms around me and places

his large hands on my butt. When his fingers flex and he grips my cheeks hard, I squirm. Maybe I like rough talk and rough handling. Who knew?

“This only has to go as far as you want it to go. If you want me to stop just say so,” Maddox says, looking me deep into my eyes. He moves his rough touch from my butt back up to my arms.

“Okay,” I respond with a nod.

Maddox smiles and it’s like someone turned on the brightest light imaginable. How can one man be so daggone gorgeous?

Before I can even blink, Maddox has the front of my dress down around my waist. My strapless bra is barely containing my hard nipples and I’m doing my best to regulate my breathing. The exotic scent of Maddox’s cologne is driving me wild, and I can’t put my finger on why I’m so excited. I wasn’t this wound up when I lost my virginity.

“Pretty girl, you good?” Maddox softly questions, but his hands never stop the exploration of my body. He lazily moves his fingers over the skin of my collarbone before his eager fingers rub circles around my nipples through my bra.

The feeling of the fabric in coordination with his fingers is so erotic that I have to squeeze my thighs together. I fall slightly forward and place my hands on Maddox’s firm chest. He flexes his muscles before leaning down with a growl and taking my mouth in the most devastating kiss I have ever experienced in my life.

Maddox dominates my mouth with each swirl of his tongue against mine. I keep up at first but before I know it, I’m a moaning, squirming mess. My hands are grabbing and tearing at Maddox’s shirt. Buttons go flying everywhere and I moan when his chiseled chest comes into view.

“Ummm, my shy pretty girl is coming out of her shell.” Maddox smirks before stripping his shirt completely off.

I’m still feeling bold so I step in his space and lick out my tongue to taste him. I run my teeth along his skin, nipping at his pecks. When I look up into his eyes, they twinkle with something dangerously sexy. Wild! That’s the look in his pretty eyes.

Chapter 5

MADDOX

Emani is a vixen that I never expected. As reserved as I can tell she is, she isn’t shutting down on me. She’s taking control and going for what she wants, and it’s sexy as hell. A lot of women are hung up on having sex with someone on the first night, but I say life is short. As long as everyone is consenting and protected, I don’t get what the big deal is.

As we were talking, I was making plans to take Emani out on a date. But that will have to come in the morning because right now, I just want to take her sexy little body and make her mine.

I lift Emani by her ass and walk her to my bedroom. I’m so glad the master is on the first floor. I place her down on the bed and rummage around in my bedside table to find my box of condoms. I get a condom out and place it down on the bed beside her.

Emani looks so sexy half dressed with kiss swollen lips. I can’t resist her, so I don’t even try. I lean down and take her lips once more in a kiss so hot my head should be on fire. The chemistry between us is out of this world. Of course, it’s not the first time I’ve had sexual chemistry with a woman, but somehow this seems different. I can’t put my finger on it, and now is not the time for me to contemplate the reasons. Now is the time for me to explore Emani.

I take my time completely undressing her then I take my time to let her see what she's about to get. I slowly slide my slacks off and step out of them. My hard-on is pushing against my boxer briefs, desperately wanting to be set free.

“You need some help with that?” Emani doesn't wait for me to reply before she leans forward and palms my erection.

The unrestrained groan that leaves my mouth sounds savage as fuck. It's as if I've been waiting my whole life for this woman to touch me.

“Fuuuuck, pretty girl. You're gonna make me cum before we even get started.” I reluctantly remove Emani's hands from my dick and strip off my briefs.

I have never put a condom on so fast, but I managed to get it on without incident. I deeply kiss Emani's lips before traveling down her body to acquaint myself with her pussy.

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I run my nose up and down and all around her sweet lower lips. I mercilessly lick and tease her while I stroke my cock. I'm doing my best not to rush and plunge myself in her slick heat, but I'm too close to cumming.

"You ready, pretty girl?" My voice is deep and husky. It's nearly unrecognizable.

"Yes," Emani breaths out.

She's so fucking sexy as she writhes and wiggles around on the bed. Her small hands are balled in the sheets, and goosebumps cover her beautiful dark brown skin. Fucking irresistible.

I kiss my way back up her luscious curves, and I slide inside my new heaven.

"Ohhh," we groan in unison.

I have to pause for a minute just so I don't lose my shit and pound into her like I'm a lunatic. I take a deep breath and start slowly thrusting my hips. My eyes slam shut at the sensation of having Emani wrapped so tightly around me. Damn! Fuck! Shit! Don't cum yet. Don't be a two minute man, Maddox! Keep your shit together!

After my pep talk, I was able to speed up my pace and show Emani why she would never regret coming home with me on the first night. Besides, we'll have many nights after this to do it nice and slow.

"Maddox! Oh my... it feels so goood," Emani loudly moans as she scratches the hell out of my back.

The burn of her nails tearing into my skin spurs me on. I'm known to like a little pain with my pleasure, and the way Emani is digging into my back is making me harder than ever.

"Fuck, baby. Your pussy feels so good. Take this dick! Tell me how good it is." I don't even let Emani answer as I pound into her. I flip our bodies so Emani is on top. "Ride me baby, ride this dick."

Emani throws her head back, and her hands are planted on my chest. I place my hands on her hips and move her roughly on my dick. I want her to know exactly how I like it.

"It's so good, baby. You're gonna make me cum. Ohhhh!" Emani holds the word on a scream that will surely have my neighbors calling the cops, but my masculine pride won't let me give a fuck.

I hold out for as long as I can while Emani's whole body shakes. I sit up and squeeze her to my chest as she rides the high of her orgasm.

Her body feels so good against mine, and the sound of her moans turns me on so much that my eyes slam shut, and I tightly clench my jaw.

"Fuuuuckk, stop baby. Don't move," I hiss out. I wanted to make this first round unforgettable and long lasting, but I'm about to explode.

"I can't stop moving. It feels too fucking good," Emani whines as she picks up the pace.

Her dirty words and sensual movements have me losing control, and my thrusts falter. I begin to wildly buck my hips as I pound into Emani's perfect pussy. I roar so loud I feel like I'm going to go hoarse. I damn near black when my orgasm hits. The

sensations are so amazing.

“Fuck! You’re definitely a goddess!” I kiss Emani’s lips, her face, and the side of her neck. I kiss her anywhere I can. She’s so fucking sexy.

“And you, sir, are what I least expected.” Emani smiles at me with a glazed, satisfied expression, and again, I swell with pride.

After we clean up a little and I dispose of the condom, we cuddle like we’ve been together for years. We go a few more rounds before we wear ourselves out and began to talk.

We talked for a while, and I’m not surprised she’s an Art teacher. We talk about our careers and a little about our hobbies before Emani drifts off to sleep.

“Sweet dreams, Sugar.” I have a smile on my face when I finally fall asleep because I can’t wait to wake up and do it all over again.

However, when I’m awakened by the light of day that slips through my curtains, I realize that I’m alone in the bed. But not just the bed, I’m alone period. Emani is gone!

The week has been grueling, but being busy has kept my mind from wandering to the beauty that left me high and dry in my bed. Although I haven’t had much time during the day to think about Emani, she has taken over my dreams every night since we met.

I’ve woken up with a hard-on every day this week. It makes my morning run uncomfortable as fuck. The flashes of our incredible night together run on a loop

through my brain, and no matter what I do, I can't shake them.

I still don't know why she left without saying anything. Our chemistry was off the fucking charts, and I was damned near planning my proposal. Emani didn't strike me as a one-night-stand type of woman, but obviously, I was mistaken.

Still, I can't help but wonder if something happened that I didn't catch. Was she uncomfortable? Did I push her too fast, too soon? No. Emani definitely enjoyed herself.

We were cuddling, for fuck's sake. I never fucking cuddle. But with her, I did. I wanted to get to know Emani. I wanted to actually go on a date. But she left.

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How the fuck could she just leave?

Don't get me wrong, I've had my share of one-nighters. But it was understood from the jump that's what it was. Maybe our signals got crossed somehow, and she thought that's all I wanted.

Obviously, that's what she thought since she slipped out without so much as a thank you for the dick.

"Mr. Reid, I'm stepping out for my appointment. Kara will be here to cover for me." Lena's voice comes through the receiver that I absently picked up. My mind is all over the place, and that's not good for business. Get your shit together, Mad.

"Alright. Thanks, Lena." I hang up, and my mind goes right back to Emani.

I decided to actually get some work done and go over a few of my case files. My father has been handling less and less of his "special" clients which means I've been handling them more. It's an exciting aspect of our law firm, but I know firsthand it can be dangerous. Most of their files are written in code only my father and I can decipher, so anyone else reading it would think it's just regular legal jargon. However, if you know the code, you would know that these files are about everything illegal you could think of. When my father began teaching me right out of undergrad, I thought it was nonsense. But he has proven to me time and time again how important it is for our clients to have anonymity when it comes to their business dealings. It's worked for us and them for years.

I'm almost completely caught up with my work when my stomach begins to growl. I

look at the clock and notice it's way past my usual lunch time. I hate when a new P.A. steps in for Lena. I pick up my phone to call for lunch; however, before I can call to order something to eat, there's a knock on my door.

"Come in."

"Mr. Reid, Lena ordered you lunch before she left." Kara enters with a bag from Anamia's, a Tex-Mex restaurant that I love.

"Right on time." I get up from my desk and take the bag from her hands with a nod, "I appreciate it."

"You're welcome, sir." Kara flutters her eyelashes and smiles flirtatiously before turning and closing the door behind her. I smirk and shake my head. I don't know why they always send the young girls up here when Lena is out. They always act like they've never seen a man before. I'm pretty sure they have a bet in the P.A. pool on who will get me in bed first. And as much as I love women, I never dip my pen in the company ink.

Not only would it expose my family's law firm to harassment suits, my father would kill me with his bare hands. I love breathing too much to slip up and sleep with one of my subordinates. Besides, there's plenty of ass out there. Even though the majority of my time is spent here, there's absolutely no reason for me to date anyone who works for Reid and Associates.

As busy as I am, especially now with the old man hinting at retirement, I still make time to date or at least hook up. Beautiful women are everywhere I look, so they don't always catch my eye. However, when they stand out like Emani, I can't help but shoot my shot.

I grimace at my thoughts. We didn't exchange numbers, but I have to find her

somehow. There's a reason Emani keeps circling my brain.

I was just so taken with her. I was pleasantly surprised by her down to earth personality because women with out of this world beauty like hers are usually high maintenance. And to find out she was an Art teacher made her a saint in my eyes. The way these kids act nowadays, I wouldn't be able to do it. But hell, if my Art teacher looked like her when I was in school, not only would I have been the most well behaved kid in class, I'd probably be another damned Vincent van Gogh.

I have to stop thinking about Emani. I know I have shit to do, especially since my brother decided to get married, and I planned his bachelor party this weekend. However, after this weekend, I'm going to make it my mission to find Emani Jackson.

Chapter6

EMANI

It's been a couple of weeks, and Maddox still hasn't called me. I thought we had something special, but I guess I was a fool. That's what happens when I act out of character. I chastise myself for the millionth time.

I can't believe I had a one-night stand. To be fair, I thought Maddox and I would eventually go out and maybe even start seeing each other. But I should've known that a man like Maddox wouldn't want something lasting.

"Who says you can't judge a book by its cover," I mumble bitterly.

I've been in a real funk since I met Maddox. Well, since he didn't use my number that I left on the pillow before I had to leave his house.

I wanted to wake him up and tell him that I had an emergency phone call from my mother, but he looked so peaceful. We stayed up half the night talking and exploring each other's bodies, and I knew he had to be as tired as I was. I'm no pillow princess, but Maddox Reid was definitely putting in work. So, instead of waking him up, I left a note and left his house. I was glad that his fancy community didn't have a guard at the gatehouse because it made it easier for the Uber to pick me up.

I guess I'm feeling a little bitter since I wasn't bold enough to ask a man for his phone number before I slept with him. Dumb move, Emani!

Now, I'm sitting here doing my best not to be a Debbie Downer as Kayla and Shelby reminisce over our impromptu trip to Vegas.

Kayla was still getting calls from Warren, so to take her mind off her troubles, Shelby got us the hook-up at a conference in Vegas for the weekend. Once we got there, we ran into Anderson and his group of friends again. I could see the chemistry between Anderson and Kayla all weekend, and I'm glad they seemed to finally work it out and get together. But Brady and Shelby are another story. There's a tug of war between the two of them, and somehow, I found myself in the middle of it.

"Emani, you seem like you're pretty level-headed." Brady is glaring at Shelby as she flirts with some random guy.

"I am." I narrow my eyes at Brady because we have never had a conversation and even though Shelby and I have been bickering all weekend, I would never talk bad about my friend to a guy.

"Good. Maybe some of that will rub off on your friend so she can stop playing games."

I've been in a sour mood since we've been in Vegas, and I can admit that. But I've

been doing my best to hold it together. I may have snapped at my girls a time or two, but who the heck does this guy think he is?

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“Excuse you? Brady, you’ve barely said two words to me, and when you finally decide to, it’s something negative about my best friend...” I fold my arms over my chest and give him the nastiest look I can muster.

“Come on, Emani. You know Shelby is leading me on. Like you said, she’s your best friend.” Brady doubles down on his insult.

“First of all, you’re the one who keeps coming back for more. If there’s one thing I know about Shell, she lets guys know from the jump what’s up. So, I doubt very much that she’s so called ‘led you on,’ you need to check yourself, Brady.” Normally, I would’ve given that speech with a bit more empathy and honey. But not today.

How dare he try to act like he doesn’t love the thrill of the chase like every other guy. Then, once he gets what he wants, he will throw away the woman like yesterday’s garbage. I don’t blame Shelby for not wasting her time with just one guy.

“Whoa, I know she’s your best friend. But there’s no need to get all defensive.” Brady puts his hands up like I’m about to attack him.

What a jackass! I can tell Shelby likes him, but this conversation is making me question her judgment.

“You came to me with this foolishness, Brady. Don’t ever try to bash my friend because you’re butt hurt. Please, for the love of God. Leave Shelby alone! If you think she’s so horrible, then let her go!”

Brady didn’t say anything to me after that. To say the flight home on their private jet

was awkward is putting it lightly. I didn't mean to hurt his feelings, but I didn't like how he was talking about my friend. Even though he kept throwing pitiful looks my way while he tried to ignore Shelby during the flight, I can't say I'm sorry for what I said.

"Earth to Emani!" Shelby snaps her fingers in front of my face, and I blink a couple of times.

"Emani? Okay, what gives? You haven't been yourself since we went to Vegas," Kayla huffs.

I try to think of something quick because I'm embarrassed about being hung up on a guy who only wanted me for sex.

"You guys are out dating, and I'm so happy for you, but I feel a little left behind." I give a partial truth to how I'm really feeling.

I tried to do it Shelby's way and put myself out there with a hot guy, but it blew up in my face, and I'm still salty about it.

"Girl! You are full of shit. I know damn well you don't think we're about to believe some high school excuse for you being so bitchy. What's really going on? I'm with Kay. Lately, you've been acting foul." Shelby raises her eyebrow and purses her lips.

I should've known she wouldn't believe me.

"Okay, fine!" I say, plopping back against Shelby's soft couch. I bite my lip, trying to decide where I should start and how much I want to tell my friends.

I watch Shelby and Kay look at each other curiously. And I know they have no idea what's going on because I like to keep things to myself.

“I had a one-night stand,” I mumble embarrassed.

“Holy shit!” Shelby laughs, sitting up.

Kayla stares at me with wide eyes as she swallows hard. I can’t tell if they’re disappointed or surprised, maybe both. But I can feel my face heating under the shocked silence.

“With who?” Kay blinks away her shocked stare to ask.

“With a guy that I really liked, and after we had sex, he never called me again. The jerk!” I purse my lips.

“Oh, Mani. I’m so sorry. Men can be asses,” Kay consoles, getting up to sit beside me. She pulls me into a side hug, and I lay my head on my shoulder.

“You know what? Forget that fuck boy!” Shelby hollers.

“Shelby!” Me and Kay yell her name in unison.

“What? That’s what he is. Don’t defend some...boy.” Shelby rolls her eyes, but she amends her words. “Who can’t handle a woman like you. He will never deserve you. We’re not spilling tears over boys that don’t matter.”

“You’re right. And I’m sorry that I took my frustrations out on you guys. I didn’t lie when I said I felt a little left out. You guys got to have the ultimate millionaire hook-ups, and I get a dud.” I pout a little because even though it was only one night, I thought Maddox was the change I needed.

“It’s okay, Mani. But you know you don’t have to keep anything from us. We love you.” Kayla smiles.

Her words warm my heart. I really can depend on them for everything. But I still can't help thinking about what would've been, what could've been, or what should've been if only Maddox were who I built him up to be in my head.

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It's been too long for me to still be in a funk, but I can't seem to get Maddox Reid off my brain. I've never in my life been so hung up on a man before. Maybe Shell is right...dickmatizedis what she called it. I can't help but think back on the way Maddox made my body feel.

The man is an artist with his hands, and I was the canvas. Just thinking about the way his long fingers stroked me to orgasm over and over again. Stop it, Emani! You're better than this.

"Amari, don't you think that dress is a little short for brunch?" My older sister, Zuri's snide remark brings me back to the present.

I don't even have it in me to hold in the loud sigh or not to roll my eyes. Our monthly sister's brunch is supposed to be a time when the four of us can catch up and stay connected. But it normally ends up with Zuri bossing and fussing at me and Amari while Naomi plays peacemaker.

"Zuri, mind your business. If my ass ain't hanging out, then there's nothing to see." Amari flicks her hand at Zuri before she takes a seat beside me.

I lean over and give her a side hug, and she winks at me. Amari is only ten months older than I am. Needless to say, somebody didn't wait the mandatory six weeks. Growing up, everyone thought we were twins. It didn't help that my mother always dressed us alike. I didn't mind though. Amari has always been my protector and biggest cheerleader. I know you aren't supposed to have a favorite sister, but yeah... she's mine.

“Don’t tell me to mind my business. The way you dress is my business. You’re running around like Mama and Daddy didn’t raise you to be respectable.”

Here we go with the sermon of the day. Thou shall not misrepresent Mount Zion Avenue Baptist Church.

“Girl! I am grown. I have been grown for a long time. So, please stop trying to run my life and run your own,” Amari says, sitting up in her seat.

“Alright you two. We have to go through this nonsense every time we get together. Let’s just relax and have a nice time for once.” Naomi’s tone is patient, but exasperation is covering her pretty heart-shaped face.

Amari shrugs her delicate shoulders, “I’m not going to let her talk to me crazy just because she has nominated herself spokesman for Mama and Daddy.”

“As the oldest...”

“Excuse me, waiter! We’re ready to order,” I cut in before Zuri can get even more agitated. Once she gets on her high horse, we will never get her off.

I love my sister, but I can’t deal with her foolishness today. The older we get, the more uptight she becomes. Maybe if her boyfriend, Kelvin, gave her the D more, she would relax a little. Oh lord! What am I thinking?

Once we order, Naomi changes the subject to a safer topic. We eat and chat, surrounded by tension until the check comes, and we pay. I’ll have to make up an excuse for the next get together because I don’t want to spend my time anxious and upset. I do that enough when I spend any amount of time with my parents.

Naomi and Zuri leave together, so Amari and I decide to stay and have a real drink

without judgment.

“So, whatever happened to the cutie pie whose picture you sent to me that night? I was expecting to meet him soon.” Amari wiggles her eyebrows, waiting for the tea.

My shoulders sag because even though I told Kay and Shell what happened, I still feel the heat of embarrassment wash over me.

“It ended up being a one-night stand because he never called,” I reply. A frown instantly covers my face when I think about it.

“Was it good?”

I enthusiastically nod my head at my sister’s question. And she frowns at me before looking me up and down.

“So why didn’t you call him?” Amari ticks her head to the side.

“Well, we didn’t exactly exchange numbers.” My face heats, and I dip my head.

“Girl, what! Okay, Mani. Just break down what exactly happened because I’m confused as hell.”

“Okay, okay. Ummm. Well, we went back to his place...”

“Well damn, little sis, you went all out! Was his house nice? Was it clean? You know you can’t be going to strange men’s houses, especially if it’s nasty.”

“OMG, Amari! Just let me finish the dang story.” I shake my head at my sister and giggle at her silliness. “So, we went back to his house, and we had the most amazing sex I’ve ever had. I didn’t think men like him existed.”

“And you didn’t get his number? Girl, have I taught you nothing! Umm uh mmm.” Amari disappointedly shakes her head.

“Anyway, between our sessions...” I hold up my hand to stop Amari from interrupting before continuing, “We talked a little, then fell asleep. I woke up to a million messages from Mama, so I left a note with my number on the pillow and left.”

“Emani! You have got to be fucking kidding me!”

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“What?”

“Lord have mercy. Anything could’ve happened to that number. He may have never even seen it for goodness sake. We’re going to find him on social media. If he rocked your world like that, I know damned well he would’ve called.”

“No, Amari. I’m not chasing any man. I’m sure he got the number.” I think. But Amari might be right. I mean what are the odds that he didn’t see my note?

Chapter7

MADDOX

“Mad? What’s up with you, man? It’s my wedding day, and you haven’t been your usual cheerful self,” Zane says, sitting down beside me.

I’m so fucking proud and happy for my twin. He found the love of his life again after he foolishly let her go the first time around. But once she was in his life again, he refused to let her go. After ten years of being apart from Tae, I’m glad my twin had the balls to find her and lock her feisty ass down. It gives me hope that I’ll find Emani again. I mean, damn, Dallas isn’t that damn big!

“My bad Z. You know I’ve been pissed about not being able to find Emani. But that’s no reason for me to dampen the mood. I’m proud of you. The first one of us to get tied down.” I smirk at Zane and aggressively slap his back.

Zane doesn’t even flinch. He just stares at me with a sparkle in his eyes and one of

the biggest smiles I've ever seen on his face. I can't help but feel the happiness radiating from him.

The entire ceremony and the atmosphere of the reception have this overwhelming feeling of love that saturates the air. I watch my brother as he sits back and watches his new bride dance with her friends. I can't help but feel a little envious of him at this moment. I never really considered what I wanted in a relationship until now. But I know I want that same twinkle.

"Listen, if you want this woman, then find her." Zane shrugs like I haven't been looking all over the DFW for Emani.

I hit up one of our clients who can find anybody by any means. Niro Dalonzo is the best at what he does. Anytime I need something done off the books, he's my guy. I don't know much about Emani, so I want to make sure I don't have any surprises. After Niro gave me the names, I realized that there were more Emani's in the DFW area than I thought. There are so many spelling variations, and I'm assuming it is spelled with an E. Not only that, I told Niro to add occupation, but I'm not sure if teaching Art is her everyday job or if she volunteers. I'm embarrassed to say that even after we talked, I didn't know much about Emani.

"Do you know how many Emani Jackson's live in the Dallas Fort Worth area? I'd be a certified stalker if I went through the entire list. I feel fucking insane."

"Man listen, sometimes you do crazy shit for love," Zane casually throws out.

I damn near choke on my drink at my brother's insult. I sputter until he slaps my back hard as hell. I snarl at his crazy ass. How the fuck could he think I'm in love? He must be out of his motherfucking mind!

"Love? Hold the hell up." I point my finger at him and snarl. "Nobody said shit about

love. You've really and truly lost it..."

"You've been looking for the same woman for weeks. How many dates have you been on since you met her?" Zane's eyes narrow at me.

"None. But that's beside the point. We had one night together. I'm not in love," I vehemently deny, but I refuse to meet his probing stare.

"One night, or one year. That shit doesn't matter when you find the one." Zane smirks before sipping his beer.

I do my best to ignore the smug, satisfied look on my brother's face, but I have to mentally acknowledge that he might be right. I'd never say that shit to him though.

I really take a deeper look. I have never had a connection with a woman like I had with Emani. Logically, I'm grown enough to understand that sexual chemistry isn't the end all be all, but it was more than that. I've never cuddled and talked with a woman after sex. I never wanted to. But with Emani, that's exactly what happened. And I have to say, Emani is one of the sweetest down to earth people I have ever met in my life. She's so humble and exudes kindness. It wasn't shocking to me when she told me that she had never gone home with a man after just meeting him. I'm not an idiot, and that wasn't the first time a woman said as much, but it was the first time I believed it.

"I don't know about all of that. Besides, your brain is in a love cloud right now. Your ass thinks everybody is in love," I loudly dismiss his claims. But inside, I'm reeling with the possibility that my love-crazed twin might have a point.

"Mad, as the oldest..."

"By two minutes, asshole," I cut in.

“Still counts. You need to listen to me. I regret with everything in me the ten years I lost with Tae. We could’ve already had kids and a nice, comfy life together. I was a miserable prick without her. I just didn’t know it until I got her back. Don’t be me, little brother.” Zane slaps my back before getting up and joining his beautiful bride on the dance floor.

“Damn,” I mumble to myself.

I don’t think Zane has ever been so forthcoming. We have a natural inclination to know when something is wrong with the other, but usually, I have to beat it out of him before he tells me what’s wrong.

I do want to find Emani. I’ll just have to look like a fucking stalker. Who knows, maybe she’ll be flattered that I tried to find her. Either that, or she’ll run screaming ‘cause she thinks I’m a psycho.

With my decision made, I get my ass up and join the party. I’m here to celebrate my brother, and that’s exactly what I plan on doing.

But tomorrow, I’m going to find Emani Jackson if I have to call every single person in fucking North Texas!

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“Maddox Reid, I take back everything I said about you,” Anderson McNair says vigorously, shaking my hand.

“Don’t apologize. You haven’t gotten my bill yet,” I reply. “Y’all have my number if you need anything else.” I nod with a smirk as I exit the mediation building.

Anderson McNair is a tech millionaire whose employee decided to make up some asinine harassment story when she didn’t get what she wanted. Anderson is one of the most upstanding men I know. But when people think they can get a dollar, they go out of their way to lie about shit.

Just when I’m about to exit the building, I see a familiar figure walking in another door. I turn around so fast I bump into a guy who is following way too close, and I almost knock him over.

“Excuse me.” I hurriedly rush back inside the building.

I don’t scream her name like a lunatic, but I damn near run to catch up to the woman so that I can see her face. It has to be her!

“Emani! Emani Jackson!” Even though I’m not yelling, I speak louder than what is acceptable in a place like this, but I don’t give a fuck even though people are looking at me strangely.

When the woman turns around, my heart nearly leaps out of my chest! It’s her!

“Emani.” I can hear the relief in my voice.

Damn, I never thought I’d find her. I’ve been wrapped up in my cases, and I haven’t been able to have a meeting with Niro to update him on intensifying the search.

“Maddox? What...” Emani doesn’t finish her sentence.

Her beautiful face morphs from shocked to a coolness that I didn’t expect from her. I thought she’d be happy to see me, or maybe it was my hope.

“You have no idea how happy I am to see you,” I confess before I think better of it.

This woman has me in a chokehold, and she doesn’t even realize it.

“Really?” Emani puts her hands on her hips and sucks her teeth.

Now, I’m not a body language expert, but I definitely know when a woman sucks her teeth, and her hands go on her hips, you’ve royally fucked up somehow.

“Yeah. Really.” I’m confused as to why she’s mad because if I remember correctly, she’s the one who snuck out of my house like a thief in the night.

As a matter of fact, I should be the one with an attitude. Hell, I had to swallow my pride and admit that even though she left without a word, I still wanted to see her again. And I’m the asshole who actually paid for somebody to find her.

“You have a funny way of showing it. I haven’t heard from you...” Emani looks around and lowers her voice, “I haven’t heard from you since our one-night stand.”

“First of all, it wasn’t a one-night stand. I’ve been looking for you for weeks.” My voice gets louder than I intend and I take a deep breath to calm down. “Look, are you

busy? Can we please go somewhere and talk?"

Emani looks around and fidgets a little. "Well, I was trying to catch up to someone before they left."

"Well, I can wait until you finish. We really need to have a conversation."

There has been a breakdown somewhere, and I'll be damned if I let this woman go anywhere without finding out what happened. If she doesn't want to see me after we talk, I'll be mad, but I'll get over it. But I still want to talk to her.

"Okay, let me find Anderson. It should only take me a minute."

"Wait... Anderson McNair?" My eyebrow raises. How the hell does Emani know Anderson?

"Yeah. Do you know him?"

"He's my client. I just closed in mediation. How do you know him?" I suspiciously question.

Emani is definitely Anderson's type. Sweet, smart, kind as hell. With an out of this world body. Yeah, she's definitely his type. Hell! Emani is every man's type.

"He's my best friend's boyfriend. Well, her ex. I mean, it's complicated. But, I was coming to give him some help."

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I tick my head to the side. I'm sure there's a plausible explanation for her rambling, but all I heard was Anderson being her friend's ex. As long as he's not her ex, then I'm good.

"Oh-kay. I'll text him and tell him to meet us down here. If we go upstairs, we might miss him." I pull my phone out and text Anderson, and he quickly replies that he'll be right down.

I let Emani know, and she nods but shifts her feet and wrings her hands. I know she tried to use Anderson as an excuse for us not to talk, but it's obvious that some wires got crossed somewhere. And at this point, I'm like a dog with a bone. I will find out what the fuck happened because I refuse to let the incredible time we had together go.

When Anderson steps off the elevator, he looks a little confused at first. But when he sees Emani, his face breaks into a big smile. I frown and step closer even though I know they don't have anything going on.

"There's a place y'all can go to talk over here." I lead them to a little bench that's away from the crowded lobby.

Emani and Anderson have a seat, and I step away to give them some semblance of privacy. But best believe I'll be ear hustling my ass off.

"Emani, it's good to see you. I'm surprised to see you." Anderson smiles wider, and I narrow my eyes.

"I know you are. It's good to see you too. Shelby told me everything, and I know you

and Kay are trying to work it out. But I just wanted to give you some insight on my friend.”

“Shelby’s been helping a lot with that. But I appreciate any help I can get,” Anderson replies.

I briefly wonder what went on between Anderson and Emani’s friend, but I have my own shit to work out with the woman that I finally found. Now, let’s see why she disappeared in the first place.

Chapter8

EMANI

I can’t believe my eyes! Maddox Reid standing in front of me was not on my list of things that were happening today. I resolved myself never to see his gorgeous face again. I had to convince myself that he was a f-boy, and I wanted nothing to do with him. Every day was a struggle not to fall into the sultry memory of our tryst.

It’s been weeks, and his blue eyes still haunt me. The phantom feel of his lips exploring my body. The thoughts of that night alone had me begging for forgiveness.

Now, I’m trying to get through this awkward conversation with Anderson as Maddox lurks in the background.

I came here today to talk to Anderson, but also Brady. I feel bad for how I told him to stay away from Shelby. I shouldn’t have been so ugly even though I meant what I said. If Brady has such a problem with how Shell operates, then he does need to leave her alone. But I still could’ve used more diplomacy when speaking to him.

“Thanks for coming all this way to speak to me, Emani. I do appreciate it. Kay finally

agreed to see me again, so hopefully, we can get back on track.” Anderson’s face lights up when he talks about Kayla.

I hope to have that someday. As the thought crosses my mind, I steal a look over my shoulder. Maddox is staring directly at me. His gaze entrances me, and for a minute, I’m caught off guard by the intensity I see sparkling in his eyes.

I finished up my conversation with Anderson, and although I didn’t tell Kay I was coming here, I’m glad I got the chance to speak with him.

“Oh, is Brady around? I wanted to apologize to him about Vegas,” I say to Anderson as he stands to leave.

“He already left with his latest toy.” Anderson rolls his eyes. “I’ll relay the message. He has his head in his ass right now.” Anderson shrugs.

“Okay, I’m sure I’ll be seeing you.”

“I know you will, sweetheart.” Anderson winks as he saunters away.

“Watch that sweetheart shit, pretty boy,” Maddox growls. His thick country accent coming out.

Anderson simply chuckles and keeps walking.

The night Maddox and I spent together, that deep, sexy country drawl would slip out, and I swear the desire would gush right out of me. Whew, that man!

“Alright, you’ve stalled enough. You hungry?” Maddox’s question sounds right next to my ear.

I can't help the gasp that slips through or the goosebumps that break out all over my body from his nearness.

"I could eat," I reply, and Maddox nods as he takes my hand in his. He leads me back through the massive lobby and out the rotating door.

It's such a coincidence that I even saw him here. It was a last minute decision to try to find Anderson and talk to him. I just so happened to be on fall break, and after talking to Shell, I wanted to help in my own way. I wanted to help Shelby, too, but I guess that will have to be another day.

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Maddox and I walk to a nearby restaurant. The nerves are beginning to take over until I remember that I was the one who put herself out there to be left on the limb alone.

The restaurant is quiet because it's the middle of the day, so I'm not surprised when we are quickly seated. However, it doesn't give me much time to build up the courage to say the things I want to say to Maddox.

I might be overreacting, but my feelings were really hurt. I'm all bravado when talking to Shell and Kay. In front of them, I can pretend that Maddox not calling wasn't a blow to my ego. I can pretend that I didn't think I was being punished for going against who my parents had chosen for me. I can pretend to be okay with being ghosted.

"I'm Stacy, your server. What can I get you guys to drink?" The pretty waitress asks.

"I'll just have water with lemon, please. Thanks." I smile.

"Same," Maddox says.

"Alrighty. Do you guys want to order now, or do you need more time?"

"Umm..."

"More time. Thanks," Maddox cuts me off.

Even though he's only said a few words, I can tell he's pissed. Too bad I have no idea what's got his panties in a bunch. I'm not a slow person, but for the life of me, I can't

figure this man out.

As soon as the waitress walks away, Maddox leans forward and narrows his eyes. The blue fire burning in my direction makes me swallow hard and look away. I can admit Maddox Reid is definitely intimidating when he wants to be. Although he told me he was a shark in the courtroom, I couldn't imagine the sweet, attentive lover I experienced could be a ruthless attorney. I can see it now though.

"Why the hell did you sneak out of my house without saying goodbye? Then you have an attitude like I did something wrong." Maddox's deep voice is all growly and demanding, and I can't help the flood that is currently taking over my panties.

"I didn't sneak out. I-I just left without waking you up 'cause..." I stop talking when Maddox grunts. I guess when you say it out loud, I do sound like I snuck out.

"Why didn't you wake me up? You know, since you weren't sneaking out." Maddox raises a thick brow.

"You were sleeping so peacefully, and I didn't want to disturb you with my drama. I left a note with my number, but you never called," I accuse.

"Emani," Maddox sighs. "I didn't get a note. Where did you leave it?"

My forehead creases in the middle. "What do you mean you didn't get it? I left it right beside you on my pillow. I wanted you to see it."

"I didn't get the note, Emani. Next time, just wake me up so we can avoid all of the confusion." Maddox leans back with a smile covering his face, and I'm flabbergasted. Did he just say next time?

“Okay, Emani. Just calm yourself down. You’ve already shared a meal; hell, you’ve shared a bed. This technically isn’t your first date. Just take a deep breath.” I look at myself in the mirror and inhale deeply before exhaling.

Once our late lunch was over, Maddox insisted that I let him take me out tonight. It really was a no-brainer that I accepted. I’ve been obsessing about him not calling for weeks. It’s wild that a little misunderstanding could’ve had me missing out.

I still wonder what happened to my note.

I pull my long box braids to drape down my back and pick up my gold hoop earrings. After placing them in my ear, I put a pair of studs in as well. I run my hands down my flowy, long-sleeved dress to smooth out the few wrinkles.

I took Kayla’s advice this time and dressed how I normally would. Of course, Shelby about had a fit, but I wanted to be my authentic self this time around. Last time, I pretended to be someone I wasn’t, and although I had an extraordinary time, it felt like I was lying.

I’m not as shy as I used to be, but I’m certainly not as bold as I pretended to be. I’m somewhere in between.

My doorbell rings, and I don’t even check my camera because I’m so excited. I take another deep, fortifying breath before heading to the front door. When I fling the door open, my wide smile falters because standing on my porch are my parents and Darrius. What in the actual hell is happening right now?

“Uhhh. What are y’all doing here?”

I haven’t really had a conversation with my parents since my date with Darrius over two months ago. I’ve been going to church and leaving as soon as the service is over.

I've used every excuse I can think of not to talk about Darrius. I've even been avoiding my sisters too because of the questions about him and the guilt I have for not wanting to date him. My mother can be extremely pushy, and I haven't learned how to tell her no yet, so avoidance is the key.

"Emani, don't be rude. Step aside so we can come in." My mother pushes her way inside before I can even do as she asks.

She takes a second to give me a once over and a tight smile before continuing inside. Darrius does have the decency to stop and greet me before barging inside like he owns the place. But at least my Daddy stops and kisses my cheek.

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“Hey, sweetie. You look nice.” Daddy smiles at me and then follows behind my mother.

“You look like you were on your way somewhere. Surely, you weren’t going on a date, were you?” Darrius’s accusatory tone rubs me the wrong way, and before I can stop myself, a frown covers my face.

“Why are you with my parents? And why didn’t any of you call before coming to my house?” I throw out my questions instead of answering his.

“I tried calling you several times, and you haven’t made time. So, I called your parents, and they said you’d be happy to have us over tonight.”

“Emani, stop standing in the door and act like we raised you right,” my Mama shouts from the living room.

I want to reply I was raised not to yell in other people’s houses too, but I don’t want to get slapped in the mouth.

“Yes, ma’am.” I wave my arm out in a flourish for Darrius to go into the living room where my parents have made themselves at home.

I really don’t know what this is about. I already told my Mama that Darrius and I didn’t connect on our date. Even though she waved me off, I thought she at least considered my feelings about not wanting to date him.

“Would you all like something to drink?” I offer because I’m unwilling to be

chastised anymore tonight.

“No. Come sit down, Emani. We need to have a conversation,” my Daddy’s deep baritone voice booms in the tension-filled room.

I instantly turned into the withering flower my parents conditioned me to be. I hate that about myself. But the fear of standing up to them and being practically disowned like my sister Amari has me giving in every time.

I take a seat in a chair as far away from my parents and their guests as I can get. I hate being blindsided like this. They are taking butting into my dating life too far. My oldest sister is the only one with a long-term boyfriend, and they have two other daughters who are also single that they can focus on. So why did they choose me to grace with their attention, who the heck knows?

“Darrius tells us you’ve been too busy to see him. That’s not how we raised you, Emani.” My Mama glares at me, and I shrink down in my chair.

“We raised you to be a woman of your word, Emani. You shouldn’t lead a man like Darrius on. He’s a good catch,” my Mama continues her berating.

Before I can wilt anymore, a little voice in my head reminds me that I’m a grown woman. You don’t owe anyone anything, Emani. Period!

“I’m a good catch too, Mama. It’s not okay for you all to show up at my house and try to railroad me like this.” I have to steady my voice so that the nervousness doesn’t come out. But if I don’t stand up for myself now, she will run my life forever.

“What has gotten into you? You shouldn’t be so disrespectful to your parents,” Darrius pipes up, sounding eerily similar to my Mama.

My fists ball and a frown covers my face before I realize my reaction. We've been on one date where he talked about himself the entire time. Darius Calder doesn't know anything about me except for what my parents told him. Who the hell does this sycophant thinks he is?

"That's right. You should honor thy parents." Mrs. Jackson is fully on display and gearing up for a sermon I've heard her spit at my sisters a million times.

My Daddy has always been a live and let live kind of man. It's funny that he's the leader of the church. Because we all know who pulls the strings... my Mama. And Mrs. Hollier than thou always forgets about being a hypocrite and judging people in all of her preaching, but that's a subject for another day. But today, I will not take it. I promised myself after I ran into Maddox again that I would live my life for me. I would do things my way. And that's what I intend to do.

"First of all..." my doorbell rings, and I swallow hard as my eyes go wide.

I was so distracted, I forgot about my date.

Chapter9

MADDOX

Once I arrive at the address Emani gave me, I see more cars than I expected. I frown because Emani didn't mention that she had roommates. I shrug. I'm up for meeting anybody to get to Emani. It's probably her best friends she mentioned today.

I turn off my car, reach over to the passenger side to grab my suit jacket and flowers and exit the driver's side. I slide into my dark blue jacket as I adjust the flowers. I want to make a good impression, considering all the mistakes I have to erase.

I still can't believe she thought I ghosted her. I shake my head. What kind of idiot would ghost a woman like Emani? She's intelligent, sweet, and has the best pussy I've ever had the pleasure of tasting. Just thinking about her makes my dick hard.

I adjust my pants and then stride to the front porch. Emani's house sits in a nice, quiet, little up and coming neighborhood. It's cute with manicured lawns and a cozy feel.

I knock on the door and then ring the doorbell. I hear voices inside, and one sounds male, so my guard goes up.

Emani opens the door and she looks spectacular. Before she can get a word out, I take her in my arms and plant a heated kiss on her lips. I nip and caress her mouth until she's breathless.

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“Hey, baby. You look pretty,” I say against her lips. I lean back without completely letting her go. And with one arm still wrapped around her waist, I put the flowers in front of her face. Emani smiles up at me, and I wink at her.

“Emani! Who is this man?” I hear a woman ask from behind Emani.

Emani’s eyes go wide as if she forgot where she was for a second and I can’t help but smirk.

“I am so sorry. My parents showed up with this guy out of the blue. I’m so sorry,” Emani’s panicked whisper is barely out before the woman invades our little bubble.

I reluctantly let go of Emani’s waist, and take a slight step back. She holds the flowers in front of her like a shield, and I have to wonder why she feels the need to protect herself from her mother. It’s obvious by her reaction the visit wasn’t wanted, but what guy did her parents bring with them?

“Hello, you must be Mrs. Jackson. I’m Maddox Reid. Emani’s boyfriend.”

“Maddox Reid?” I hear a deep, familiar voice.

“You might as well come on in and meet the family,” Emani leads me past her mother, who is eyeing me suspiciously and into the main area of her house.

Emani places the flowers on the counter before leading me into the living room. My smile is wide as I greet one of my father’s golfing buddies and one of his “special” clients.

“Dr. Jackson, how are you? I haven’t seen you around the club lately.”

It’s crazy that I never put two and two together. I’ve known Dr. Jackson for years, but come to think of it, I have never met his family. But to be fair, Jackson is a fairly common name, and Emani never mentioned her parents. Looking at them now, I can see the resemblance between father and daughter. They have the same button nose and honey brown eyes.

“Well, Maddox Reid. I thought that was you, son.” The good doctor gets up, shakes my hand, and pats me on the back.

There’s another man in the room eyeing me like I’m his mortal enemy, and if he doesn’t shift his gaze somewhere else, I’m going to put my foot in his ass in front of the doctor and his wife.

“Honey, who is this?” Mrs. Jackson is frowning so hard that I know it will take all of my charm and a bit of prayer to get her to smile.

“Oh, sweetheart. This is Maddox Reid. Joseph’s son.”

I see the recognition on Mrs. Jackson’s face, but instead of a smile, her frown deepens.

“It’s nice to meet you, ma’am.” I thicken up my southern boy accent and kiss the back of her hand for good measure.

I steal a look at Emani, and she’s looking at her father with wide eyes. I guess it is a shock that I know Dr. Jackson, and although we talked, we didn’t exactly discuss our family tree. We were too busy for that. At the thought of our wild night, a smirk covers my face.

When I look back at Mrs. Jackson, she has a scowl so deep it looks permanently etched into her face. Goddamn! What'd I do to this lady?

I clear my throat and paste my charming smile back on my lips. If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to win this woman over. She looks like the type that would have an influence over her daughter. Emani is too sweet not to want her parent's approval, and I'm definitely in with Dr. Jackson.

"Mr. Reid," Mrs. Jackson says, removing her hand from mine.

"Please, call me Maddox." I nod.

"Daddy, I didn't know you knew Maddox," Emani cuts in, finally coming out of her stupor, but the confusion is still covering her entire posture. She's standing ramrod straight like she's about to meet a General in the armed forces.

"Well, sweetheart, you don't know everybody I know. However, let's talk about how you know Maddox." Dr. Jackson raises a thick brow, and I see Emani visibly gulp.

I see her wilt right before my eyes. I don't like the insecure version of Emani. She shrinks into herself, and the confidence I know is nowhere to be found.

"We've been seeing each other for a couple of weeks. You know how our Emani is about being cautious. She didn't want me to get my hopes up if I wasn't the complete gentleman I told her I was."

A little white lie doesn't hurt anybody. Besides, they don't need to know shit about how long we've been together. I can already see the judgment on her mother's face and the asshole sneering from across the room.

“Oh, we definitely know how cautious Emani is. Why didn’t you tell us that Maddox was the reason you didn’t return Darrius’s calls?” Dr. Jackson asks.

Darrius huh... well Darrius better watch how he’s looking. I look the man up and down, but when I meet his eyes, he turns away. Bitch.

“Daddy, y’all have never in my life been this interested in who I’m dating. I can’t even believe I’m having this conversation right now. Do you know how embarrassing this is?” Emani looks to her mother and father with exasperation.

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I don't want to throw fuel on the fire, but Emani is so uncomfortable I can't help but want to save her. I stride over to her, wrap my arm around her waist, and pull her to me. I kiss the top of her head like I've been doing it for years, and she relaxes against me.

"It's alright, Sugar. Your parents are just concerned. There's no need to be embarrassed."

A loud throat clearing garners all of our attention. This Darrius character is standing with eyes full of fury, and they're zeroed in on Emani. I instinctively step in front of her and fold my arms over my chest.

"I did not come over here to be introduced to some guy Emani is cheating on me with!" He yells with his fists balled at his sides.

"Darrius, calm down son. I wasn't aware of the circumstances. I didn't mean to put you in this position," Mrs. Jackson softly says.

It's the first time since I've been here that she isn't shooting daggers at anyone. It makes me wonder who really wanted Emani and Darrius together.

"Listen, as wonderful as this impromptu visit has been, Maddox and I have dinner reservations. So, we'll have to have this really awkward discussion at a later time. Or never," Emani mumbles the last part, but I heard her.

Dr. Jackson nods and shakes my hand, kisses his daughter's cheek, then ushers his wife and the asshole out of Emani's house. I could tell that both Mrs. Jackson and the

jackass wanted to argue, but Dr. Jackson rushed them out.

Once the door closes behind them, Emani looks at me and lets out the loudest sigh I've ever heard anyone make.

"You okay, Sugar?" I approach Emani as if she were a skittish animal.

I don't know the backstory of her parent's arrival or why they thought it was their business who Emani was dating, but I could tell that Emani was caught off guard. Hell, she looked surprised to see me, and she knew I was coming.

"I'm good. Are you okay? Our first official date, and my parents and my ex ambushed you." Emani rolls her eyes and shakes her head.

But I'm focused on only one thing in that sentence. "Ex? That d-bag is your ex?"

Now, don't get me wrong, I know Emani is a grown ass woman, and as beautiful as she is, of course, she's going to have exes. And I heard the weird comments about her not calling him. But the thought of him being her former man doesn't sit right with me.

"I'm just wondering what you mean by ex..." I raise my eyebrow as I crowd her space.

I push my body against hers as she leans against her front door. Emani's body fits so perfectly with mine I almost forget about my annoyance.

"He's not really an ex. We only went out on one date." Emani bats her long lashes at me as she slides her hands up around my neck.

"Uh huh. One date, and he's over here with your parents?"

“They knew him first. From church, to be exact. And from the looks of it, you knew my father first as well, so...” Emani trails off, but she’s right. I know her father.

However, I only know that he and my dad have been friends for years, and Dr. Jackson is on our client list although we’ve never represented him in court for any reason.

“I’m going to assume that Darrius is a ‘good fit’ in the church,” I say using air quotes.

Emani nods, “Yeah, but he doesn’t fit with me. Anyway, I’m tired of talking about this foolishness. I’m ready for our date.”

“Alright, sunshine. Let’s go.”

I let the subject drop because obviously, Emani isn’t interested in Darrius. It’s time I took her out on the date that I’ve been planning in my head since the night I met her.

I’m a grown man, and I’m entirely too old to have jitters from taking a woman out on a date, but I want to impress Emani. After our lunch date, I had the P.A. make reservations at one of my favorite places to eat.

I was a little thrown off by the unexpected meeting of the parents and an ex, but at least I know where I stand. Dr. Jackson is easy, but Mrs. Jackson is going to take a lot of work. I swear that woman is made out of ice.

My phone vibrates for the millionth time tonight, but instead of answering it, I put it on silent. If Emani notices my phone constantly going off, she doesn’t comment.

“My mother keeps calling me,” I say as I show her the phone.

“Parents,” she says, then smirks. We share a chuckle as I slide my phone back into the cupholder.

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My mother has been blowing up my phone for the last few weeks. We have a nonexistent relationship, so I kinda wonder what she wants because she's been calling so much. However, now is not the time for me to have a conversation with her.

We pull up to the restaurant, and the valet opens my door, I go around the car and pull open the passenger side door. I take Emani's hand and help her out before escorting her inside.

"Hello, welcome back to Santorini's, Mr. Reid. Your usual table is ready," the host says, leading us to my preferred table.

I pull out Emani's chair and push it in once she's seated. I round the small table and take my seat. The place was buzzing as usual, and I couldn't help but notice the eyes that followed Emani's every move.

The woman is effortlessly graceful, and it's hard not to notice the light that shines from within her. I don't think she's aware of all the attention she's getting, which says a lot about how humble she is.

Once we order, I have to keep myself from awkwardly staring at Emani. The last thing I want to do is creep her out. But she's so fucking beautiful that I just can't help myself.

"What? Is there something on my face?" Emani lightly touches her face, and I grab her hand and kiss it.

“No, Sugar. You’re perfect.”

Emani dips her head with a smile, and she’s so damned cute when she blushes that I can’t resist kissing her hand once more.

“So, you know my Daddy, huh?”

“Yeah, crazy how small the world is.” I nod, but I doubt that Emani really wants to know how well I know her dad.

“Yeah, it is. So, I guess since you’ve met my parents, we should probably have the customary how many siblings do you have conversation,” Emani says.

I chuckle, “Well, I have a twin brother. My parents have been divorced since I was young, and my stepmother raised us as her own. That pretty much sums up my family dynamics. How about you?”

“Well, there are four of us girls. I’m the youngest.” Emani smiles.

“Wow, four girls. I’m sure your father must’ve had his shotgun ready at all times,” I chuckle.

“He absolutely did.”

Our conversation is so easy, that I can definitely see myself falling hard for this woman. And God help me because it’s only our first date.

Chapter10

EMANI

My first official date with Maddox was so relaxed that it was like we'd known each other for forever. I don't want to get my hopes up so soon, but he's so... everything. After that, we've been seeing or talking to each other almost every night for weeks.

"So, how's the dating life?" Kay's hopeful tone gets me excited all over again.

"Did you give up the goods yet?" Shelby makes her eyebrows jump up and down, and I laugh.

"Maddox has been great, and no, I haven't given anything up," I laugh.

"Why not? Y'all already did the do. It was so good it had you turning into a bitch 'cause you weren't getting tha D, and now you wanna act appalled at the thought of popping that p on him again." Shelby gyrates her hips and flutters her tongue at me.

"You are so crazy, Shell." Kay and I fall out laughing.

I love the time I get to spend with my girls. We've all been busy, and our get togethers have been put on the back burner. Kay has just returned from her vacation with her boyfriend, and Shelby has been working nonstop since she got her promotion. And I've been trying to make it through the school year without losing my mind.

"I just don't want to hop into things too fast. I felt guilty and regretful for jumping into bed with Maddox without knowing anything about him. I didn't feel good about myself, and I don't want to feel like that again," I respond after our laughter dies down.

"Emani, you're too hard on yourself. You don't have anything to feel guilty about. Maddox didn't ghost you, and now you're dating." Kayla, the forever optimist, always makes me feel better.

“I guess you’re right, but after the berating I got from my mother... I still feel some type of way,” I sigh, letting the somberness creep out.

After my parents crashed my date, I knew that I was going to have some serious questions to answer from my parents. I thought my Daddy would be the most upset because he hates looking uninformed in front of anyone. But, he surprisingly took it rather well. As a matter of fact, he came to my defense a few times when my mother was fussing.

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It isn't like him to go against my Mama in front of us, but he actually put a stop to her hurtful words this time. To say I was shocked was an understatement.

"Your Mama is one scary woman. I wouldn't even mess with her." Shelby playfully shudders her shoulders with a grimace.

I roll my eyes at her, but she's right. Nobody messes with Mrs. Tina Jackson and comes out unscathed, not even an outspoken, self-assured, independent woman like Shelby.

"Yeah, well, for whatever reason, she is stuck on me dating Darrius. It's so weird how she keeps pushing us together even though Maddox declared we were a couple. It's like she knew he was lying. Although there's no possible way she could know that." I shake my head.

I'm not sure why my Mama is so persistent. I've told her that I'm not interested in Darrius. To be honest, I don't think he's all that interested in me either. He just gives me weird vibes. I can't put my finger on what it is.

There's something about the way he's always slithering around that gives me pause. He's always sucking up to my parents and putting himself in the middle of church business. It's like he came out of nowhere and inserted himself into our lives. Everything was fine when it was just the church, but now that he seems to want something with me, I don't like it.

"What's it going to take for your Mama to realize that church boy is a phony?" Shelby scowls.

“The Lord only knows...”

“Shoot. I need to make a call. You guys relax. This won’t take long,” Shelby says after an alert sounds on her phone, successfully interrupting our conversation.

I’m actually relieved because the last thing I want to do is discuss Darrius or my mother. I’m glad for the interruption.

“So, have you crossed off any items on your list lately?” I ask Kay.

Kayla started a list of things she wanted to do but never thought she would, and she’s been crossing things off since before she turned thirty. After she successfully marked off a lot of her list, she decided to add more.

“Actually, I have. Anderson has been so helpful. He even thought of a few for us to do as a couple,” Kay giggles, and I can’t help but smile.

“Ooooh, Kay. You’ve been putting sex acts on your list,” I tease, giggling back.

When my phone rings, I look down at the screen, and my face splits into a grin. “Hey Kay, I’m going to step out for a minute.” She nods at me as I go outside onto Shelby’s back patio.

“Hey, you.” I immediately smile.

“Hey, Sugar. Hope I’m not interrupting anything. Just thought I’d check up on how you’re doing.” Maddox’s deep baritone always gives me chills, even over the phone.

“No, you’re not interrupting me. I was just catching up with the girls. How’s your day going?” I question, the perma-grin plastered on my face. I couldn’t stop smiling if I tried.

There's just something about this man that makes me gushy inside.

"My day is much better now that I can hear your sweet voice." I can tell Maddox is smiling, and it makes mine broaden even further.

"You sure know how to sweet talk a lady," I giggle like a schoolgirl.

"Talking to you is always sweet, Sugar." Maddox is smooth. I'll give him that.

Every time I talk to this man, I recognize why it was so easy for me to fall into bed with him on the first night. Although he didn't have to do much talking, his charisma is off the charts. The animal magnetism I feel when I'm in his presence should be illegal. I only wish I could get my brain to recognize that fact so I could stop feeling so guilty.

"Uh huh, I bet you say that to all the girls," I reply, smirking.

"Best believe you're the only woman worth my words, time, and attention, baby. As a matter of fact, when are you finished with your girls? I want to take you out."

Normally, I would jump at the chance to spend more time with Maddox. These past few weeks, getting to know him has been wonderful, but I haven't seen my girls in weeks. I'm not going to neglect my friends even if this man makes my stomach flip with excitement every time I think of him.

"We were actually doing a Thursday girl's night out tonight since we all have Friday off. And then we're going to breakfast in the morning. But we can hang out tomorrow night if you don't have any plans."

"Alright, Sugar. Tomorrow it is. Y'all be safe and have fun. Text me when you make it back. I want to know you're good."

I swoon at his words. I know it's simple, but I don't have many people in my life who care that much. Which is sad, considering I'm the baby of my family. Amari, Kay, and Shell are the only ones who check on me consistently.

"Okay, I'll text you later. Have a good evening," I say, cheesing hard.

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“Later, Sugar,” Maddox replies before we disconnect.

I sigh and giggle to myself. I twirl around and nearly jump out of my skin when I come face to face with a smirking Shelby.

“You out here fallin’ in love. There’s just no hope for either one of you.” Shelby shakes her head. “I guess I’ll be an old maid by myself since you hussies have gone off and got coupled up.”

“Whatever, Shell. You have more men on your roster than a basketball team,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“I’m tryin’ to get a white boy on my roster...” Shelby sings the song and does a little dance.

“Let’s go get ready so we can have some fun tonight,” I chuckle.

We end up at a nice little lounge where there is karaoke and half priced drinks. We out voted Shell and ended up here instead of some uppity club with a bunch of pretentious posers. Of course, it isn’t up to Shell’s standards, but I think the place is super cute and relaxed, and it’s a Thursday night, so it was easier for us to get a table.

Honestly, I would’ve rather just stayed at Shell’s and hung out, but she insisted we get out and socialize, so here we are. I called Amari and asked if she was busy, and she decided to meet us here too. It doesn’t take long for Amari to walk in and I

instantly wave her over. We greet each other with a hug.

“Hey, sissy. I like this little place.” Amari looks around and nods in approval.

“Me too. This is my first time being here,” I respond.

“Hey girls,” Amari hugs Shelby and Kayla before sitting down at the table with us.

There are some pretty decent singers in the place, but you can tell some of them are here every weekend, living out their fantasies of stardom.

“Amari, you should get up there and show them how it’s really done. You can out sing everybody in here,” Shelby encourages my sister.

Shell is right. Amari isn’t just a talented producer, she can sing her butt off. My sister was very active in the church choir before everything went down with my parents. She was the shining star my mother always wanted. Amari was front and center for every major event my father ever held.

It’s a shame that they fell out over what Amari truly wanted to do with her life. Producing music has always been Amari’s passion, and I can’t see why my parents aren’t happy that their child is doing well in life. They are supposed to lead with love, but I’m figuring out that really isn’t their way.

“Nah, I don’t want to show these regulars how it’s done. I might want to come back,” Amari says, laughing.

Soon, the place is packed, and the drinks have been flowing. Thanks to Shell, we have had several rounds bought for us, and I’m feeling pretty good. I don’t normally drink so much, but I didn’t drive, and a few drinks won’t kill anybody.

Somebody starts rapping Teach Me How to Dougie, and Amari and I get up and start doing the dance. We laugh hysterically as the girls cheer us on. We do a little routine and sing along like we are back in high school. Once the song is over, we loudly cheer and holler like we are at a real concert.

“Now, how did two church girls have a routine to that song?” Kay asks, looking between the two of us.

“Man, listen, we used to sneak and make up dances all the time. Don’t play ‘Stanky Leg’ ‘cause it will be on and poppin’.” I stick my right leg out along with my tongue and hit the move.

The girls all laugh and cheer me on once again. I laugh as I take my seat and pick up my drink. When I go to take a sip, I notice that Amari is frowning with narrowed eyes.

“Mari, what’s up?” I bump her shoulder to get her attention.

“D.C., just walked in. I can’t stand his ass.” Amari points and my eyes soon find the object of her disdain.

Darrius is heading in our direction. I haven’t seen him since he popped up at my house with my parents. I thought he got the memo that I’m not interested, but I can tell by the determined look on his face that isn’t the case.

“Oh, Lord! I know that isn’t who I think it is,” Shelby says, wrinkling her nose.

“Emani, ladies. How are you all doing? Can I speak to you alone, Emani?”

Even though he formed it as a question, I know it isn’t. I don’t know what Darrius wants, but it’s best just to get this over with.

“Yeah, sure. There’s a patio we can go to. I’ll be back, guys.”

I lead Darrius out to the patio, that thankfully isn’t too far from our table. I was in a good mood, so I do my best to think positive about his appearance.

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“Emani, I thought we had something special. How could you cheat on me? If you leave thatwhiteman alone, I’ll be happy to take you back. We will be great together, especially when I start my church. We’re the perfect couple.”

The more he rambles on, the more confused I get. I notice almost every time we talk, which isn’t that often, thank God, he mentions becoming a preacher. Now, he wants me to be his first lady. I think the hell not. This man is obviously delusional.

“Darrius.” I put my hand up to stop the foolishness from spilling from his lips. “I am not breaking up with Maddox. And I didn’t cheat on you, by the way. You and I went on one date. We are not a couple. We werenever a couple. You need to let it go.” My voice is calm, but I want so badly to yell.

“Emani, that man only wants one thing. I’m sure you gave it to him already, so it’s only a matter of time before he dumps you anyway. Just save yourself the trouble and come back to me now while I’ll have you,” Darrius sighs as if he’s talking to a child.

It takes a second before his words sink in, but once they do, it takes everything in me not to slap his smug face.

“Yeah, no. Have a good night.” I start to walk away, but Darrius grips my arm and snatches me back.

“Hey!” I yell.

“Listen. It will be a lot easier for you to go along with everything like you usually do. Think about what we can be.” Darrius is smiling, but his delusion dances in his eyes.

“Let me go!” I yell and snatch my arm away.

What the hell is wrong with this idiot! I walk back into the bar without looking back. What an ass!

Chapter 11

MADDOX

Things between Emani and I have been going so much better than I ever could've expected. She's such an amazing woman, and I'm so glad that we got a second chance. We've been spending more and more time together, and I'm loving getting to know her. I can't wait until our date tonight. I wanted to scoop her up last night but she was hanging with her friends.

I'm doing my best not to become a stalker, but at this point, my obsession with this woman is out of my control.

One of my mediation meetings was shorter than expected, so when Jasper called and said he was back in town and wanted to meet up for a drink, I told him yes. Besides, I knew he would hound the shit out of me until I gave in, so I decided to meet him for a quick drink around the corner from the firm.

“I'm surprised you had time for me,” Jasper replies, staring at me with mirth dancing in his green eyes.

“Shut the fuck up. You've been MIA since I saw you last.”

Jasper just chuckles, “So, what's been going on with you?”

“Same ol' shit. You know how it is.” I take a sip of my drink and shrug.

“Yeah, I do know. How’s the family? I saw your brother and his wife the other day. Damn! How’d an ugly motherfucker like him get somebody as gorgeous as Tae?” Jasper laughs loudly, thinking he’s funny.

“Please. My brother might be a lot of things, but you and I both know he’s a handsome asshole.” I smirk.

Jasper laughs and shakes his head, “So, you finally found Emani. I never thought you’d become a stalker. Hell, I never thought you’d find someone to put up with your stodgy ass.” The prick laughs like he’s doing a set at the comedy store.

“First off, asshole, I have never been dull. Second, stop discussing my business with my know-it-all brother.”

“I haven’t...” Jasper cuts off his sentence when his phone rings. He looks down at the screen, and his face breaks into a humongous smile. “I need to take this. I’ll be right back.”

I’ve seen that look on my friend’s face too many times to count. He won’t be back anytime soon. I decide to text Emani even though I’ll see her in a couple of hours.

Me: Hey Sugar. Can’t wait to see you tonight.

Sugar: Hey sweetie. Me either. Where are we going?

Me: Somewhere special.

Sugar: How special? How do I need to dress????

I laugh at all of her question marks. Emani could show up in a paper bag and still look fucking spectacular. But I get most women don’t want to be overdressed, or hell

underdressed either.

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Me: Wear whatever you want babe... You'll be gorgeous either way.

Sugar: ??

Me: ?? lol don't be mad...wear something sexy. I'll be there at 8.

Sugar: K... see ya later. ??

My face splits into a massive grin at the thought of the sexy dress she might wear. We've been taking it slow since we officially started dating, but I can tell Emani is getting more comfortable the more we get to know each other. I can't wait until she completely lets down her walls.

"What, or should I say, who has got you grinning so wide?" Jasper sits down in front of me with a goofy smile on his face.

"You already know. But what I want to know is who you ran off to talk to?" I question, turning the tables on him.

Jasper thinks he's slick. He always wants to be in my business but never wants to tell me what's going on with him. I can tell that something is up with him. He hasn't been his usual playful self. And it's unusual for him to step out and take a call from anybody, and I know it was a woman by the way he was grinning. Jasper doesn't care about his conquests like that.

"A woman that finally has my attention." He smiles, and it makes me pause.

“You finally found somebody to put up with your shit?” I raise my brow, waiting for his answer.

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. Hell, she hardly puts up with me at all. But I’ll wear her little ass down eventually.” Jasper has a crazed look in his eyes, and I believe whoever he has set his sights on is going to be in for a challenge.

I was entirely too wound up for my date tonight. After my drinks with Jasper, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being followed. I didn’t see anybody, but there is something in the air that has me feeling cautious. I don’t know how to explain it, but my gut is telling me to keep my wits about me. The feeling makes me think about the unexpected visit from my mother the other day. She popped up out of nowhere, catching me at work. I guess she got tired of being sent to voice mail.

“Maddox, I shouldn’t have to come here just to see you. I’ve been calling you for weeks!” My mother’s shrill voice is loud and dramatic.

“I’ve been busy, Elizabeth. What is it that you want now?” My voice is calm even though my irritation level is at its limit.

“Don’t you dare call me by my first name when you call that woman your mother!” Elizabeth screams, her face turning beet red.

“Keep your voice down. This is a place of business. Get to the point, or I will have you escorted out. And you know I will.” I raise an eyebrow in challenge, and she huffs and takes a seat.

My mother and I have had a contentious relationship since she came back into our lives when we were thirteen. She abandoned us when we were toddlers, not a phone

call or a letter for years. Then, when she finally came back, she was cold, manipulative, and controlling—the exact opposite of my stepmother, Sarah.

“I want you to talk to your father about giving me back my shares in the firm. After all, it was my family money that got him started.”

The woman is delusional. “Elizabeth, I don’t have time for this. I have a meeting with a client.”

“Maddox! I’m your mother! But if you won’t do as I ask... I always get what I want.” An evil gleam was in Elizabeth’s blue eyes as she stood, straightened her dress, and smoothed her hair down.

The woman flew in like a hurricane, yelled about foolishness, and then left.

Thoughts of my mother vanish as I pull up to Emani’s house, and the street is quiet as usual. But I do notice a dark colored car sitting a few houses down. However, when a person wearing a hoodie gets out and starts up the driveway of the house the car is parked in front of, I dismiss it. I’m just glad that there aren’t any cars in Emani’s driveway this time. At least I know I won’t be ambushed by her parents and ex this time.

I have been looking forward to taking out Emani tonight since we made the date yesterday, so I damn near run to her door. We’ve been spending a lot of time together and it gets harder and harder to leave her.

After ringing the doorbell, it only takes Emani a second to open the door. I can tell by the bright smile and twinkle in her eyes that she’s happy to see me. She steps back inside, and I stalk toward her. I never take my eyes off her as I shut the door behind me. Neither of us says anything as we stare at each other.

We both step forward at the same time, and our lips smash together in a furious cloud of passion. Who needs to breathe when kissing this woman is life itself.

“Fuck, Sugar. Kissing me like that is going to get you in a whole lot of trouble.”

“Mmmm, but you are the best kind of trouble,” Emani purrs.

I swear this woman is going to make me lose my mind. I want to take her right up against this wall. Fuck going out, I’d rather eat her for dinner.

I lick my lips at the thought and Emani smirks. We’ve spent so much time together lately that I know that she knows what I’m thinking. Even though we haven’t had full-blown sex again, please believe I have licked and sucked every part of her body that she’ll let me touch.

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“We have some time before the reservations. Would you like a drink?” Emani wipes her lipstick off my lips, and I kiss her finger.

She smiles and grabs my hand to lead me into the kitchen. “What would you like to drink? I have that bourbon you like, beer, and wine.” Emani looks over her shoulder expectantly, but I’m too distracted by the way her ass looks in her dress to answer her right away.

Emani clears her throat to gain my attention, but I take my time making eye contact with her.

She tilts her head and purses her lips, but I just shrug. Emani knows she’s hot as hell. There’s no need for either of us to pretend I don’t worship her body.

“I’ll take a beer since I’m driving,” I finally answer.

Emani shakes her head but grabs me a beer. She pops the top and hands it to me. I nod and take a sip. She pours herself a small glass of wine and then sits beside me.

“How’s classes going?” I ask.

Emani’s been having a tough time with funding for her student’s art supplies, and she’s been stressed about it. She just told me about the issue, or I would’ve taken care of it sooner.

“Remember when I told you about the supplies we needed? We got a donation, and we were able to get the kids what they needed.” Emani’s smile is so bright that I can’t

help but pull her in for another satisfying kiss.

“That’s good, baby,” I say after kissing her.

“You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” She leans back to look in my eyes.

“All you ever have to do is tell me what you need, Sugar.”

“I knew it was you. Thank you.” She kisses me again.

“You’re welcome.”

I can’t help but take her lips again. I’m addicted to this woman, and I can’t get enough. My tongue invades her mouth, and when she moans, I deepen the kiss. She tastes like the sweet wine she was drinking. When I finally have enough self-control, I pull back.

“I missed you this week.” Emani is breathless after our steamy kiss.

“I missed you too, Sugar. Now, let’s go get some dinner before I take you to your room and feast on you.” I lean down and quickly peck Emani’s lips once more before taking her hand and leading her to the front door.

Emani grabs her purse, sets the alarm, and locks the door. As we approach my car, I notice the back driver side tire is flat.

“That’s weird.” I bend down to get a closer look and that’s when I noticed the passenger side tire is also flat. “Fuck.”

“What’s wrong? Oh no. Shoot, how did both tires end up flat?” Emani asks, coming

from behind me.

“That’s a great question. I must’ve run over something. Why don’t you go back inside the house while I make arrangements.”

“We can just drive my car, Mad. Or we can just stay in tonight.” Emani frowns as she studies my tires.

“Nope. I’ve been looking forward to taking my girl out. We have plenty of time; just go relax, and I’ll take care of this.”

“Okay, sweetie.” Emani reluctantly turns and goes back into her house.

I get a closer look as I call my head of security, Frank Bates. I see the slashes, and I go on high alert. I’ve been working on a few high-profile cases, so I have no idea who could’ve slashed my tires. But I’m not going to figure out anything tonight. I will have Frank do some investigating to see what he can find out.

Soon, Frank pulls up, and arrangements are made for my car to be repaired while we’re out. I think it’s safer for Frank to drive us tonight since I don’t know who’s lurking around. When I go get Emani, I introduce her to Frank, and although a puzzled expression briefly graces her features, she doesn’t ask any questions.

When we arrived at the restaurant, my reservations had been made for Saturday night instead of Friday, and even with my pull, there weren’t any available tables for another two hours. I have no idea how the hell the mix-up happened, but it makes me feel like shit. I don’t want Emani’s night to be ruined any further after dealing with my car.

“I’m so sorry about this, Emani. I should’ve checked the reservations.”

“Don’t worry about it, Mad. We can eat somewhere else. It’s fine.” Emani rubs circles on my back to calm me down. She’s just so fucking sweet.

I decide to take her somewhere that I hope she’ll love, but it’s definitely not everyone’s cup of tea.

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“I know a place with gourmet cuisine and an ambiance out of this world,” I say, making up my mind on the perfect place to take Emani.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

It really is perfect, and I hope that Emani thinks so as well. But we shall see...

Chapter12

EMANI

I thought Maddox was going to blow a gasket when the hostess said his reservation was for tomorrow. The way he pinched the bridge of his nose and ran his hand through his hair were clear indications that he was holding on by a thread.

Bless his heart, after dealing with his flat tires, I think he just wanted to relax and eat. And although the restaurant was beautiful it didn't look like a relaxing type of atmosphere. However, the place Frank pulls up to is the exact opposite of the stuffy restaurant. I smile because I know this place! It has some of the best burgers in Texas.

“Taters and Beer! I can't believe you brought me here!” My excitement is palpable.

“I'm glad you're excited. 'Cause after the night we've had, the least I can do is get some good down home comfort food. Gourmet cuisine just like I promised.” Maddox winks.

It seems kinda funny pulling up to a bar in a fancy car with a driver, but it is what it is.

Frank hops out and opens the door, and Maddox slides out and grabs my hand. He leads me inside, where there's a band playing, and the place is packed. There's a line at the hostess stand, but when a brown haired bartender sees us, we get waved in immediately.

"Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in. Your brother is pissed at you," the man loudly chuckles.

"I know, I know. Is he here?" Maddox yells over the music.

"You know he is. He and Tae are at their table. Y'all want something to drink?"

"Babe, you want a drink?" Maddox turns to me and asks.

"Yeah, a beer is fine. Whatever you have on tap," I respond.

"My kinda girl. I'll bring them to y'all."

"Oh, by the way, this is my girlfriend, Emani. Emani, this is Si. He owns the place."

We shake hands in greeting, and Si gives me a big welcome. Once again, Maddox grabs my hand and leads me through the crowd. When we get to the table, a beautiful black woman turns and smiles at me. But the shocker comes when her date turns as well.

"You told me you had a twin, but my goodness, I can't believe how identical you two are. There's two of you walking around Dallas!" I look at Maddox and then back at his doppelgänger.

“I swear, I said the same thing,” the woman giggles.

“Hard to believe there are two handsome motherfuckers just existing,” the doppelgänger responds, then tips his beer at Maddox.

“Emani, this is my brother, Zane, and his wife, Tae,” Maddox introduces as we slide into the other side of the booth.

“Nice to finally meet you, Emani,” Zane says as he winks at his brother.

I feel like there’s a little inside joke between the two of them because they give each other secret smiles before they let out identical laughs. I look at Tae, confused, but she just shakes her head and sighs.

“Don’t worry, girl. They have a twin language. Just ignore them. You’ll get used to it.” Tae swats at her husband, and he chuckles before kissing her on the temple.

The looks they give each other show how in love they are, and I can’t help but think how I want that someday.

Our beers arrive at the table shortly after we sit down, and we order food. The band takes a break, and a DJ comes on. We’re all vibing to the music and having a good time when a line dance jam comes on, and Tae pulls me out on the dance floor.

There’s a big crowd on the floor because the song is popping, and of course, we put our own little spice on the steps. I’m having a ball, and Tae is so down to earth and fun. I can see the guys watching us from the table, and I can also see them turning down advances left and right.

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I must say, Maddox is fine as all get out, but him and Zane together really is a sexy combination.

“Look at these thirsty tramps in here. We haven’t been on the dance floor for a full song, and they’re surrounding the table like vultures on roadkill,” Tae says above the music.

I laugh because she’s right. As soon as we got up, the women in here started circling the guys. I can’t say that I blame them, but dang they’re bold.

“There’s the waitress with our food. Let’s go eat and save the boys from the thirst,” I holler over the music.

Tae nods in agreement, and we head to the table. As we get closer, some of the women scurry off, but two of them obviously want smoke since they stay. They are eyeing Tae, and I like we’re interrupting their good time. They’re attractive women. One is black and the other white. Both are skinny with huge boobs popping out of their short dresses. I can tell they think they’re something special, by the looks on their faces.

“Excuse me.” Tae moves around the women as Zane and Maddox slide out from their seats.

“You heard my wife, move the fuck out the way.” Zane shoos the women.

I guess they didn’t move fast enough as they continue to stand there looking appalled because Maddox snaps his fingers in front of their faces. “You heard my brother,

move the fuck around.”

Both women huff and stomp off. When I look up at Maddox, he just shrugs.

“If you haven’t noticed, he’s the evil twin.” Zane’s face is serious until he looks at Maddox, and they both break out in loud belly laughs.

“From what I can tell, both of y’all are the evil twin.” I look between the two of them, raising my eyebrow.

They both chuckle at my statement. “Depends on the day,” Maddox responds, kissing my temple. When I look over at Tae, she simply shrugs and we share a laugh.

Out of all of our dates, this is the most relaxed that I’ve seen Maddox. I really enjoy this side of him. Even though I see glimpses of his playful side, I can tell that Maddox is very rarely relaxed. I see that his twin brings out a comfort in him that someday I hope I can accomplish.

We settle in to eat the best burgers in Dallas, and the conversation flows naturally between the four of us. And even though a double date wasn’t on my agenda tonight, I’m glad I was able to meet Zane and Tae. It shows me that Maddox is serious about us really getting to know one another. My guard is slipping down just a little with every moment I spend with this man.

“I had a great time tonight. I’m really glad we got to go to Taters. Your brother and Tae are so fun.” I hug Maddox around his neck as he sways me side to side on my front porch.

I feel like a teenager again. Not that I got to experience many unsupervised dates with

the way my parents had me locked down, but it's what I imagined dating would've been like in high school.

"I had a great time as well. Thanks for understanding about the reservations and for going to Taters with me. I know it's probably not what you're used to." Maddox kisses the side of my neck, and I sigh.

"I'm not as fussy as you think. I loved going to the bar and hanging out with your brother. It's nice just to relax sometimes."

Although Maddox and I have been dating for several weeks now, when we go out to dinner, it's always a fancy place. I assumed upscale dining was his thing, and it never crossed my mind that he was doing it for me.

"I'll keep that in mind for our future dates." Maddox continues to sway us.

When his hands start to caress my body, and he begins to pepper more kisses on my neck, for a brief second, I want to strip off my clothes and let him take me right here on my porch until I hear screeching wheels and a revving engine.

Before I can see what's going on, there's a blur of something flying towards us. I don't get a chance to move, but I'm hitting the ground with a thud as glass from my front window shatters all around us.

Maddox's heavy body is crushing me to the hard concrete of my porch as I scream my head off.

"It's okay, baby. I'm here. Calm down." Maddox isn't panicking at all, but I can't calm down.

My heart is beating so fast that I feel like I'm about to pass out. I can feel the

beginnings of a panic attack.

“What just happened? Are you two okay?” I hear Frank ask, but I still can’t see anything because Maddox hasn’t moved.

“Call the police. Someone just threw a brick through the window. Emani, do you have a ring camera, or do your neighbors?” Maddox finally raises off of me to question.

“I have one. Umm, and Mr. Simmons across the street might.” I’m still slightly disoriented, but Maddox’s words register through my cloudy brain. “Did you say someone threw a brick? What the hell is going on?”

“I’m not sure, but we need to get in the house right now. We need to check your camera footage while we wait for the police.” Maddox is taking charge, and I get the distinct feeling he’s used to being in control.

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I open the door, and Maddox and Frank follow me inside. Maddox grabs my hand before I move any further into my house, but he instructs me to disarm the alarm by the door. Once the alarm is off, I'm surprised when Frank pulls out a gun and continues into the main living area.

I look up at Maddox, and he just pulls me to him and kisses the top of my head. At this point, I don't know what to think. I'm so confused about why someone just threw a brick through my window that I just stand staring after Frank instead of peppering Maddox with all the questions that are running through my mind.

"It's all clear. The police are on the way. Can you log into your camera for me, Emani?" Frank questions.

"Uh, yeah, sure." I shakily unlock my phone and go to my camera app. I hand over my phone, and Frank nods.

"I'll wait out front," Frank says as he walks past us and back out the door.

"So, he's not just a driver." It's the only thing I can think to say at the moment.

"No. Frank is head of my security team." Maddox leads me into my kitchen and helps me sit on one of my barstools.

He calmly fixes me a glass of water then hands it to me. I sip it slowly as I watch him through weary eyes. Nobody has ever had any reason to throw a brick through my window until I started dating Maddox. It can't be a coincidence that two of his tires were flat. I'm pretty sure his excuse of running over something was a lie.

“Should I be worried?” I don’t know why I asked because I already know the answer.

“No, Sugar. You don’t have to worry about anything. I’ll find out who did this and why.” Maddox’s words are genuine, but I’m still scared.

“I should probably go stay with my parents,” I say, thinking out loud.

I don’t want to stay in this house by myself just in case they decide that one brick isn’t enough. Lord above, what if they shoot next time!

“We will wait for the police, and then you will come to my house where it’s safe. I’ll have the window repaired and more security cameras set up tomorrow. I’ll take care of you, Emani. I promise.” Maddox tenderly kisses my lips in reassurance.

But I still feel the worry deep in the pit of my stomach.

Chapter13

MADDOX

I don’t have any idea who the fuck is trying me, but they are dead when I find out. The audacity of somebody to think they can throw a fucking brick at me is insane. Although there wasn’t anything written on the brick, the message was loud and clear. Somebody didn’t want me with Emani, and they were making it known.

Emani’s camera didn’t pick up much since we were partially standing in front of it. All I could see was a dark two-door car driving by. I couldn’t even make out the type of car it was. And even though Frank has eagle eyes, he was only able to get partial plates because of how fast everything happened.

It was definitely unexpected, even though I should’ve been on high alert after my

tires were slashed. And unfortunately, Emani nor Mr. Simmons' cameras picked up who did that either.

I told Emani to pack a bag, and now she's getting settled in my bedroom while I make some necessary phone calls in my office.

"This better be good, Reid," Niro Dalonzo's raspy, accented voice sounds over the line.

Niro is the cousin and security expert for the Dalonzo Organization. We've known each other for years. The Dalonzo's started out on my father's special client list, but three years ago, I picked them up. Let's just say they give me a lot of billable hours.

"You know I wouldn't call if it weren't," I reply.

I hear shuffling around, and a woman's voice before a door shuts. I can't say that I'm surprised that Niro isn't alone this time of night, even though he's one of the scariest motherfuckers who has ever walked the planet. And even though most men cower in his presence, most women throw themselves at his feet in worship.

"What's up?" Niro finally comes back to the call.

"My girl had a brick thrown through her window, and my tires were slashed outside of her house all in one night. I need to know who did it," I answer, getting straight to the point.

"Was the target you or your girl?"

The question gives me pause even though it shouldn't. There's no way anyone would be after Emani. She's an art teacher for middle school kids. But her father isn't.

“You know what, I’m not sure.” I have to be completely honest so that Niro can search for every possible avenue.

“What’s her name?”

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“Emani Jackson. Her father is Dr. Reverend Miles Jackson,” I respond.

Niro whistles, “How the hell did you, of all people, get with a preacher’s kid?”

I should feel offended by his statement, but I don’t have any room to be insulted. Hell, a dog can recognize a dog. And I’m not proud, but I’ve had my moments.

“Guess the devil was tired of dealing with my ass and passed me off to the angels,” I smirk when I hear Niro’s chuckle.

“Yeah, whatever. Give me a week, and I’ll have everything you need.”

“Thanks.”

We disconnect the call without any further discussion. If Niro says a week, then that’s exactly how much time it will take. He’s a man of his word, and he’ll find exactly who’s behind this shit.

All I have to do is try to convince Emani to stay with me for the week and to take off work until I hear back from Niro. It should be pretty straightforward, but I know how independent she is. I just hope she doesn’t fight me on this because her safety is of the utmost importance.

And although I initially assumed that this was about me, it could very well be someone trying to target Emani. Her father is a prominent figure, and although his family isn’t in the public eye as much, someone could still hurt him by hurting them.

I just hope Niro can come through as usual. I hate waiting, especially when safety is a concern.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Emani’s soft voice breaks into my thoughts.

I’m so glad to have her back in my house again. I’ll probably try to keep her here forever, but I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.

“Yeah, Sugar. Everything is fine. You doin’ alright?” I stand from behind my desk and move toward Emani, who is standing in the doorway.

“Still trying to calm down. Mr. Simmons called my parents, so I had to explain what happened,” Emani sighs.

I take her into my arms and hug her tightly to my chest. Emani is perfect for me. She fits against my body so naturally that I feel blessed every time we touch.

“What’d you tell them?”

“I just said there was some vandalism probably done by some teenagers. I didn’t go into detail. My Mama wanted me to come to their house, but when I told them I was staying with you, my Daddy was surprisingly fine with it.” Emani looks up into my face, and I smile down at her with a shrug.

“Never in my adult life has my Daddy been okay with me staying the night with a man. So, how well do you know him anyway?”

“Do you honestly want to know the answer to that? ‘Cause I ain’t gonna lie to you.” I raise my brow and school my features into a serious expression.

“I’m gonna have to pass... for now. There’s really no telling, and I don’t want to get

into that after the night we've had. But I reserve the right to revisit this subject at a later date, Mr. Attorney." Emani winks up at me, and I chuckle.

"Look at you sounding like an attorney yourself." I lean down and kiss her lips. "Ummm, let's go shower so we can relax."

"I assume we're taking this shower together..."

"You assume correctly. Now, get your fine ass to my room so I can strip you out of that dress." I can tell by the look on Emani's face that she's ready for everything I'm about to give her.

I take my time taking off Emani's sexy little dress. I pull her long braids out of the way as I slip the straps down her arms. I run my tongue over her silky, smooth skin, savoring her sweet taste. Damn! This woman is sexy without even trying.

"If you keep kissing me like that, we'll never make it to the shower," Emani moans as I kiss her neck.

"Alright, baby, let's get in the shower." I head into the bathroom and turn the shower on.

I strip off my clothes as Emani slips off her panties and wraps her braids up in a bun on the top of her head.

We get in the shower, and I turn on the multiple heads. Emani sighs when I rub the lathered up luffa over her shoulders and down her back. I do my best not to be a pervert and rub my hands down to her plump round ass or over her sensational tits, but it's taking a miracle.

I make it through washing Emani from head to toe, but when she returns the favor, I can't hold myself back any longer.

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I once again tug her petite frame into me. I get lost in the feel of her lips against mine. Her mouth is so soft and warm, and the flashbacks from our first night together come rushing back. I wanted to take things slow. I wanted to show her that it wasn't just about sex. But I'm not gonna lie and say I don't want Emani sexually. And I'm not gonna stop myself from taking what she's offering. I couldn't even if I tried.

My fingers find their way into the soft, pliable flesh between Emani's thick thighs. And I can't help but groan at the feeling.

"Shit," Emani gasps out.

"Ride my fingers, darlin'. That's it. Make yourself cum on my hand." I speed up my fingers as Emani works her hips.

The sight of her taking pleasure from my hand has my dick jealous. My cock is so hard I have to take my other hand and squeeze just to find some relief.

"Hmm. It looks like you might need some help with that," Emani moans.

Then she does the unexpected and drops to her knees and slides my dick into her gorgeous mouth. The sound that comes out of me isn't one I've ever made before.

"Fuck, Sugar! Your mouth feels incredible..." I start to slowly move my hips as Emani slurps on my dick.

One of her hands is wrapped around my cock, and the other has a firm grip on my balls. Emani sucks me to the back of her throat as she twists her hand up and down

my shaft while simultaneously massaging my sac.

I have to shut my eyes to keep them from crossing. I do my best not to grab Emani by the head and fuck her face, but if there's one thing I know is not to grab a woman while she's giving you a gift.

Emani starts to gag and bob as saliva runs down her chest. She makes an erotic vision that my nasty ass loves. I could almost cum from just looking at her. However, when she removes her hand from my dick and starts to rub her clit I can't take anymore.

"This is gonna be hard and fast, Sugar. Hold on tight," I growl. When I pick her up, my dick plops out of her mouth. I can't even enjoy the sight because I'm in such a rush. I slam her back against the wall of the shower, ready to devour her whole.

It doesn't take a lot of finesse for me to slide into her slippery heat. I hold completely still so her body can adjust to mine, but when Emani initiates a passionate kiss and moves her hips. I take that as a sign that she's ready.

I slam into hard, pumping in and out of the juicy warmth of Emani's sweet pussy. I groan loudly when her walls squeeze my length. I thought the memory of her was just me romanticizing what we had. However, I was wrong. This is far better than anything my memory could've concocted.

"You feel so good, Mad. Fuck!" Emani's eyes are shut tight, and her head is thrown back.

It's funny that the only time Emani uses foul language is when I'm fucking the shit out of her. I know her parents are proud of their little church girl. Too bad I'm going to make it my life's mission to corrupt Emani Jackson in all the fun ways that I can think of.

“I can feel you about to cum, Sugar. Are you about to drip that sweetness all over my dick? Let me feel that shit.” I slide my hand between us and circle her swollen nub.

The way her pussy flutters around me tells me she’s close. I rub faster and harder until Emani’s legs are shaking. She lets out a yell so loud it could damned near shatter the mirrors.

I continue to thrust faster until the tell-tell sign of my orgasm reaches the base of my spine. I have to talk myself out of cumming inside of Emani’s tight pussy because it’s irresponsible as hell, but fuck, she feels like heaven.

At the very last minute, I slip out and cum all over Emani’s stomach. I continue to rub against her slick flesh until my dick goes flaccid. I place Emani on her feet, and once she’s steady, I clean her off once more. I manage to clean myself before turning off the water, and stepping out. I wrap a towel around Emani, and then myself before picking her up and carrying her to the bedroom.

“I can walk, you know,” Emani says sleepily.

“You could barely stand up. I’m not risking you hurting yourself so you can try to prove how tough you are. I know I put this dick on you, baby. No need to pretend.” I’m an arrogant son-of-a-bitch, but I have every reason to be.

Emani just shakes her head with a giggle, but she doesn’t try to dispute what I said. I manage to somewhat dry us off before climbing into bed and spooning Emani. I kiss the top of her head as I close my eyes.

At least this time, I know she’ll be here when I wake up in the morning.

Chapter14

EMANI

Having to explain to my sisters that I wasn't coming to Saturday brunch again wasn't really an option after being criticized by Zuri. Even Naomi, the peacemaker, wouldn't be able to save me, so I sucked it up and got dressed.

Maddox was very much against me going out today, but he had to get over it. I'm not going to stay locked in the house because someone threw a brick. It's not like they were shooting. I did compromise by allowing him to drive me to the restaurant.

When we arrive at the Rooftop Restaurant, I give Maddox a lingering kiss on his lips. He hums his approval before I move back.

"If you keep kissing me like that, I'm going to take your ass right back to the house." His deep voice gives me chills and makes me want to tell him to put the car in drive and let's go. But I know I need to go inside, so I suck it up.

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“We came all this way. I might as well eat. Besides, you’re meeting your friend. Go have fun, and I’ll text you when I’m ready. Or I can have Amari drop me off.” I kiss his cheek once more, but Maddox frowns.

“No, I’ll pick you up. Go have fun with your sisters.” Maddox kisses me again before hopping out and opening the door for me.

Maddox is such a contradiction. He says the nastiest things to me during sex, but you would never know by the way he treats me in public. I guess freak in the sheets, lady in the streets can go for him too... well, gentleman in the streets in his case.

Maddox helps me out of the car and I head to the entrance. I look over my shoulder when I reach the door of the restaurant, and he waves at me before driving off. He waited until I was at the door—such a gentleman.

As soon as the door opens Zuri is on the other side watching me with a scowl. Before she can say anything, I head to the elevator, and we get inside. There are other people in here, so she doesn’t get to scold me for whatever she thinks I did wrong.

When we step off the elevator, the hostess immediately calls her name. Naomi and Amari walk in right behind us, so I don’t have to be alone with Zuri. It looks like lady luck is on my side today!

I love my sister, but she is the definition of doing too much. She takes being the oldest sibling to another level. You’d think she gave birth to us herself. Zuri has always been particularly bossy, but lately, her judgment has been over the top.

As soon as the waitress takes our drink orders and leaves, Zuri turns her glare my way. At this moment, she looks so much like our mother that I almost want to shrink away from her.

“Who was that white man you were kissing on?” Zuri’s question is sharp, but I knew it was coming.

“What white man?” Naomi asks, looking in my direction.

“Oh, so Maddox is playing chauffeur? Yes ma’am. I know that’s right, sis!” Amari high-fives me, and I can’t help but giggle at her.

“Is that the man Mama said you were staying with instead of going to their house after the teenagers broke into your place last night?” Zuri is still snarling as she throws out her question.

But what I can’t figure out is why she’s so mad. None of this is any of her business or concern.

“Somebody broke into your house? Are you okay?” Naomi questions.

“Why didn’t you tell me you had a break-in? You know I would’ve been there,” Amari says with wide eyes. I smile at them both because their concern is for my safety, unlike Zuri.

“I’m fine. Nobody broke in. It was just some vandalism. The police said it was most likely teenagers.” I wave off their concern. Even though I know it’s more than that, especially the way that Maddox has been behaving.

“If it was just teenagers, then why aren’t you at home?” Zuri snaps.

“Why do you care?” I snap back. Because what the hell! “You can’t even ask how I am. Just jump to the part where it’s none of your business. I am a grown woman!”

“Mama said...” Zuri starts, but I cut her off.

“I don’t care. I’m here to enjoy brunch, not talk about stuff that doesn’t concern you. If I want you to know my business, I will tell you.”

“Oop.” Amari cracks up laughing, and I cut my eyes at her.

When she sees my face, she shrugs, but her laughter quiets down. Amari knows her antagonizing Zuri only makes things worse. And I honestly don’t want to be bothered.

“Listen, ladies. Every single time we get together, it’s some foolishness. We have got to stop this toxic behavior. Zuri, what’s going on with you? You’ve been snapping and mean for the last couple of months.” Naomi turns to our older sister.

All eyes are on Zuri, waiting for her answer. She loves to be in everyone’s business, but when it comes to hers, she likes to play saint. Nothing is ever wrong, and everything is perfect.

“Nothing is wrong with me!” Zuri yells.

“Here she go,” Amari mumbles, rolling her eyes.

“Hush, Amari.” Naomi cuts Amari a look.

This conversation takes me back to when we were kids. I swear these brunches are getting more and more exhausting. I don’t even know why I bother anymore. Naomi is right. This mess is toxic.

“Nothing is going on, Naomi. Just drop it.” Zuri sips her drink and looks away.

“If that’s how you want it to be, then fine. But you need to stop trying to impose your will on us. You don’t want to tell us your business, then stay out of ours.”

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I am shocked that peacemaker Naomi just put Zuri in her place like that. So, I know Zuri must've gotten on Naomi's last nerve with her shenanigans.

"Let's just enjoy our brunch and stick to safe topics," I say, trying to defuse the tension between us. No matter how much I'm trying to change, old habits die hard. I will always be the baby sister who wants everyone to get along.

"That sounds like a great idea. Amari, what artists have you been working with lately?" Naomi asks, effectively changing the subject.

For the rest of the brunch, we stayed on safe, mundane topics, but the tension was still high among us. Zuri barely said a word for the rest of brunch, and although Amari was eating it up, I was kinda worried. It's not like Zuri to just take being told off. I have a feeling there's way more going on than we know.

After brunch, I wanted to give my family a rest for a while, but that wasn't meant to be. My Daddy called Maddox and invited him to church today. I wanted him to say he was busy, but of course he agreed.

I have a feeling he's trying to get in my Mama's good graces, but if he can figure out how to crack that code, then I'd give him a million dollars. The only people good enough for my Mama are my Daddy and maybe Zuri on a good day. She's pretty neutral towards Naomi even though she's a doctor and the smartest out of all of us. And although she had her tantrum about Amari, I always felt that she was Mama's favorite. Me on the other hand, no matter how hard I try, my Mama will never be

satisfied.

“Do I need to wear a tie? If you haven’t noticed, I don’t go to church that often.” Maddox smirks at me and I shake my head.

“Wear whatever makes you comfortable, ya heathen.” I smile up at him sweetly, and he busts out laughing.

Maddox looks so carefree when he laughs. I can’t help but admire how handsome he is and how much I’ve come to care about him. My eyes eat up the way his suit drapes effortlessly over his muscles. This man is fine!

“Now, Emani Jackson. How can you smile at me like that after calling me a heathen?” He pouts and shakes his head. “Here I am, trying to be a good church going man.”

“Aww, babe. I’m sorry. You don’t have to wear a tie. You look absolutely gorgeous without one.” I run my eyes over him once more, appreciating how scrumptious he looks in his suit. No Matter how hard I try, I can’t stop myself from imagining all of the naughty things I could do to this man.

“You probably shouldn’t look at me like that,” Maddox says, giving me a sultry look. When he licks his lips, I know exactly what he’s thinking. When his heated gaze finds mine, I feel like I’m standing here naked. I have to bite my lip to keep the moan from slipping out. Emani, you are about to go worship the Lord. Stop being so lustful.

I clear my throat and remove my teeth from my lip. I cannot be this wanton on a Sunday morning.

“You’re right.” I step back and look down to adjust my dress.

“Hey.” Maddox puts his finger under my chin and lifts my face. “I was only kidding, Sugar. All you have to do is exist to have me hard.” Maddox’s face is as serious as can be, but that twinkle in his blue eyes holds humor.

“I was thinking about sex right before church, Mad. I am so off track.” I throw my hands up in frustration.

“Come here, baby.” Maddox leads me over to his bed, and he sits down, pulling me onto his lap.

He caresses my thigh, but not in a sexual way. Once he shifts me where he’s comfortable, he looks me in the eyes. “Emani, what track are you supposed to be on exactly? Because from where I’m sitting, you’re sweet, responsible, kind, and hardworking. I’d say you’re on track, sweetheart.”

I smile up at him, but he has no idea the expectations my family has. I’m twenty-eight years old, and I’m still doing my best to be the Emani my parents want me to be. Acting so lustful before church behind a man that I’m not married to is horrible. But I appreciate him trying to make me feel better.

“Thanks for saying that, Mad. Let’s head out before we’re late.” I slide off Maddox’s lap and pull his hand so he can stand.

When we get to the front room, I’m not surprised to see Frank. However, I did forget about the reason I’m here until now. I haven’t asked Maddox if he’s found out anything else, and the police definitely weren’t any help the other night. But I will wait until after church to ask Maddox if he’s heard anything.

We are under enough pressure for today. Having to face my mother on a Sunday is like a prisoner going in front of a firing squad. You’ve already been sentenced to death, and there’s no way to stop it. I just hope she is distracted enough by the

congregation that we can slip in and out unscathed.

We pull up to the parking lot of the church, and Frank gets out and opens the door for me. I slide out, and Maddox gets out behind me. I take another deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. I've never really brought a man to church before, and even though my Daddy invited him, I'm still really nervous.

"Frank, are you going to join us for service this morning?" I question the intimidating man.

"No, ma'am. I need to do a sweep and get in touch with the team. You all have a good service, and I'll be here when you're finished." Frank nods then shuts the door. He walks around the front of the large SUV and slides into the driver's side.

I have so many questions about what Frank just said, but when I see Zuri, I know I have bigger issues on hand.

"There's my oldest sister. It would be a good time to pray. She's my mother's clone," I whisper to Maddox.

I plaster a smile on my face. "Hey, Zuri. Where's Kelvin?" I question, surprised that he isn't here.

Usually, Kelvin is at every Sunday service, and even though I've been rushing out, I still noticed he hasn't been here the last few weeks.

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“Kelvin had something else to do today,” she quickly dismisses as she looks down her nose at Maddox.

I find it funny that she never wants to talk about what’s going on with her relationship but can frown at my man, who she doesn’t even know.

“Zuri, this is Maddox, my boyfriend,” I introduce them anyway. Even with her frowning, I refuse to make Maddox feel like he’s not welcomed.

“Hi,” Maddox greets.

Zuri just nods without saying anything. She has the same expression on her face our Mama had when she met Maddox. I can only shake my head at her. I still don’t know what her problem is with me and Maddox, but at this point it doesn’t matter.

I decide just to ignore her and take Maddox’s hand with a smile. “Come on, babe. Let’s go.”

Once we’re inside the church, we head to the front of the sanctuary. We’re early, so I introduce Maddox to a few members. I knew they would have questions, but I didn’t realize just how nosy people are. At least everyone is somewhat welcoming and didn’t make it too awkward.

The church is one of the largest black churches in Dallas, but other races attend as well. After all, Christians come in all colors.

We are seated at the front of the church beside my Mama and sisters. The tension is

thick, but it feels like something other than Maddox's presence is causing it.

It does surprise me that Darrius is sitting behind my Daddy with the other prominent men of the church. I don't know when that happened, but seeing his smug face makes my skin crawl. I can feel his eyes watching me, but I never make eye contact with him.

When the sermon starts, Daddy begins preaching about forgiveness. The testimonies from the congregation are all relatable. It's amazing the power you hold when forgiving someone or the power someone can hold over you if you don't forgive. I've never really experienced the deep grudges that one person talked about, but I can't imagine walking around angry at someone who doesn't even acknowledge that I'm alive.

When the service is over, I do my best to try to slip away. But, as we were making our way to the door, my Daddy stops us. My Mama and Zuri disappeared, so at least I won't have to endure their berating today. Naomi is working, but because she's a doctor working in the ER, she always gets a pass. And Amari didn't even wait for the last amen before she was slipping out of the door.

"Emani, sweetheart. Can you please go and check to make sure the daycare is clear? We have a new volunteer, and she's a little relaxed with the cleaning up."

"Well, Maddox and I were just about to leave," I say, hoping we can get out of here.

"I need to speak with Maddox. It will only take a second. We'll be in my office once you finish in the daycare." My Daddy nods at me.

It is more than obvious that he didn't want me to hear whatever he wants to say to Maddox, so I just sigh and let go of Maddox's hand.

“Don’t sweat it, Sugar. I’ll see ya in a minute.” Maddox grabs my hand again and kisses my palm.

I smile at him and turn to go to the daycare. As I walk down the hall, I hear voices coming from behind a closed door. Now, normally, I wouldn’t eavesdrop because that’s not my way, but something tells me to stop.

“Why is she here? You said that Emani does whatever you say.” I hear a whiney male voice, and I instantly roll my eyes.

I know Darrius is talking about Maddox. He stared at us the entire service.

“Darrius, son. Emani is just going through a phase. She’ll come around. You just need to keep being persistent.”

I frown when I hear my mother encouraging this man. Why in the world would she tell him to keep pursuing me? I have made it absolutely clear that I am with Maddox.

“Emani is a little old to be going through phases. I shouldn’t be wasting my time on her if you don’t have control over her.”

“Listen, Emani isn’t important, and she doesn’t matter. But unfortunately we need her right now for this to work. You need to do as I say. I will get Emani to do what she’s told. She always does things my way.”

“Fine! But if she doesn’t come around, then we need to find a different way to do this. I’m tired of waiting.”

Before my mother can respond, the door flies open. I rush around the corner before anyone can see me. I hold my breath until I’m sure nobody is there, and I slip into the empty daycare. I don’t know what that was about, but I need to keep my guard up and

stay away from Darrius and my mother.

Chapter15

MADDOX

When Dr. Jackson sent Emani off to another room, I knew that whatever he had to tell me was serious. Serious enough to discuss at the church of all places. That is definitely not good news.

I saw the jackass sitting behind the pulpit, and I watched him closely as his beady little eyes stayed on Emani. I can tell by his demeanor that he hasn't given up yet.

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However, he didn't approach us or say anything, and as long as he kept his distance, then we wouldn't have any problems. There's something about him that seems shifty, and I don't like it.

I turn my attention to Dr. Jackson once we enter his office.

"Thank you for letting Emani stay with you, Maddox." Dr. Jackson sits behind his large desk and waves to a chair in front of it.

I sit down, "Of course. It was just a brick and a few slashed tires, but I need to know if this issue is mine... or yours?"

Dr. Jackson sighs heavily before wiping his hands down his face, "There is a time and a place for this conversation, and here and now is neither. I will say that I have made some mistakes in my life, some worse than others." Dr. Jackson looks up at me. "I just hope this issue isn't mine."

I really hate when people talk in riddles, but I understand that Dr. Jackson doesn't want to say too much, especially here.

"I have someone working on finding out, but if I have questions... I'm going to need you to answer them."

Dr. Jackson can read between the lines because he agrees with a nod. I let out a breath because I had no idea how this conversation was going to go. But it was much easier than I thought. That might've had something to do with Mrs. Jackson being MIA. I still haven't defrosted her yet, and I don't want her sour attitude to get in the

way of my budding relationship with Emani.

“I will have security for Emani, just in case this wasn’t a one off situation. But if anything else happens, she might need to be convinced to take off work.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Dr. Jackson responds.

“Thanks. And I appreciate the invite to service. I’ll keep you informed on what’s happening.” I stand, and we shake hands.

“Thanks again, Maddox. And please protect my baby girl.”

“With my life.”

I leave the office, and I see Mrs. Jackson and Zuri talking in hushed tones. When they notice me watching, I get frigid smiles from both before they turn and walk in the opposite direction.

“Man, they really don’t like me,” I comment out loud with a shake of my head.

I round the corner and walk down a long hall before I see Emani sitting in a small room used for the daycare during services. Her face is confused, and her shoulders are slumped over. It looks like somebody kicked her puppy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my girl look so sad.

“Emani? You okay, Sugar?”

“I’m not sure.” Emani shakes her head. “Let’s get out of here. It’s been a long day already.”

I don’t know where the confusion could’ve come from in such a short time, but I

know that if she's ready to go then I'm going to get her out of here. I just hope dickwad didn't say anything to her because if he did, I will beat his ass right here at this church.

"Alright then, Sugar. Let's get you home." I take Emani by the hand and lead her to the parking lot.

When we get to the front of the church, Frank is there waiting for us. He nods, giving me the signal that everything is clear. If there had been any problem, I would have been notified immediately anyway.

It bothers me that even after talking to Dr. Jackson, I don't know who is behind the vandalism. Nothing has happened since that night, but my gut tells me there's more to it. I always trust my gut, and that's why Emani is still staying with me. Yeah, I might have downplayed a brick and slashed tires, but doing things like that usually isn't random.

We get in the car, and Frank pulls off. Emani is still holding my hand, but she hasn't said anything. The somberness is rolling off of her in waves, and it makes me want to fight whatever or whoever caused this shift in her mood.

The drive to my house isn't long, but it's far enough that I've had too much time to think. All of the possibilities of what can be causing Emani to be upset are driving me crazy. I know I must really care for this woman if I'm obsessing over her like this.

We pull up to my house and exit the car in silence. Frank pulls off to park the car, and I lead Emani inside.

"Do you want something to eat? We haven't had anything since breakfast." I hug Emani from behind, and she sighs.

“No, I think I just want to take a nap. I should feel better when I wake up.” Emani is looking down, and when she doesn’t melt into my arms like she usually does, I know there’s something serious going on.

“Sugar, tell me what’s wrong. I’ll do all I can to help you. You know I will.” I’m damn near pleading with her to let me in. I hate that she’s shut down, and I want to know the reason.

“I know you will, Mad. It’s not you...”

“Baby, don’t shut me out. We’ve already been through one misunderstanding. I don’t want to go through that shit again.”

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“You’re right. Let’s sit down. I overheard some weird stuff, and I’m just trying to make sense of it all,” Emani says sadly.

I nod, and we walk into the living room and sit down. Emani seems nervous and unsure of herself. It’s the same way she looked the night her parents and that fucktard ambushed her.

“Tell me everything, Sugar. You can trust me.”

The last thing I want is for Emani to go back into her shell. She’s so sweet and kind, but I have a feeling that people take advantage of her. I want her to know that I’m not one of those bastards who would take her for granted. I want to protect her.

“I know I can trust you.” She sighs deeply before continuing, “I overheard Darrius and my mother discussing me.”

“What do you mean? Why were they talking about you?” I question confused.

“I heard Darrius whining about me not dating him.” Emani rolls her eyes.

I know that couldn’t have upset her that much. Anyone who has come into contact with the asshole knows he’s a bitch. So, I’m not surprised he was complaining to Mrs. Jackson about her daughter.

“I know that didn’t make you sad. So, what did?”

“I heard my Mama tell Darrius I didn’t matter and I wasn’t important.”

What the hell? Why would anybody say that about their child? What a bitch!

“Did anything else happen?” I have a feeling that Emani is leaving something out.

“Not really. She was just telling him to keep trying to date me. It’s so weird. Why does she want us to date so bad? Especially if I’m not important. My own Mama said that.” Tears well up in Emani’s pretty brown eyes, and I want to crush Darrius’s skull with my bare hands. And Mrs. Jackson ought to be ashamed of herself. Some Christian she is.

After our little chat, I know Emani’s feelings were hurt. I’m not sure why her mother would say such hurtful shit, but it’s unacceptable. I can understand why Emani wanted me to say no to going to service.

Her family has some control issues. But regulating who your grown ass daughter dates is weird. I’ve heard of people trying to live vicariously through their children, but it still feels a little over the top. I mean, Emani has three other sisters who are all single. Why is she so focused on Emani? Especially since I’m here. I’m a catch! What’s this lady’s problem?

I would never do anything to hurt Emani if that’s her worry. But that little weasel, Darrius, would. I know men like him. His arrogance and ambition are dripping from his pores. I have my suspicions about what his angle is, but I don’t know why Mrs. Jackson would want to help him.

All my theories are just that... theories. I have no way of knowing why these people do what they do. But I know they hurt Emani, and that will not fly.

My poor sweetheart’s feelings were so bruised that I couldn’t talk her into eating

anything before she went to take her nap. Bless her heart, she was so confused about everything that was said, and I didn't have any answers either.

When my doorbell rings, I know it could only be one of two people. I roll my eyes because I know I'm about to get cussed out for missing the monthly Sunday lunch.

I open my door with the brightest smile on my face. "Hey, Sarah."

"Sarah? You're already on thin ice. Don't make me whoop your behind," my stepmother sasses as she pushes past me. I chuckle because we both know I only call her Sarah to get on her nerves. She has been and always will be my Mama.

"Dad." I nod.

"Son," he laughs at my expense.

My parents and I have a great relationship. But they can be intrusive as hell when they want to be. I had a bit of a reprieve when Zane moved back and then got engaged. My stepmother spent all of her time fawning over Tae and the wedding. Now, it seems she's turned her sights back to me.

Maybe I can plant the idea that Zane needs to give her a grandchild, and she'll leave me alone again.

"Y'all want something to drink?" I ask, following them into the living room.

"No. We just came from the lunch you missed." Sarah purses her lips in displeasure.

"Come on, Mama. I told you I was going to church."

"You were serious? I thought you had some tramp over here, and you were avoiding

us.”

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I laugh loudly because my Mama has absolutely no filter.

“No, ma’am. There aren’t any tramps here. I went to Dr. Jackson’s church.”

This gets my father’s attention. He sits up, and his blue eyes, which are identical to mine and Zane’s, narrow at me. Dr. Jackson has been a special client of my father for years, the problem is, I have no idea why.

I know about their business arrangement to a degree, but I have no idea how it came about. I don’t know why a preacher needs a secret lawyer. As far as I can tell, Dr. Jackson doesn’t have any special files, but there’s definitely something going on.

“How is Miles? I haven’t seen him around the course lately.”

“He’s fine. I’m actually...”

“Babe? Hey, I feel better, and I’m kinda hungry. Do you...” Emani interrupts, but her words abruptly stop when she sees my parents.

The cute flush of her cheeks and the way she tugs at the shorts she’s wearing tells me that she’s embarrassed. Meanwhile, I’m trying to figure out if she’s wearing a bra under that shirt.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you had company.”

“Come on in here, Sugar, and meet my parents.” I get up so I can usher Emani into the room.

When I reach where she's standing, I give her a reassuring kiss to her temple. She smiles up at me, and I kiss her lips softly.

"Wait. Did you say, parents? Oh my God! I need to go change," she whispers with wide eyes.

"No, you don't. You're at home relaxing. You don't need to change." I pull her into the living room, where my parents are watching us.

My Mama has a huge smile on her face, and my father tilts his head with a curious expression. Before, his eyes widen slightly and he smiles.

"Emani, this is my stepmother." Sarah gives me the side-eye, and I correct myself. "What I meant was, this is my Mama, Sarah, and my father Joseph. Parents, this is my girlfriend, Emani," I introduce them.

"Nice to meet you," Emani greets as she shakes my father's hand, but my Mama engulfs her in a big hug, rocking her side to side.

"I knew there had to be another reason Maddox was going to church all of a sudden." Sarah takes in Emani then winks at me.

"If you ladies will excuse us, I need to speak with my son for a minute," my father says.

I go to Emani and kiss her lips once more, "I'll be right back, Sugar. There's food for you in the kitchen."

Emani nods, and I follow my father to my home office. I shut the door behind me and sit on one of the couches that faces my desk. My father sits beside me and takes a deep breath.

“Alright, what’s going on? You’re scaring me,” I state, looking at my father.

If there’s one thing about Joseph Reid, he is never at a loss for words. The man could talk the ears off an elephant. The hesitancy and deep breathing have me worried. If he says something crazy about Emani, I have no idea how I might react.

“So, you’re dating Miles’ youngest daughter, huh?”

“Obviously. Is there a problem with that?” I ask, my guard going up.

“No, of course not.”

I feel like my father wants to say something, but when he shakes his head and smiles, I know whatever he is thinking will stay in the vault of a brain of his.

“I heard your mother…” he stops talking when I narrow my eyes at him, “Elizabeth came by the firm the other day.”

“I should’ve known. You already knew. Why didn’t you come save me?”

My dad chuckles, “I didn’t know she was there until later. What’d she want?”

“She wanted me to talk to you about giving her shares in the firm.”

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“Elizabeth is delusional. She just wants attention again. Ignore her, son.”

My dad’s voice is calm, but I know the old man better than he thinks I do because there’s a storm raging in his eyes. It makes me question what’s really going on with Elizabeth.

Chapter16

EMANI

I never would’ve guessed that Maddox’s stepmom was a black woman, but I should’ve known. He’s got a little spice and a whole lotta swag to him. And even though Sarah is great, I still wasn’t prepared to meet her wearing a t-shirt and booty shorts. I am so embarrassed.

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to run and change.”

“Oh, sweetie, there’s no need to do all that. You’re fine. Come sit down and talk to me.” Sarah goes to the couch and pats the seat beside her with a sweet smile. I don’t want to be rude, so I adjust the t-shirt, pull down the shorts as much as I can and take a seat. I forget all about my hunger as my nerves take over.

“So, how did you and my son meet?”

It’s a perfectly normal question to ask, but it still has the first raunchy night we spent together flashing in my mind. I flush so deeply that I can feel my face heat.

“Ummm, we met on a night out. I was celebrating with a few friends.” I finally manage to tell a partial truth.

“Oh, well, that sounds like Mad. Always out on the town. I just want to know how you convinced that scoundrel to go to church.” Sarah has a twinkle in her eyes that shows she’s joking, but at the mention of church, my face crumples.

The feelings of betrayal bubble up and come out unexpectedly, and I can’t hold back as I burst into tears. I guess the nap wasn’t as replenishing as I thought it was.

“I’m sooo sor- sorry,” I stutter out mortified.

“Oh honey, what’s wrong?” Sarah pulls me to her and wraps her arms around me.

The comfort I feel from her is something that I haven’t felt from a mother in a long time. It only makes me cry harder.

“It’s okay. Just take your time, sweetie.” Sarah keeps her arms around me until I pull myself together.

I sniffle a few times and wipe my tears away. But the ache I feel is still sitting in the pit of my gut like spoiled milk. Hearing my Mama say that I didn’t matter did something to me.

“It’s been a long day. I’m so sorry.” I take a deep breath before continuing, “I didn’t have to convince Maddox to go with me. He’s willing to do anything for me.”

The words are nothing but the truth, and even though I spoke them, I’m just realizing that I believe them wholeheartedly. It’s only been a few months, but I’m already falling in love with Maddox.

“You know, my son is very protective over his loved ones. It doesn’t surprise me that he’s willing to do anything for you. What does surprise me though, is why we’re just now meeting.” Sarah arches her eyebrow at me, and I swallow hard.

I’m not sure how to answer that question because we never really spoke about meeting parents. Maddox met mine by accident, so it never really came up. Maybe that makes me a bad partner since I never asked, but there’s nothing I can do about that now.

“If you think I was hiding her from you, then you’d be right,” Maddox says, coming back into the room.

I’m relieved that I didn’t have to answer. I have a feeling that if I would have, then it would have led to more questions.

“Hmmp. Could’ve fooled me. You went out with your brother and Tae weeks ago.”

“Zane can’t hold water,” Maddox mumbles, but he’s smiling. “You know I had to ease Emani into our craziness. I didn’t want to run her off.”

I smile and shake my head. I just burst into tears in front of his stepmom on our first meeting. I just hope he doesn’t run off.

“Honey, give the kids a break. Besides, they’re coming to dinner with us next weekend.” Joseph’s announcement comes as a surprise to me, and by the shock on Maddox’s face, I know he had no idea of his dad’s plans either.

“Dad...”

“Oh! Great! Well, I guess we’ll leave you kids to relax,” Sarah interrupts Maddox with her cheerfulness.

I notice Maddox cut his eyes at his dad, but he doesn't protest. I don't mind spending time with his parents because they seem like nice people. Besides, if I know I'm falling hard for this man, I might as well get to know his family.

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“It was really nice meeting you, Emani. If you need anything, you give me a call. Maddox can give you my number.” Sarah engulfs me in a tight hug, and her comfort almost makes me want to cry again.

Her motherly concern is genuine. And for the first time in my life, it makes me question my Mama’s behavior. I know that she’s capable of love and affection because she gives it to my sisters, but with me, it’s just... different.

“Thank you. It was nice meeting you as well,” I reply.

I just met this woman, but I can feel the care radiating from her. Although Joseph is a bit more reserved, he seems just as caring as his wife. I have to admit that I look forward to getting to know them better.

Joseph nods and gives me a warm smile, “It was nice to meet you, Emani. Tell your father I said hi.”

“Nice meeting you too, and I will,” I reply before Maddox ushers his parents out the door.

I plop down on the couch and exhale. When Maddox comes back into the living room, he sits down beside me and throws his arm behind my back.

“I’m sorry about the ambush, Sugar. I didn’t know they would show up like that.”

“No need to apologize.” I shrug. “It’s not like my parents didn’t ambush you.”

We share a laugh, but at the mention of my parents, an uneasy feeling pops back to the forefront of my mind. I can't shake the dread, and it's unlike me to feel this way. I have to talk to my Daddy.

"I hope you don't mind the plans for this weekend. I'll make sure my brother and Tae are there so you won't be peppered with too many questions."

"I appreciate that." I lean over and gently kiss his lips.

Maddox deepens the kiss, and before long, all my worries are forgotten as he takes my breath away.

"So, how are things going with the hot lawyer? You've been real quiet about him lately. Even though I saw him drop you off tonight." Shelby eyes me from across the table.

I grimace at her question. I haven't seen or talked to my girls in forever, and she's absolutely right. I've been MIA. I've never been a woman who neglects her friendships once I'm in a relationship, but I can admit I've been in a love bubble with Maddox since we reconciled.

"Sorry, Shell. It's been crazy lately."

"Crazy like how?" Kayla questions with a furrowed brow.

"Well, I've met his parents. We had dinner with them a few weeks ago. His whole family, actually. And I've been kinda living with Maddox." I slip the last part in because it sounds crazy when I say it out loud.

“Wait a damn minute. Meeting the parents is important and all, but you’re living with this guy? Already?” Shelby bucks her eyes at me. “Now, I know I told you to live a little, Mani, but I think you took my words too far!” Shelby shouts with wide brown eyes.

“Yeah, that is a little crazy, Mani.” Kayla quickly throws her hands up in a surrendering motion, “I’m not judging. Just saying.”

“I didn’t really have a choice...”

“Listen, I don’t care how powerful lawyer boy is. I know people. If he forced you into some kinky shit, I’ll have his head!” Shelby interrupts me, and I can only shake my head.

This girl has had too much wine!

“Shell, calm down. I didn’t get to tell you guys about the stuff that went on. I didn’t want you to worry.”

The girls sit up, and I go through everything that has happened in the last few weeks since I’ve seen them. I didn’t tell either of them about the brick being thrown through my window because I didn’t want them to worry. I saw how my family reacted, and even Maddox seems a little paranoid lately. It was one brick thrown one time, but everyone was making such a big deal out of it that I didn’t want to make a fuss.

The first week was fine, and although Maddox had my window fixed by Monday and a new upgraded camera and security system by Tuesday, I haven’t stayed at home in weeks. And the longer I stay over his place without answers, the more worried I get.

“Why didn’t you tell us? You could’ve stayed with one of us. You didn’t have to move in with a man you just started dating.” Shell eyes me suspiciously.

“I still don’t have any idea why someone would throw a brick at me or slash Maddox’s tires. I didn’t want to bring any unnecessary drama to either of your doors. Besides, I’m enjoying my time with Mad. You’re able to get a raw and uncut version of a person when you live together.”

“I know your parents had something to say because there’s no way they are all of a sudden okay with you living with a man. That’s way too progressive for your Mama and Daddy. No offense,” Shell says, looking at me over the rim of her stylish glasses.

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“None taken. And I have no idea why they’re okay with it. All I know is that’s not a conversation I even want to have with my Mama.” I roll my eyes.

I haven’t even been in the same room with my Mama since I heard her and Darrius’s conversation. I’ve skipped church and brunch for the past month. I’ve only spoken to Amari, and I told her what I overheard. I’m pretty sure she’s pissed off on my behalf.

After Darrius ambushed me at Karaoke, I hadn’t seen or heard from him. I thought he’d finally gotten the message and had given up. Seeing him in the pulpit behind my Daddy was surprising, especially since he was sitting in my Mama’s chair.

Thinking about the Karaoke incident makes me realize that my mother has been behind the scenes pulling strings as usual. I just don’t understand why. I guess she wants Darrius to have that church he talked about. I still don’t know what that has to do with my Mama or why I have to be the first lady.

“Well, as long as you’re comfortable with Maddox, I don’t see the harm. But if you ever change your mind, my door is always open.” Kayla smiles. We lock hands from across the table, and I return her smile.

“Thanks, sweetie.”

“So, Mani is shacking up, and Kay is practically married. My little chicks have left the nest. My work here is done.” Shelby clasps her hands together with a proud smile on her face.

“Girl, please! You’re so full of it,” I laugh and swat at Shelby’s arm.

“What? You know I taught y’all everything about men.” Shell shimmies her shoulders and makes her eyebrows jump.

“Whatever, Shell,” Kay laughs.

We spend the rest of our dinner catching up and gossiping. My time with my besties is so different from my sisters. I find myself wishing that it can be easy and we can get along like when we were kids. But I guess adulthood comes with its own issues. As we start finishing up, I send a quick text to Maddox to let him know he can come and pick me up.

“Oh, I forgot to ask you guys what plans you have in two weeks. I wanted to do a Friendsgiving dinner this year. Because on Thanksgiving, Anderson is taking me to Aspen, so I won’t be here this year.” Kay’s eyes light up with excitement, and I can’t help but mirror her happy expression.

“Well, you know I don’t have anything planned. My parents are off gallivanting around the world, and I’m actually not babysitting any wayward celebrities at the moment.” Shell rolls her eyes.

I chuckle at her. Shelby wanted the promotion at her firm, but she wasn’t prepared to deal with people who had more attitude and mouth than she did. I know one client in particular is giving her hell.

“What about you, Mani?” Kay asks.

“Just let me know the time, and I’ll be there,” I respond happily.

“Great! Bring Maddox along. I’ve heard so much about him from you and Anderson I feel like I know him already.”

“I’ll be happy to bring him. I can’t wait for y’all to get to know him better.”

We sit and chat until I see Maddox walk into the restaurant. The man makes a pair of jeans and a sweater look sinful. He’s got a fresh haircut, but the top was left longer. It looks good on him, and I can’t help but devour him with my eyes.

When he sees us, his blue eyes brighten, and he strides towards us. My heart picks up a steady beat, and the pulse between my legs throbs in time with his steps. It’s like I’m under a spell—a spell I don’t want to break.

“Hey, ladies, y’all look gorgeous.” Maddox’s deep voice gives me chills every time I hear it.

“Heeeey,” both the girls sing, and I can’t help but smirk.

Even Shelby has stars in her eyes at the sound of his voice. My giggle breaks the spell, and Kay blushes.

“Did y’all enjoy the meal?”

“Yes, it was great.” Kay smiles.

“Yeah, it’s good to finally see Emani again. It’s been soooo long.” Shelby emphasizes the word in a singsong voice. “We didn’t know if you would let her out of your love cocoon.”

I can feel my face burn with embarrassment. Shelby says whatever is on her mind, but I didn’t think she would put me on blast like that.

“Shell!” I chastise.

“I have to apologize for keeping Emani all to myself, but I can’t say that I’m sorry. When you find a woman like her, it’s hard not to lock her up and throw away the key,” Maddox says with a naughty gleam in his eyes.

I feel myself blush again at the lustful look he gives me. This man makes me feel like the most desired woman who ever walked this earth. There’s no wonder I haven’t wanted to leave his side.

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“On that note, I guess I’ll take my single ass on home,” Shelby says, grabbing her purse and sliding from her chair.

We all chuckle as we grab our things and head out of the restaurant. Maddox makes sure the girls are in their cars before we head to his car. Before he opens the door for me, he gently spins me around and backs me up against the car. The sultry gleam in his eyes excites me to my core.

“Did I tell you how pretty you look tonight?” Maddox leans in and kisses me softly on the side of my neck.

A moan slips from my lips as a shiver runs down my spine. All it takes is one look from Maddox to get me going, but when he touches me, I’m helpless.

“If you keep making those noises, I’m going to show you just how much your pretty ass affects me,” Maddox growls.

“If you want me to stop moaning, then you need to stop kissing me like that.” I manage to breathe out between pleasurable groans.

“Alright, I guess I can wait until I get you home.” Maddox helps me into the car and shuts the door.

I can’t help the contented sigh that slips out, but before I can truly enjoy the moment, my phone dings with a message.

Darrius: You need to answer my calls. I need to see you.

Me: Leave me alone.

I hit block as soon as I send the message.

“You okay, Sugar?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Let’s get back so you can finish what you started.”

Chapter17

MADDOX

I finally had to let Emani go back to her house. And I use the word let because I didn’t want her out of my sight. There haven’t been any further incidents, and I had to relent and trust that my guys did their job.

She has the best security system money can buy, and I don’t have any other excuses for her to stay. I still feel like the brick wasn’t just kids being assholes, but even Niro’s lead was a dead end. At this point, I have to keep my guard up and be diligent, but it looks like we’ll never figure out who did it.

My office phone beeping brings me out of my wandering thoughts.

“Yes, Lena? What is it?”

“Mr. Reid, there’s been some sort of disturbance. Cameron is asking for you to come downstairs.”

I frown because we shouldn’t have any kind of issues in our building. Our security here is top-notch. There’s no way anyone should’ve been able to create a disturbance.

“I’m on my way.” I disconnect the line and head to the elevator.

Once I get downstairs, I head directly to the control room, where all of the security cameras are. The day supervisor, Cameron turns to me with a deep frown covering his face. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this man without a smile.

“What’s this disturbance nonsense?”

“When I came in this morning, I did a sweep as usual. But I noticed the cameras in the bottom level of the garage were moved.”

“What do you mean, moved? Moved how? Which camera’s?”

“They were slightly moved, so the employee entrance was partially blocked. When I checked the badge reader, it had been tampered with. All of the scans haven’t been recording.”

“Have you checked the footage to see when this happened?”

“Yes, sir I checked. The footage was put on a loop. I can’t tell when it was changed. I only checked the badge reader this morning and noticed that my scan to come through the door wasn’t there. There’s no way to tell how many scans it’s missed. It could be a coincidence, but...”

“We don’t believe in coincidences,” I finish. “Who knows about this?”

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“Just me and you. I contacted Senior Mr. Reid, but he’s not here yet.”

“Good. Keep this between us. I’ll speak to my father. I want you to leave the camera on a loop. I’ll take care of the rest. Thanks, Cameron.”

“You’re welcome, sir. What would you like me to do about the badge reader?”

“Make sure all of the scans are recording, but don’t put it in the system. If it shows we fixed it, then it will alert the person who did it that we know.”

“Okay, sir.” Cameron nods.

I don’t know if this has anything to do with my slashed tires because it’s been over two months since it happened, but for some reason, I don’t feel like they’re related. Someone is targeting my business. The other incident felt more personal.

These last few months, I’ve been so focused on Emani that I didn’t even think about anything remiss at the firm. Now, I have to look into what could’ve happened while I wasn’t paying enough attention. It’s unlike me not to have my shit together.

I make my way back upstairs, feeling suspicious of everything and everyone around me. Who in their right mind would want to betray me?

“Everything okay, sir?” Lena questions when I get back to the executive floor.

“Yep, just run-of-the-mill stuff,” I answered dismissively.

“Anything I can do to help, sir?” Lena asks.

“No, thank you. Everything is taken care of.” I continue into my office to call my father.

A thousand scenarios are running through my mind, but I have a meeting with Luca Dalonzo so I can’t dwell on it right now. I’m already prepared for my meeting because I’m thorough when it comes to my work, which is why I’m pissed that I neglected to see a rat right under my nose.

I don’t know who was in our building or why, so I won’t take any chances of meeting here. There’s no telling what has been going on or for how long. I’m too anal not to know what is going on around me, and it pisses me off.

“Lena, I won’t be back after my meeting today.”

“Yes, sir. Oh, I needed to remind you that you have the Winter Gala next weekend. I RSVP’d for two, and you can’t renege. You skipped the Fall Ball, and your father was not happy.”

“Thanks for the reminder. I completely forgot. See ya tomorrow. If you need anything, contact my dad or shoot me a text.”

“Will do.”

It doesn’t take me long to gather up my things for my meeting with Luca. The man is a certified genius, and he’s also certifiably insane. You wouldn’t know it by looking at him, but the things I know about this man would have anybody running scared. I ain’t no bitch, but he’s one person I would never even think about crossing. Too bad some people aren’t as smart as I am.

It doesn't take me long to drive the few blocks to the Dalonzo building. Conveniently, a lot of our high-profile clients have businesses close to ours. Our special client list is comprised of people who need our services because their businesses may not always operate on the legal side of things. They also have very unconventional ways of getting things done, which is why I have Niro Dalonzo on speed dial.

"Maddox Reid, here to see Luca Dalonzo," I say to the front desk security.

"Of course, Mr. Reid. Here's your visitor's pass."

I nod my thanks and take the pass. The Dalonzo's are as diligent about their security as we are. However, unlike us, who need to follow the letter of the law, they do whatever is necessary to take care of any issues.

Once I exit the elevator on the executive floor, there's a woman waiting. "Mr. Reid, Mr. Dalonzo is in his office. Right this way, please," the woman says.

I follow behind the woman, who I can't help but notice is wearing a very inappropriate outfit for the office, but hey, she doesn't work for me. So, I keep my observation and gaze to myself.

"Here we are. Do you need anything?" She puts her hand on my arm and bats her eyelashes at me.

I have to look at her face to make sure we haven't slept together in the past, but nope. I don't know this woman. Damn, she's bold and unprofessional as fuck.

I move away so her hand slips off my arm, "I'm good. Thanks."

She bats her eyes one more time and leaves. I just shake my head as I move into the

office where Luca and Niro are waiting.

“Just the man I needed to see,” I say to Niro.

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The meeting with the Dalonzo's went better than expected, and in no time at all, I will be able to pinpoint exactly who tried to betray us and when it all started. But for now, I have to pretend that I don't know shit is going on. It will be hard for me because I'm a revenge now kinda guy, but I guess it's like they say: revenge is better served cold.

I've been mulling over everything Cameron told me all day. Even with reassurance from Niro that he would get answers ASAP, my gut is turning. However, when I pull up to Emani's house, I switch my thoughts about work off so I can give her my full attention.

Before I can get out of my car, my phone buzzes with a message.

Niro: I have what you need.

Me: Excellent. Jump drive?

Niro: Encoded one.

Me: I'll pick it up later tonight.

Niro: Fantasy @ 10.

Me: k

Niro got the information way faster than I expected, but I shouldn't be surprised. It's a reason that I go to him before I even go to my security. I have pleaded with this man to start a security company, but he says he doesn't want the headache.

He might as well start a company. Hell, he does so much for us that he might as well be on our payroll. But Niro likes to be paid in favors. I'm just glad that he's not a lunatic like his cousins, although he does have his moments. Must be a family trait.

I make my way to Emani's front door and ring the doorbell. I hear a rustling sound before she opens the door with a beautiful smile gracing her face.

"Hey there, Santa." She pulls me inside with a playful giggle.

"Santa?" I quirk my brow at her.

"Yeah, you sent the beautiful gown and shoes for the gala, right? A girl loves to get unexpected gifts."

"I'm glad you like the dress, gorgeous. But I thought you were calling me Santa 'cause I'm a white man with a beard."

Emani's giggles turn into a full belly laugh. "No, silly. Besides, Santa was black at our house."

I chuckle and pull her gorgeous ass in for a kiss. I love the way her plump, soft lips feel against mine. I could kiss this woman for the rest of eternity and still not be satisfied.

"Come on in. Dinner is ready." Emani walks toward her dining room where there's a steaming hot meal ready.

The fact that this woman worked all day and still wanted to fix me a home cooked meal makes me love her even more than I already do. Emani is a nurturer, and her sweet nature is so welcoming that I love coming home to her. It's one of the reasons I wanted her to continue staying with me. I miss her face when she's not there. I missed her not being in my bed, so being without her lasted all of a week before I showed up at her door.

Now, we take turns staying at one another's house. I would ask her to move in with me, but I know she's not the shacking up kind of woman, and I respect that. I also know she's not ready for marriage, but as soon as I get an inkling that she's ready, I'll be dragging her ass to the altar.

"I have to go out later to meet Niro, but I'll be back to tuck you in." I smile at Emani as she finishes plating the food.

"Okay. You know, if you have something to do, you don't have to come back," she says, sitting down.

"No, ma'am. I will not miss the chance to have you in my arms."

Emani's smile gets brighter, and she blushes. "Okay, I'll give you a key. You already know the code."

I nod because exchanging keys gets us another step closer to moving in together. "So, how are classes going?" I ask between bites of smothered pork chops.

The meat is so tender it melts in my mouth. It's one of my favorite dishes that my Mama made, and now that I've had Emani's, I won't have to beg her to fix it for me anymore.

"They're going okay. But I'm definitely looking forward to Christmas break."

“Speaking of... how would you like to take a little getaway over your break?”

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I've been wanting to take Emani somewhere, but I know she likes to schedule trips on school holidays so she doesn't leave her students with a sub. I love her dedication to her career and her students.

"Really? A getaway where?" Emani's eyes brighten with excitement.

"I was thinking somewhere close this time. That way, we don't use up a lot of time traveling. Maybe Cancun or Cabo."

"Ooh, Mexico. I can't wait!"

Before we can continue our conversation, Emani's cell vibrates on the kitchen counter. She frowns, but ignores it until it buzzes again. Emani sighs heavily before getting up.

"Let me check that." She rolls her eyes before grabbing the phone.

When she looks at the screen, her face crumples with indignation. As her eyes scan the phone, she clenches it tighter and purses her lips. Her brows dip in the middle before she closes her eyes and breathes deeply.

The rage coming off my sweet baby pisses me off. Whoever had the audacity to upset her is going to have to answer to me. Emani is the most selfless person I know, so it would take an asshole of epic proportions to make her angry.

"What is it, Sugar? 'Cause the way you're looking over there is making me want to hurt somebody," I say, getting up and moving behind her.

Emani hands me the phone before turning and wrapping her arms around me, and placing her head on my chest. I wrap one arm around her as I hold the phone up with the other hand. I absently rub her back as I read through the messages.

Unavailable: You need to answer me!

Unavailable: I'm giving you a chance. Stop ignoring me.

Unavailable: Answer my calls.

Unavailable: You're going to regret this.

There are so many messages that I don't even want to read them all. Emani hasn't answered any of them. But I can see all of the messages are coming from different numbers.

"It's Darrius. I blocked his number two weeks ago, but I've been getting messages every day since. Even though I won't acknowledge him, he won't stop."

"Is it just the messages?"

"Yeah. He hasn't called me since I blocked him. I don't know what the end game is here. Harassing me isn't going to make me want him," Emani says before smashing her face back into my chest.

"We can get a restraining order. It will be temporary, but it will show him you mean business."

"I don't know, Maddox. I don't think there's enough to prove that Darrius is the one sending these. They're from different numbers," her voice is muffled because her face is still against my chest.

“Sugar, don’t underestimate me. If you want an order of protection, say the word.”

Emani shakes her head. “No, my Mama will throw a fit. She’s already mad at me. I just want to keep the peace.”

I can understand her not wanting to deal with her mother, but I’ll be damned if I let a man stalk my woman. If she doesn’t want me to use my legal favors, then I’ll use my illegal ones.

Chapter18

EMANI

The weekend got here way faster than I anticipated. I’ve been summoned to my parents’ house for dinner, so I wasn’t even able to look forward to Saturday like I usually do. Maddox had to meet up with another client, so he couldn’t make it tonight.

The only buffer I have is Amari, and her behind is running late. I suck it up and get out of the car. I enter the house, and my Daddy greets me with a big bear hug.

“Hey, Daddy.”

“How’s my baby girl?” He asks as he holds me out in front of him.

He studies me for a second before he pulls me in for another hug. I relish in his smell and the comfort it brings me. My Mama may not be affectionate, but my Daddy did his best to make up for it. There’s never been a time when I questioned my father’s love.

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“I’m okay. Just tired. Ready for break.”

“Break? You just had off a week for Thanksgiving,” Zuri’s snide remark makes me inwardly groan.

Of course, I knew she was going to be here, but I thought I would have a little more time before I had to deal with her.

“Zuri, I didn’t see your car outside,” I remark instead of acknowledging her question.

“I caught a ride.” She smirks.

I frown because I don’t know what the little smirk is about, but I really don’t care anymore. I’m not about to fight with Zuri. I just want to suffer through this dinner as quickly as possible so I can get the heck out of here.

My Daddy excuses himself to go help Mama in the kitchen and leaves me and Zuri alone. I do my best to ignore her as I scroll on social media on my phone. I really miss Maddox.

The doorbell rings, and I tick my head to the side. “Why is Amari ringing the doorbell?”

“She probably forgot her key. I’ll get it.” Zuri gets up and strides out of the room.

“The door was unlocked. Just tell her to come in,” I holler out, but Zuri doesn’t answer.

I shrug and keep scrolling until I hear a voice that I know I must've hallucinated. I know you're freakin' lyin'!

"Hello, Emani. It's good to see you." Darrius walks into the room like he owns the place.

I side-eye him behind so hard that I almost give myself a headache. Instead of responding, I get up and go to the kitchen to ask my parents what the hell is going on.

"Emani! You are so rude. You know Mama and Daddy taught you better than to not speak when spoken to." Zuri follows behind me.

"I'm not a child, Zuri. Or a puppet. I don't have to talk to anyone I don't want to talk to. Including you," I say as I keep walking.

I don't even stop or turn around to look at her to tell her off. She heard what I said, and I meant what I said. I'm not giving this man any energy. I was entirely too close to letting Maddox cash in a favor to get a restraining order. But I put the family first. It would've been a scandal if I had done that. My family is prominent in the black Christian community. We are held in high regard, and I didn't want my actions to start any drama.

But my family doesn't seem to be able to put me first, and it shows by them inviting this man into our home. Maybe I'm jumping to conclusions. I haven't told them about his harassment. Although my Mama knows I'm not interested in Darrius, maybe I need to make myself crystal clear.

"What is all the yelling about? You girls know I don't stand for that foolishness in my house," Mama chastises in a stern tone.

"I apologize, Mama..."

“That’s Emani yelling, Mama. You know she acts like she doesn’t have any home training.”

We both speak at the same time, but I’m the only one who apologizes. Like always.

“What’s wrong, Emani?” My Daddy asks—the deep wrinkle in his forehead and his honey brown eyes laser in on my face.

“Why is Darrius here, Daddy?” I don’t even address my Mama because I know she will gaslight me.

“He’s my guest. I told you about being rude, Emani. It’s like we didn’t teach you anything. You’re such a disappointment,” my Mama answers instead.

The word daggers she throws lands directly where she intended. I can feel my heart breaking into a thousand pieces. I don’t know what else I can do to get my Mama to love me, but at this point, I believe it’s impossible.

“Heeey family,” Amari sings as she comes into the kitchen. We lock eyes before her gaze drifts around the room. I can tell when she sees Darrius because her bright smile morphs into the fiercest scowl I’ve ever seen her wear. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Amari! Watch your mouth,” my Mama gasps like she’s some southern belle in a theatrical rendition of a Tyler Perry movie.

“My question still wasn’t answered. You’ve been harassing my sister for months, and you have the unmitigated gall to show your funky ass up at our house for dinner. I think the hell not.”

I can’t choke down the smile that graces my face. Amari has always been my

protector, and I'm so glad she's here. She's reminded me that I need to stand up for myself.

“Like your mother said, I was invited.” Darrius looks at me, and a smug smile crosses his face.

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I have suffered through forty-five minutes of dinner. I didn't leave because I wasn't going to let some arrogant a-hole run me out of my home. But it has been torture. Darrius sat across from me and stared the entire night.

Although I avoided eye contact with him, he kept trying to engage me in conversation. Amari ran interference, but he was persistent. It felt like nobody else noticed how aggressive this man is being.

It's also funny how Zuri doesn't think I notice how flirtatious she's being with Darrius. I decide to watch her instead. As I continue to observe her, I see that she's being uncharacteristically forward. Zuri is giggling, touching Darrius every chance she gets, smiling all in his face. Her behavior isn't the only strange thing, the fact my Mama hasn't commented on it is also weird. Zuri has been in a committed relationship for two years, and I know she's looking for a ring.

"Zuri, where's Kelvin? I haven't seen him in months," I interrupt her flirting.

Zuri's eyes shoot daggers in my direction. If she could spit fire, my behind would be a sizzling crisp. Dang! Guess I touched a nerve.

"Kelvin and I decided to take a break." Zuri straightens in her chair and throws a side glance at Mama.

"A break? After two years... since when?" Amari leans forward with her eyebrows raised.

I know this tea is piping hot. It's probably what's been stuck up Zuri's butt for the past few months. And instead of confiding in her sisters that she was having problems with her boyfriend, she spent her time treating us like crap.

"It's none of your business, Amari," Zuri huffs.

"None of my business?" Amari touches her chest. "After you consistently stick your nose in any and everything we do. No, ma'am, I surely will not mind my business."

"I'm not talking about this right now. Besides, we're here to talk about Emani." A satisfied smile crosses Zuri's face.

"Me? I promise there's nothing that we need to discuss," I dismiss her.

The last thing I want to do is listen to my family berate me on whatever it is they've decided I've done wrong. I am tired of being the object of their ire. It's unfair and exhausting.

"Oh, yes there is." Darrius leans forward with his hands steepled.

If he's trying to look like a supervillain in a comic book, he's succeeding. This whole dinner has been one long cliché, and I'm over it.

"Nah, I think I'm going to head out. I'm meeting Maddox." I stand up from the table.

"Speaking of Maddox..." Darrius pulls out his phone and scrolls for a second before pausing.

The only reason I'm still standing here entertaining this foolishness is because I want to know what they think they know about my man that I don't. I can dispel whatever ignorant idea they have right now.

Darrius slides the phone across the table, and I pick it up. The picture is of Maddox walking into a strip club with one of the scariest men I've ever seen. But I'm not sure what this picture is supposed to prove.

I slide the phone back across the table. "I won't be at service tomorrow. I'm busy." I start to walk out of the kitchen.

"Emani! Come sit down so we can talk!" My Mama bellows out.

I'm trying to remain respectful, but they are really starting to piss me off.

"Tina, there's no need to yell. Darrius, show me what you have."

I walk back into the dining room as Darrius arrogantly stands up and hands my Daddy his phone. My Daddy's brown face flushes red, and the anger I see in his eyes makes me take a step back. I can't tell why my Daddy is mad because Dr. Miles Jackson doesn't often show anger. He's a forgive-and-let-live type of man, and I've always appreciated that about him, especially since my Mama is the exact opposite.

"We invited you into our home. Why would you feel the need to show us this trash?" My Daddy sits up and narrows his eyes at Darrius.

Darrius swings his attention to my Mama, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out where he got this bright idea. I don't know what the issue is or what they're trying to do, but I'm sick and tired of it.

"I just wanted Emani to see what kind of trash she's dealing with. You all are prominent members of our community. It doesn't look good for your daughter to be with a man like him." Darrius is still looking at my Mama as if he's waiting for her to back him up.

I look in her direction, and just like I knew she would she sneers in my direction. “Let me see that.” She grabs the phone from my Daddy then clutches her imaginary pearls. “Miles! Emani can’t date a man who hangs out in places like these. What will our parishioners think? Emani, you need to end things with this miscreant immediately!”

I almost feel like applauding my Mama’s worthwhile performance, but I’m too busy trying to keep my eye roll in check.

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“Y’all are ridiculous. It’s a strip club, not a brothel. And even if it was, I do not care. My life is mine. Maddox is a great boyfriend. Be happy that I’m happy.” This time, I look at my Mama.

She needs to understand that I am done doing things her way. I can live my life without her control. I have to.

“Tina, Maddox Reid is a fine young man. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but this nonsense needs to come to an end,” my Daddy’s voice booms throughout the dining room, and it makes all discussion stop.

My father never raises his voice, but it looks like my Mama went too far with her meddling. Her gasp is real this time, and her wide eyes and open mouth show just how shocked she is.

“I can’t believe you, Miles. This is not the time to have this discussion.”

“Emani, have a good night, sweetheart.” My Daddy comes around the table and hugs me.

“You’re just going to let her leave? Mama! After everything we did to get her here! Oh my God, she ruins everything!”

I frown at Zuri having a full-blown temper tantrum. At thirty-seven, she’s way too old to be acting like this. There’s definitely something deeper going on.

“How do I ruin everything? My dating life has nothing to do with you. You don’t

need me for anything. I'm not important." I look at my Mama, and she bucks her eyes.

Good. Now, she knows I heard her.

"That's right! You're not important. All you had to do was what Mama said. The brick through your window was to get you to see that you needed to stay away from Maddox Reid. But noooo, you ran straight into his arms like the whore you are."

"You threw the brick through my window? Zuri? What the hell!"

"Bitch! You did what?" Amari stands up and lunges at Zuri, but I hold her back.

"Shut up, Amari. This isn't your business!" Zuri yells then she turns back to me with fire in her gaze, "You needed to learn a lesson. Ever since you came into our lives, you've been nothing but a headache. I was trying to get you to see reason. But forget it. I will be happy to be the first lady of the church once D.C. takes over. You'll be out in the cold where Mama should've let you stay when Daddy's whore left you."

"Zuri! Shut up!" Both my parents yell out.

"Daddy, what is she talking about?" Amari questions.

I feel like my world just came crashing down around me. There's no way Zuri could be telling the truth... right? Why would she say something so foul?

"You're not my Mama?" I stare directly at her, daring her to lie to me.

My Mama looks at me with so much venom lacing her dark brown eyes that I have to take a step back. "No."

Chapter 19

MADDOX

I hate wining and dining clients. Well, in this case, more like tipping and pimping. Zachary Larson is one of the National Baseball League's biggest stars. When he wanted representation, he sought us out.

With all the trouble he's recently gotten into, I know he is a gold mine. The guy can't stay off the gossip sites and blogs to save his life. He's gone from a disorderly conduct charge to a DUI. He's also arrogant and a narcissist. He will make the perfect client.

"Man, I love this place. The chicks in here are top-notch." Zachary is looking around like he's never seen a woman in his life.

I know the guy is a little on the young side, but someone should've sat him down and had the talk with him. Zachary just signed a one hundred million dollar five year contract with the Dallas Rovers. His agent should've told him about the pitfalls of money and fame.

"I'm glad you're having a good time, I'm going to have my security Saul take care of you for the rest of the evening. I'll send over the final paperwork in the morning."

"Great! Thanks, man."

We shake hands, and I leave the VIP section, where Zachary and his friends are partying like there's no tomorrow. There was a time not too long ago that I would've stayed with them until the early breaks of dawn, but now that I've found a woman worth loving, you have to pay me to be in a club.

I stop and talk to Saul who is standing at the entrance of the VIP. "Hey, make sure you drive them back to Los Colinas. None of them should be behind the wheel."

“Yes, sir.”

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“Give me a call if you need anything. Otherwise, I’ll see you in two days.”

Saul nods, and I leave the club through the rear entrance. I have extra guys on duty tonight because of our recent security breach. These guys blend in so well that only Niro and I know who they are.

After I found out who was behind the break-in at our firm, my dad thought it was best we outsource our security until we knew just how many snakes we had in our house. I’m still raw from the betrayal, but once we take out the trash, I’ll be able to calm down.

I nod to the VIP valet and hand him a twenty before sliding behind the driver’s side. I was supposed to meet Emani at my house tonight. She has a key, but I wanted to be home when she got there. I go to hit the call button, but my Bluetooth connects with an incoming call.

“Hey, baby. I was just about to call you. Are you at the house yet?” I ask Emani.

“Uh, hey Maddox. It’s Amari.”

“Amari? Where’s Emani? Is she okay? What happened?” I can hear the slight rise in my tone.

“Emani needs you. She’s physically okay, but... she needs you.” The quiver in Amari’s voice has me pressing the gas pedal to the floor.

“Where are you?”

“We’re on our way to Emani’s?”

“I’m on my way. Tell Emani that I love her. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Okay. See you when you get here.”

I make it to Emani’s house in no time at all. I barely shift my into park before I’m out of the car and on the porch. I unlock the door and as soon as I open it, I can hear sobbing coming from the main room.

“Emani? Sugar?” I call out as I rush to the front room, where Amari, Kayla, and Shelby are all gathered around her.

The girls move so I can gather my woman into my arms. I rub her back and whisper that I love her. I have no idea what’s going on, but the sound of Emani’s devastation is wrecking my soul.

“Sugar, no matter what happened, I’m here.” I rock her from side to side until she’s ready to talk.

I brace myself because I have no idea what could’ve made Emani so upset. She was fine when I talked to her earlier. She didn’t want to go to her parent’s house because of the tension between her and her mom. But damn... what really went on?

Once Emani calms down a little, she takes a deep breath and begins to tell me what happened. “Darrius showed up at my parent’s house for dinner tonight.”

“What the fuck! I know that asshole isn’t the reason you’re bawling your eyes out. I swear to God, Emani, I will kill his ass.” My rage takes over before I can even think about what I’m saying.

I'm not a killer as long as I'm not pushed. I never had to be a killer because I know so many, but that doesn't mean I won't do what needs to be done to protect Emani. And that includes killing a motherfucker.

"No, I handled him just fine. He tried to show me pictures of you going in a strip club to make me break up with you. But when I didn't react the way they wanted me to, Zuri had a meltdown and told me that I wasn't my Mama's child."

"Wait. What?" I look at Amari for confirmation, and she nods her head.

"Apparently, Daddy had a mistress—Emani's birth mother. Our parents told everyone Emani was Mama's, and they covered it up since they were 'upstanding' leaders of the church," Amari explains.

"Wow. That's a lot. Why would... how could... damn, I don't even know what to say to that." I shake my head. I pull Emani closer and hold her tighter.

"Yeah, it was a lot. Zuri and D.C. want to be the next power couple of the church. They were planning to push Daddy out by exposing his infidelity. Mama was behind it all."

I continue to shake my head at the news. I can't believe Dr. Jackson had an affair and a child. That explains why Mrs. Jackson treated Emani so bad.

"So, why did the asshole start dating Emani if he wanted Zuri. It doesn't make sense."

"It was part of the master plan. I was supposed to fall in line so that I could be paraded around as evidence that Mama is a saint for raising a side baby. Darrius and I were supposed to usher in a new era for Mount Zion with my mother as the pastor and him as her underling. Except Zuri wanted the light for herself and exposed it all."

“Well, I’ll be gotdamned! That’s some crazy shit right there. Your Mama was just gonna out your Daddy after thirty years of silence. Vengeance is strong in that one.”

“I’ve always been afraid of that lady,” Shelby mumbles, shaking her head.

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“What is your dad going to do about all this?”

“I have no idea.” Emani wipes her tears, and I wrap her in my arms once more.

Whatever Dr. Jackson decides to do, I know all hell is going to break loose.

The last thing I wanted to do was leave Emani, but when my dad called me in the middle of the night, I knew there was important business to handle. Once we found out who was behind the security breach, we had to play the waiting game to catch them. But now that we know for sure who it was, it's time to handle business.

I show up at a place of some former clients of ours. It's in the middle of nowhere, and I'm definitely out of my element. I pull up to a tall rot iron gate with two guys guarding it. Even if I didn't know how dangerous these men were, you can tell with a glimpse.

“Maddox Reid. I'm here to see Bishop.”

The man nods, then barks out, “Shark! Open the gate!”

I drive through the gate and down a long driveway. It's in the middle of the night, and there's a full-fledged party going on. The loud rock music is blasting, and people are wandering around. I would be worried, but I know who we're dealing with. The Hellhounds don't take too kindly to snitches, and if these people are here, then they definitely know how to keep their mouths shut.

I drive around the back of the main building like my dad told me to, and I'm glad that I drove my F250 because the gravel would've been hell on my Porsche. I find a place to park and get out. I head to the side door and double knock. I only have to wait a few seconds before there's a clicking sound, and the door swings open.

"Reid."

"Big Country." I nod. I only know a few of the Hellhound members, but I trust every single one of them.

I follow behind him until we're walking down a dimly lit hallway. Suddenly, Big Country stops, places his hand against the wall, and a door that I didn't initially see slides open.

"Well, that's some futuristic shit right there," I say, impressed.

I'm not surprised that the Hellhounds have such high-tech in their building. On the outside looking in one may not think there's much to these men, but I know for a fact over half of them are millionaires.

I walk into a large room, and Ace, the Hellhounds enforcer, is beating the shit out of someone while a small group of men standing with their backs to me. Questions about stolen files come between the loud sounds of fists meeting flesh. When they notice my presence, they all turn, giving me a clear view of who Ace is beating the shit out of. Frank Bates.

"Just the welcome I like to see." I walk toward the group with a smile on my face.

It does my heart good to see Frank's snake ass tied to a chair, looking like he's been fifty rounds with Mike Tyson in his prime.

“Yeah, for a security specialist, he wasn’t very aware of his surroundings,” Bishop, the Vice President of the Hellhounds, says.

“Maddox, you know me. I didn’t do this,” Frank coughs out, still denying the truth.

“Idoknow you. And I know you weren’t working alone.” I shake my head in disappointment.

“Let me let you in on a few things. Since you’ll be taking them to the grave.” My dad smirks while sizing up the asshole. “The Hellhounds MC doesn’t take snitching lightly. Now, they haven’t been clients of mine for quite some time since Bishop here left the DA’s office and started his practice, but I still have their files in my records. The same records you stole.”

“I-I didn’t steal anything. I’ve worked for y’all for years. I wouldn’t do that.” If Frank is looking for compassion, he has severely overestimated us.

“You’ve known us for years, so you should know as well as anybody that we don’t forgive betrayal. Did you think we wouldn’t figure it out?” I question.

Frank shakes his head, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

My dad throws the pictures at his feet, and his eyes go wide. There’s nothing left to say. Being photographed in compromising positions with your co-conspirator would leave nothing left to be said.

“Are you still confused about what we’re talking about?”

Before Frank can answer, the door opens, and muffle screams are heard. When I turn around, I’m not surprised to see my assistant, Lena, as well as my mother, Elizabeth, with their mouths taped shut and their hands bound behind their backs.

All three of them were in on stealing confidential files from our offices. Too bad their efforts were all futile. Nobody else can decipher our coded files because the only two people who know they are coded are me and my dad. They risked their lives for a jump drive full of bullshit.

After thoroughly investigating, we found out Elizabeth was paying Lena for her help. When I confronted Lena, she gave up everything she knew. She thought I would forgive her transgressions since she turned on her partners. Foolish.

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I trusted my assistant. She had been with me for years. Her salary was one of the highest at the firm. Hell, she made more money than some of our freshman attorneys, and yet she still sold her soul to Elizabeth for more. Loyalty is hard to come by these days.

The two Hellhounds lead the women further into the room and push them into chairs. Once they finish tying them up, they nod and leave. The efficiency with which they completed the tasks leaves no doubt in my mind they have plenty of practice.

“I knew I should’ve kept a closer eye on you after you visited Maddox that day. I told you to stay away from my sons. You gave them up, and I paid you handsomely to stay away from us. But you’re a greedy, selfish bitch. Always have been, always will be.”

I’ve never heard my father talk like that to Elizabeth. He’s always carefully blank when talking about or dealing with anything that has to do with my mother. He’s never said anything disparaging against her, he let me and my brother figure out who she was on our own. It didn’t take long, but I never would’ve expected her to betray us like this.

Both Elizabeth and Lena’s faces are streaked with tears. Too bad this lesson is one they learned too late. Neither of them will leave this compound alive.

“Do you want to hear anything they have to say?” Bishop looks at me, then my dad.

“Why not... any last words, ladies?”

The tape is ripped from their mouths, and Elizabeth yells out dramatically. Lena, on

the other hand, whimpers with wide, pleading blue eyes.

“How could you do this, Joseph? All you had to do was pay me. You owe me!” Elizabeth furiously yells. “I helped you start the firm with my parent’s money. You wouldn’t be shit without me.”

“You’re fucking delusional! Your parents are broke! They were broke then, and they are broke now. They were living off borrowed money and their name. They barely had enough to send you to college, much less start my firm.”

I can only shake my head. The woman tried to ruin our lives, knowing it took my dad almost a decade to get established and pay off business loans. My grandparents have never done anything for us. Hell, they’ve never done anything for Elizabeth, either.

It’s wild what people will do for money. Elizabeth put all of our lives in jeopardy. If they were able to get the information they were after, I wouldn’t have to worry about going to jail because one of the more ruthless clients would’ve killed us to keep their secrets.

“Please, Maddox. I told you everything. I never wanted to do this. Your mother told me she would have me killed.”

“Shut up, you stupid bitch! If you would’ve kept your fucking mouth shut, they would’ve never known anything,” Elizabeth snarls at Lena.

“Both of you can save it. It doesn’t matter the reasons. I hope you all find peace on the other side.”

I signal for Ace to do what he does best. Make people disappear. I turn to my father, and he nods as we leave the room. All I hear are tearful pleas, but the only emotion I feel is relief. I’m glad this shit is over, and I can get back to my woman.

Chapter20

EMANI

The last place I want to be is back at Mount Zion Avenue Baptist Church. The lies and betrayal will forever be tied to this place. It's still unbelievable that my parents lied to me my entire life. But it was not just the lie; it was the resentment that was held towards me.

My Mama said she forgave my Daddy, but all along, she was stewing in her bitterness. Her hate for my Daddy turned into mistreatment of me. No child should have to feel they aren't good enough. What my Daddy did was not my fault.

If she didn't want to raise me, then she should've said so. She had a choice in the situation, but she wanted the power that the church was providing her—the prestige of being the first lady of a popular mega-church. But as soon as being first lady wasn't enough, she wanted to use the child she hated for her gain.

“You alright, Sugar?” Maddox leans over to ask.

“No, I want to go home. But I promised. So...” I look up at Maddox, and he smiles his understanding.

We make our way to the front pew and take our designated seats. Amari and Naomi are already here, but Zuri is nowhere to be found. I can't say that I'm sad she's not here. I'm still feeling some type of way about my oldest sister.

“I know you f... lying,” Amari fiercely whispers.

I look up to see my Daddy coming from the back with my Mama, Zuri, and Darrius following behind him. They are all wearing big smiles like they just won the lottery,

and my stomach sinks.

When I left my parent's house after Zuri dropped her bomb, they were all still arguing. Amari drove me home, and I hadn't planned on stepping foot back in their house. All I know is a lot of blame was placed on my shoulders, and not a single apology came my way.

It's shocking to see them all walk out together like they hadn't crushed my world for a little power. It makes me sick to my stomach that I can be so easily dismissed. I can feel the tears welling up, and I do my best to suck them up.

Maddox places his hand in mine and tugs me closer to his side. He squeezes my hand then kisses my temple. His presence is such a comfort that I feel myself slightly relax. But the anxiety is lingering at the surface like a volcano about to erupt.

"Good morning, Saints," my Daddy's voice booms throughout the church. "How are you all this fine Sunday morning?"

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There's a roar of "alright" and "God is good" before the crowd settles back down to listen to my Daddy continue his sermon.

"I've come to you today to ask you for forgiveness. You see, I have been called to be a leader. I was called to preach the word of Gawwd! Can I get an amen!"

"Amen! Yes, pastor!"

"But as a man. I have fallen short of my calling sometimes. And I have asked my God for forgiveness, but now I need to ask it of you."

"We forgive you, pastor."

The congregation is yelling out their absolutions before they even know what the sin is. It makes me wonder if these people are actually listening or if they are just here to be seen and heard.

"I want you to know that if you can find it in your heart to forgive a sinner that I was, that I will be forever grateful. Because as long as you can forgive me, I will be here to lead this church."

"Amen! We have all been sinners."

Again, the congregation is for everything my Daddy is saying. However, I noticed that the three musketeers are all frowning. My gaze shifts to Maddox and he raises his eyebrow, and when I look at Amari, she has the same look. So, I'm not the only one who sees the sour faces.

“My wife has stood by my side for forty years. She has been the first lady of this church and a pillar of our community. Mrs. Tina Jackson has been a godsend. She raised four girls without batting a lash, and I love her for it.” My Daddy gives my Mama an adoring look, but she shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

“But one of those girls, she didn’t birth.” My Daddy pauses, and the murmur of the crowd gets louder with questions. “My wife raised our baby girl as her own once we reconciled from our separation.”

I can feel eyes on me, but I don’t shrink down like I normally would. Like they expect me to do. I sit up straighter and hold my head higher. None of this is my fault, and I will not shrink into myself.

“Lord knows when we were about to file for divorce, circumstances pushed us back together. Our marriage wasn’t perfect thirty years ago, but it’s more loving than it has ever been. I couldn’t ask for a more loving mother, wife, and first lady for Mount Zion Avenue Baptist Church.”

My Daddy calls for my Mama, and she slowly gets up. He pulls her into a tight hug and whispers in her ear. The smile plastered on my Mama’s face is forced, and her body is so rigid she could pass for a mannequin.

The congregation is eating it all up and applauding and hollering out, amen. I would laugh if it weren’t so tragic. But the look on Zuri, Darrius and my Mama’s faces are enough to make me smile.

I don’t know what they agreed to, but my Daddy telling the congregation about me was probably not part of it. It is very clear that Dr. Miles Jackson has no intentions of giving up his church or position, especially when he called Mama the first lady. I thought her head was going to explode.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting any of that,” Maddox says once church is over.

“I don’t think anyone was expecting that,” I chuckle.

My Daddy can rest knowing that his wife and oldest daughter can’t engage in a hostile takeover of the church, but that doesn’t mean everything is right with our world. Our family is completely broken, and I don’t know if it can be repaired.

“I’m glad you all invited me here tonight. I know you’ve needed space and time baby girl, but I missed you,” my Daddy hugs me tight.

I relish his bear hug even though I’m still upset with him. But he’s still my dad, and I’m doing my best to forgive him.

“I’ve missed you too, Daddy.”

I lead him inside, where everyone is chatting and mingling. Since we aren’t spending Christmas at home, Maddox and I decided to have all of our friends and family over for a holiday get together before we leave for Mexico.

I invited Amari and Naomi, but that’s it. I haven’t talked to Zuri or my Mama since that night at my parent’s house. I’m working on my trauma in therapy, but it might take years before I can forgive them... if ever. My Mama treated me like trash my entire life, and neither of them had any qualms about using or hurting me in their quest for power. I might change my mind one day, but at this point, I don’t want to see either one of them again.

“What your Mama and sister did was... I still can’t believe they put you through that. I’m sorry, Emani. I’m sorry I wasn’t man enough to tell you the truth.”

“What happened to my birth mother? Is it true she just left me?”

“No, sweetie. She died from complications in childbirth. Autumn never got to meet you. She really was a wonderful woman. You remind me of her sometimes.”

I nod, but I stay quiet. I’m not sure how I feel about any of this information. But I won’t stop my Daddy from sharing his story.

“She didn’t have any family left. It was just her, so it never crossed my mind not to keep you. Even if Tina didn’t want to raise you, I would’ve never given you up.” I get teary-eyed at his declaration, and we end up hugging once more.

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“What are you and Mama gonna do?”

“Well, honey. You need to trust your partner, and your Mama had her reasons for not trusting me, and now I have mine for not trusting her. It’s been too many years for either of us to leave. But for now, she’s going on a missionary trip to start her own church, and Zuri will be going with her. It will be good for them. We need the space.”

My Daddy just told me that they are separating without officially getting divorced. I think they should go on and sign the papers especially since the last time they separated, I showed up. But I’ll let them do things their way.

“What about Darrius? Is he still at the church?” I hate to ask, but I need to know if my forgiving father let this man stay in his life.

I haven’t been back to Mount Zion since the big announcement, and I don’t have plans on returning anytime soon. I’ve been attending another small local church for my spiritual needs. This is the first time I’ve asked my Daddy about any of this.

“No, of course, he’s not at the church anymore, honey. I fired Darrius. Last I heard, he slithered his way back to Louisiana.”

I’m relieved to hear that Darrius won’t be popping up anymore. I know that his stalking messages were all part of my Mama’s plan to take over the church, but I thought because he and Zuri had a relationship that he’d at least go with them on the mission trip. I guess that wasn’t the type of church he wanted to preach the word to. I’m just glad that all of them are out of my life. Good riddance.

“Glad to hear it.” I smile “Now, let’s go mingle. Maddox’s dad is here and wanted to see you,” I say, changing the subject. I grab my Daddy’s hand and lead him the rest of the way into Maddox’s house.

“Miles, good to see you, brother. The kids told me all about what happened. I’m glad it finally came out.” My Daddy and Joseph shake hands and do a man hug.

I look at my Daddy then at Joseph. “Wait a minute. You knew? How?”

When I look at Maddox, his brows are crumpled and he’s looking between his dad and mine. It looks like he was in the dark too.

“Joseph and I have been friends way before either of you were even thought about. He knows my darkest secrets... and I know his.” My Daddy winks.

I had no idea that the two of them were that close. Of course, because of Maddox, I knew that my dad knew his, but I didn’t realize how well. As a matter of fact, this is the first time I’ve ever seen them in the same room together. I guess if it were my business, I would know more about it, but I’m learning some things are better left alone.

“I guess that explains why a preacher needed to be on our client list,” Maddox replies with a lifted eyebrow.

“Preachers need loyal representation too, son. Your father did my prenup. It’s a reason why Tina went the route she did to try to get the church. It was ironclad. Not even infidelity would allow her to cash in what we built together. She had to go to the court of public opinion to try to push me out.”

The more my Daddy talks, the less I want to know. There are so many twists and turns to his tale that I feel dizzy. Now that I have most of the story behind my birth, I

don't need to search for approval like I once did.

Tina Jackson raised me, but she was not my mother. She treated me differently, and I never understood why. Learning about my Daddy's infidelity, I can almost sympathize with her. She stood by her husband but blamed the child, who was a constant reminder of her husband's weakness.

I get it. I honestly do, but that doesn't excuse her behavior. It doesn't make her ill-treatment of me okay. She should've been woman enough to tell my Daddy to go to hell. Instead of plotting his demise, she should've been packing her bags.

"Well, I'm glad you were able to keep the church and come to an agreement that works for both of you." I try my best to be diplomatic, but what I really want is for my Daddy to shun the woman who treated his child-like shit.

"Yeah, everything will be fine, baby girl. I promise."

"I'll hold you to that."

Epilogue

1 YEAR LATER

MADDOX

"Babe, are you sure you want to go? The anniversary of the car accident is in a few days. I will understand if you want to cancel," Emani says, placing her small hand on my face.

I kiss her palm and pull her onto my lap. "Sugar, Lena, and Frank meant a lot to me. Knowing that they were on their way from picking up Elizabeth to try to help us

reconcile is all I need to get me through.”

It’s one of the only secrets I’ve kept from Emani. Well, that and the fact I beat the shit out of D.C. before Ace sent him to meet his maker. He would’ve caused me too many problems.

Neither Emani nor Dr. Jackson know that he didn’t really go back to Louisiana, and she doesn’t need to know what really happened to those three either.

Her heart is too pure for me to taint it with darkness. Besides, we needed to tie up loose ends. I would have never let D.C. walk around after he stalked Emani, and Frank, Lena, and Elizabeth knew the cost of betraying me and my father.

“Okay, if you say so. I have to be honest and say that I am looking forward to another trip to Mexico. It’s just what I need after a long fall semester.”

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“I know you need to relax. That’s why we’re leaving tonight and not in a few days. Surprise!” I say with a bright, shit-eating grin.

“Tonight? I can’t get ready by tonight. I haven’t even started to pack anything yet.”

“Baby, where we’re going, you won’t need clothes. You will be in a private villa with me at your beck and call.”

“Oh is that right?” Emani wraps her arms around my neck and I pull her against me.

“Yep, and I have another surprise. I had the girls pack for you, so you don’t have to worry about that either,” I say, smiling.

However, Emani starts to frown. “Which girls? Because Shelby will have me looking like a prostitute, and Kayla will have me looking like a nun.”

I chuckle, “Well, I actually had them and Amari pack, so it’s pretty evenly split. Nun in the day, working girl at night.”

Emani playfully slaps my chest, and we laugh. This beautiful woman is the piece of my puzzle that I didn’t know I was missing.

“You can always check your suitcase real quick before we leave. Anderson said the jet will be ready at nine, so we still have a few hours.”

“Ohhhh. I know that’s right. Got the private jet and a private villa. Look at you trying to get the best boyfriend award,” Emani says as she opens her bag. Her eyes go wide

and she looks up at me. “Maddox, what is this?” She whispers with tears in her eyes.

I smile, dropping to one knee, “I’m trying to get the best husband award. Sugar, I love you with everything in me. I can’t imagine what my life would be without you. You’re the sweetest part of my day, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

I pull the black box out of the empty suitcase and open it up. I pluck the fifteen-carat single solitaire oval-cut pure white diamond out and place it on her finger. Emani has tears flowing down her cheeks but she hasn’t said anything.

“I hope those are happy tears...”

“Of course they are. Oh my God Maddox! I love you! I’d love to be your wife!” Emani presses her full, plush lips against mine, and I know there’s no place I’d rather be.

“You’re never getting rid of me now, Sugar.” I stare deeply into her eyes with an unexplainable joy.

“Baby, I would never try to begin with. You’re stuck with me from now until eternity,” Emani purrs before she kisses my lips again.

“Great, if that’s the way you want it, then that’s the way you’ll have it.”

“Are you saying I can have things my way?” Emani questions.

A smirk covers my face. “You can always have your way, Sugar. You just need to tell me what way you want it.”

“Hmm. What if I want it with you still on your knees?” Emani backs up and pulls her dress over her head.

She's completely nude, and I can't help the wolfish grin that breaks out. I wrap my arms around her middle and tug her so my lips meet her stomach before sliding down to her sweet center. I lick long and slow, savoring her taste.

Emani moans low as she works her hips. I lap at her middle until her sugary wetness drips down my chin. I'm so painfully hard that I could probably knock a hole through concrete. I stand up and wrap her legs around me.

"I love celebratory sex," Emani giggles.

"And I love you!" I place her on the bed and strip off my clothes.

It doesn't take long before I'm sliding into the best place on earth. My world ends and begins with this woman, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Yes! Maddox, you feel so good, baby! Go deeper!"

"Remember what you asked for, Sugar. Remember when I'm tearing this sweet pussy up... don't run from me. You wanted it deep, remember!"

I spend the rest of the night making love to my fiancé and giving her everything she wants... her way... Emani's way.

THE END.