



If There's A Question Of My Heart (DeLuca Brothers #3)

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Description: After nearly a decade behind bars, Franklin “Kilo” DeLuca is finally free—but freedom comes with more weight than he expected.

Once a quiet storm with a dangerous edge, Kilo finds himself facing the past he thought he left behind.

Jameala “Mel” Sanders knew him before the system got its claws in him, and fate brought them back together when her job placed her in the prison he was locked in.

What started behind bars now has room to breathe, but as secrets surface and old wounds reopen, Kilo must fight for the future he’s building with Mel—and make sure there’s never a question of his heart.

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Chapter One

Franklin 'Kilo' DeLuca

I've been home almost two years now and things have slowly gotten back into order.

I stepped back into my role at DeLuca Enterprises with my brothers by my side.

That's the one thing that I changed. We were all CEOs.

I needed them to know that we were equal in this shit.

Our pops was still in the mix, but for the most part we handled everything.

Buck still handled the negotiations, though.

Nobody seemed to ever want to piss that nigga off, so negotiations always seemed to work in our favor.

He wanted to step back from enforcing, but he loved torturing muthafuckas too much for that shit.

When Stacks told me he burned a muthafucka and skinned them like a catfish, I knew then that nigga was deranged.

Stacks still did the brokering and was always down to get his hands dirty.

He seemed to have morphed into Buck's psychotic ass over the years and at times I didn't know if that was a good or bad thing.

Since I've been home, I witnessed that nigga beat a valet because he said the nigga felt on Kasha's ass.

I don't know how true it was, but I can't lie and say I wouldn't do the same.

Since I've been home, both of my brothers managed to get married.

Kasha had my nephew, Jefferson, or Jet, as we called him, so they were over there with two kids.

She took a step back from the bar after having Jet since Stacks didn't want him in daycare.

Buck had to end up hiring another manager.

He went with a man this time because Nic threatened to kill his ass if he hired another woman who wasn't family.

He even replaced the chick he had over at Vault because he fucked on her, too.

Me and Mel weren't married yet, since we had to follow prison protocol, but we were engaged, and she was pregnant with my son.

It's crazy that we all have boys like our parents.

Maybe that's all we could produce. I wasn't mad about it one bit because I know I'd end right back in prison if I had a daughter.

I had a distro meeting this afternoon, so I had to hurry and get my ass out of here.

Mel's pregnancy hormones had her on my dick twenty-four seven.

I wasn't complaining one bit, but I still had business to take care of.

The dispensaries were doing well. I currently had shops in The Cove and the downtown area.

I'm working on getting one opened in The Peak.

Muthafuckas loved getting high out there in the woods and shit.

I stepped out the closet, pulling my shirt over my head in the process.

I noticed Mel was still sitting on the bed in just her bra and panties.

She looked radiant with her five-month belly on display.

My boy had his mama's titties sitting nice and ass fatter than a memory foam pillow.

I had to shake my head to rid the thoughts I was formulating, or I'd never leave this fuckin' house.

"Why you still sitting there like you want me to leave." I leaned down and kissed her lips while palming her stomach. She wrapped her arms around my neck.

"Because I don't." She pouted. I looked into her sad eyes and almost rescheduled, but I couldn't do that shit. I needed to show up because once she got closer to her due date and after she gave birth, my presence would be scarce.

“Baby, I can’t stay here with you all day, every day. I gotta work.” I kissed her lips. “Besides, I thought you were going to chill with your sister. That changed?”

“No, it didn’t change. I’m just being a brat.” She smirked.

I pulled her up so that her body was flush with mine. “You can get that though, mama.” I kissed her slow and deep, hands gripping her waist. Before I knew it, she was bent over the bed, and I was knee-deep again.

Mel moaned out my name as I gripped her hips, dragging her back onto me slow and deep. “Fuck, Kilo... you feel so good. Don’t stop, baby.”

Her moans echoed through the room as I picked up the pace, our skin smacking loud and wet. I leaned down, kissing the side of her neck, whispering in her ear. “Shit, you feel good, Mel.”

I reached around and gripped her throat lightly, pulling her back against me. She gasped, and that shit sent a jolt down my spine. Her back arched deeper, giving me even more of her.

“Ughn...shit...Kilo,” she cried out.

“That’s right. Let me hear you. Let this baby know who his daddy is.”

She fell forward, grabbing the sheets, her legs trembling as I kept drilling into her. Her walls clamped down, and I felt her come undone all over me, soaking me in the process.

“Shit, baby... you tryna make me late again,” I growled, hips still moving.

“Then be late... just don’t stop.”

I gave her a few more deep strokes before I was letting go with a hard grunt, kissing her back as I held her still. We stayed like that, breathing hard, hearts pounding, before I kissed her one last time and headed for a shower.

After another round in the shower, I redressed and peeled out before she caught a third wind. I pulled up to D.E. with about forty-five minutes to spare before it was time for my meeting.

When I got off the elevator, I ran into Buck's ignorant ass. I knew he was about to start his shit.

"Well, look who decided to show the fuck up." He smirked.

"Don't start yo' shit, Lincoln." I pushed past his ass and headed to my office. I wasn't gone be in here long. I just needed to grab my folder for the meeting.

"I ain starting shit, but you were supposed to be here an hour ago. The fuck took you so long?"

"Damn, nigga. I'm here now, right? Fuck you asking all them questions for?" I frowned.

"Because he's nosy as fuck. That's why." Stacks came waltzing in the room with a smirk of his own on his face.

"Fuck outta here. I ain nosy. This nigga late." He pointed at me.

"That man has a pregnant girl at home. We both know how that is." Stacks gave Buck a knowing look, and this fool started grinning wider than The Joker.

“Thugga over there using you for your meat?” I couldn’t do shit but laugh at this ignorant ass fool.

“I told you to stop callin’ my girl that shit. Now if I tell her what you said, and she goes across yo’ shit, I’on wanna hear about it.”

“Her violent ass is the exact reason I call her ass Thugga. Tough ass girl.” We laughed at his stupid ass, because we knew he was serious.

“I’ma tell my sister you talkin’ ’bout her, too.” I looked up and Jace and Keenan were walking through my office door.

“Lil’ nigga, you nor your sister scare me. The fuck?” Buck frowned.

“Nic does though.” Keenan smirked, making Buck his charge his ass like he was a damn kid, but Keenan ducked. “Chill before I tell Nic you tried to body slam me.”

“Aye, chill.” I laughed. “Why y’all bad asses ain’t in school?” When I asked that, they both got a dumb look on their face, so I knew it was some bullshit. “Y’all don’t hear me?”

“Man, Unc. Our P.E. teacher was yelling in our faces like we were some punks, so I told him to back the fuck up,” Jace explained. I couldn’t do shit but shake my head.

“Shit, you ain’t wrong, nephew,” Buck input.

“And what you had to do wit’ that?” I asked Keenan.

“Y’all told us to stick together and look out for each other. When the teacher got in Jace’s face, I told him to back up ’fore I beat his old ass.” Keenan shrugged.

I couldn't do shit but shake my head because for these boys to not have DeLuca blood running through their veins, they acted just like us.

"You lil' niggas bad as fuck, but I'm proud of y'all." Buck praised. "Y'all gone get fucked up, but I'm proud of y'all."

"Man, Pops. You gone tell Ma?" Jace asked Stacks.

"She already knows, my boy. I'm just keeping you with me 'til she cools off." Jace sucked his teeth and went to sit down on the couch that I had in here, with Keenan following suit.

"Come on, let's go get ready for this meeting." I stood up from my desk and headed out with my brothers. "Don't y'all touch shit and stay in here. Don't be wandering the halls and shit, either." I warned.

Once we left my office and headed to the conference room, I burst into laughter. "Those lil' niggas bad as shit. The fuck you gone do wit' Jace?" I turned to Stacks, and he was laughing right along with me.

"Bust his ass when need be. He knows how far to take the shit. Muthafucka got in his face. He was supposed to check that, nigga." He shrugged.

"And you think this nigga a better role model than me?" Buck instigated.

"Nigga, yo' kid just turned three. The fuck he gone do beside tear some shit up?" Stack countered.

"We ain't talking about my kid. We talking about Chucky and Dennis-the-fuckin-Menace back there. I know Ms. Keena gone fuck Keenan's ass up when he goes home."

“You’ll find out firsthand because you taking him.” Stacks smirked.

“The fuck you say. I ain taking that lil’ nigga nowhere. You picked him up, so you take him home.”

“I already told his mama you were bringing him, so shut the fuck up and come on.” I left those two arguing while I went into the conference room. Our pops was already in there, as usual. When he heard the bickering, he shook his head because he knew exactly where it was coming from.

“What y’all fussing ’bout now?”

“Yo’ son volunteering me for some shit like I’m running an after school transportation service or some shit,” Buck fussed.

“What you talking about?” Pops laughed.

Stacks filled him in on what was going on, and even Pops had to laugh. He got a kick out of his grandsons. He said they reminded him of us growing up. Even though Keenan was Nic and Mel’s baby brother, he referred to him as his grandson as well.

“I’ll go talk to them when we’re done.” No sooner than he finished his sentence, Rachel was letting us know that H.O.T. was here. I usually dealt with Logic and Lucci, but Maverick was coming along today instead of Lucci.

“Wassup, fellas?” Logic spoke as he walked further inside the room.

Maverick followed suit, and we got right down to business.

I let them know I was expanding and that would mean I would need the product to do the same.

We talked numbers and Stacks let them know how the figures were already looking on this end.

I gave them the logistics of the area, and they were sold.

They knew I could make a hefty profit, that in turn would make them one.

After going over the details for a little over an hour, we wrapped the meeting up. Stacks scooped up Jace, while Buck damn near pushed Keenan's bad ass out the door.

"You want me to take him?" I asked.

"Hell nah. I'm taking his ass to my house first so he can cut my damn grass. He can go home after that." He smirked.

"You got me fu—"

"Say it so I can make them words come out ya ass." Buck warned. "Get in the truck, bro."

Shaking my head, I dapped my brother's up and headed back to my girl. I missed her mean ass.

When I got back home, Mel was napping. That gave me time to go over some contracts before taking another shower.

By the time I lathered my body, I heard the bathroom door open and saw Mel sauntering inside.

I watched as she stripped and walk over to join me.

I slid the door back to help her inside.

As soon as she was close, I pulled her body into mine, as much as my son would allow.

“Why didn’t you wake me up when you got in?” She took the washcloth from my hand and started washing me up again.

“I know you needed your rest. My boy rarely lets you do that, so I didn’t want to disrupt that, not knowing how long you’ve been down.” She nodded and continued to wash me. She turned me around and washed my back. When she was done, I stepped under the showerhead and rinsed off.

“How was your day?” she asked as I took her loofah returning her gesture.

“It was straight. Got distro to increase my supply so that I’ll be able to cater to another location.” She nodded.

“That’s good, baby.” She smiled. This was the shit I loved about her. Yeah, she was rough around the edges, but with me she was on her soft girl shit...until her hormones kicked in.

“Yeah, it is. But, aye. You know Keenan got suspended today?” She laughed.

“Hell yeah. Kasha called me and Nic and told us that Stacks had to pick their bad asses up from school. They didn’t call mama because they knew Stacks was his uncle, so he was able to take him, too. Those damn boys bad as hell. I pray my baby doesn’t act like that.”

“It’s inevitable, baby. He’s a DeLuca. It’s in his genes.”

“Jace nor Keenan are DeLuca’s, so explain that.” She raised her arched brow and cocked her head to the side.

“They are, just not by blood. They’ve been exposed to Buck long enough to know the ropes.” We both laughed.

“My poor baby is doomed, ain’t it.”

“Unfortunately, sweetheart. He is. He’ll be straight, though. As long as he ain’t out here wildin’, I’m a let him rock out.”

We finished our shower and dressed, and were now lying in bed with Mel in between my legs, with me rubbing her stomach. It was shit like this that I couldn’t wait to come home to. Those few quick moments while I was locked down didn’t cut it, but it sufficed.

“You narrowed down a name yet?” We were going to keep the tradition going on with the old man names like Nic called it. We never thought about it like that, but I guess that’s what it was.

“Yeah. I narrowed it down to Andrew or Theodore.” I nodded.

“I can rock with either one,” I admitted. I didn’t care which name she chose as long as my son came here healthy.

We stayed home the rest of the night and ordered in, since she didn’t feel like going anywhere. I was fine with that because it was supposed to rain, and I didn’t want to be out in that shit. Sitting my ass in the house with my woman was just fine with me.

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Chapter Two

Jameala ‘Mel’ Sanders

It was time for my five-month checkup, and I was already ready to get it over with.

I had to have blood drawn and do a glucose test. Nic and Kasha told me about that test and said the drink was sweet but horrible.

I hated taking shit I could taste if that makes sense.

If it left a nasty taste in my mouth, you didn’t have to worry about me with it.

I slipped on my shoes and headed downstairs to find Kilo in the kitchen.

He was shirtless, chain resting against his chest, inked skin flexing with every move, and head shining.

He looked like a whole damn meal, and I was mad I couldn’t enjoy it properly with this belly in the way.

When he noticed me, he smiled before pressing that nasty shit toward me.

“Here.” He pushed the drink toward me, and I frowned.

“Why are you forcing me to drink this nasty ass shit?”

“Because you need to drink it. You know you needed to drink it before now, so we’re pushing it. Here.” He forced the glass in my hand since I still hadn’t taken it out of his. Rolling my eyes, I snatched the glass from him and rolled my eyes.

“I know I hate you.”

He laughed. “You said that yesterday.”

“I meant it yesterday, too.”

He slid a plate in front of me and handed me the glass. “You gone thug it out. Just get it over with.”

I took a small sip and instantly gagged. “This shit tastes like regret and aluminum foil.”

“Stop being dramatic, man.” He laughed like some shit was funny.

“You drink it then, since you think I’m being so dramatic.” I put the glass on the counter and started to walk off.

“Jameala. Get that damn glass and drink it so we can go,” he asserted. I turned on my heels and squinted my eyes at him. He only called my name when he was trying to boss up on me or I was annoying him. Right now, it could be a little bit of both.

“Can you at least put it in my Stanley? I’ll drink it on the way.” I pouted.

Smirking, he came close to me and kissed my lips. “You got it, mama.”

Once he had my drink ready, I grabbed my purse and followed him outside to his truck.

It took about thirty minutes to get to the women's clinic, since we stayed near the outskirts of town.

I loved the house we had in the city, but I loved being out the way too.

Stacks and Kasha stayed out here now, so we were all close together.

Our mama still stayed in the city, but Keenan used Nic's address.

That's why he and Jace were able to attend the same school.

When we pulled up to the office, Kilo found a park closest to the door so I wouldn't have to park far.

He helped me out and ushered me inside, where I signed in and took a seat.

"You finished that shit, Mel?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. You wanna check?" I held my cup to him. He took it from my hand and really opened the lid and checked to see if I really drank it.

"Good girl," he praised like that made it any better.

"Gimme my shit since you'on trust me." He pulled me up and into his lap as laughter rumbled through his chest.

"Don't be like that." He continued to laugh, as my name was called. I lifted from his lap and headed toward the door where Eve was standing. I loved the fact that someone familiar was here.

"Hey girl. I see you're still holding up." She greeted.

“Yeah, I am. I see you are too.” I rubbed her pregnant belly.

“Girl. I don’t know what your cousin is thinking, but he swears we’re not done, but I got a trick for his ass. He must’ve forgotten I have access to too much shit to not make that happen.” I knew she was talking shit because if Saint’s crazy ass wanted ten more kids, she’d pop them right on out.

“Please don’t let him hear you say that.”

“Hey, Kilo. How you been?” Eve spoke to Kilo as she took my weight and then vitals.

“I’m straight. Your girl gave me a hard time this morning, but I survived.” I cut my eyes at him for telling my business.

Eve laughed and asked what I did. Kilo spoke up before I did and told her how I acted when I had to drink that nasty ass drink. She shook her head and continued to laugh as she prepped me to draw my blood.

“Girl, you should be ashamed. Heir doesn’t even act like that when he has to take medicine.”

“Shit, with Saint as my daddy. I wouldn’t either,” I countered.

“But you got me, and you still try it,” Kilo asserted before winking his eye at me.

“See, those looks are what got this little one here in the first place,” Eve instigated.

We all laughed as she took my blood. Four vials later, she had the samples she needed, and I went to the room to wait for the doctor.

Kilo sat next to the table, rubbing my belly while we waited. “He’s moving more today.”

“Probably mad at that damn drink, too.”

He chuckled. “He get that shit from you.”

The doctor finally came in, checked the baby’s heartbeat, and did measurements. “Baby’s growing beautifully. Already over a pound. Might be seven, maybe eight pounds by birth.”

I cut my eyes at Kilo. He grinned, but I ain see shit funny.

“You proud of that?” I asked.

“Hell yeah.”

“You’re not the one who has to push him out.”

“I’ll be right there, though,” he affirmed.

“Mhm.”

Once we finished in the office, I went up front to get my next appointment and were on our way.

“I gotta make a quick stop by the dispensary. I’ll be quick.” He lied.

“You always say that then be in there forever.”

“You’on say that shit when I’m in you forever.” He smirked, causing me to blush and

clench my thighs together.

We talked about the baby the entire ride and I was telling him how I felt about a home birth. He didn't trust it, but I thought it would be more intimate and relaxing.

He finally pulled up to Off The Scale and parked in his designated parking spot.

"I'm coming with you," I told him.

"You sure?"

I nodded.

We walked into the shop and instantly, I felt the shift. Frosted glass, organized displays, green LEDs lining the walls. It looked more like a boutique than a weed spot.

Daphne, the shop manager, stood behind the counter counting product. That's what I liked about her. She moved like she didn't owe the world anything. Solid. About her business. And never weird toward me.

"Hey, mama," she nodded. "Glowing heavy today."

"I'm just trying to survive this lil' boy."

Kilo joined her behind the counter while I browsed. That's when the fool walked in. Light skin, fake diamonds, smelled like loud cologne and desperation. He had that goofy confidence some men get when they think nobody's watching them take a risk. But he picked the wrong damn day to flex.

"Damn," he drawled, eyes dragging all over me. "You fine as fuck for a pregnant

chick. Yo' baby need a daddy?"

I ignored his stupid ass hoping he got the hint before Kilo saw this dummy over here fuckin' with me.

"Bet your baby daddy don't even appreciate all that. You need somebody who knows what to do with a body like that. Pregnant or not." He stepped closer, too damn close. "I give good rubdowns. Strong hands. Real strong. I could make you forget he ever existed."

"You tryna die in here?" Kilo's voice cut through the shop like a blade.

"Aye, chill. My bad, big homie. I didn't know that was your—"

"You saw she was pregnant, and that big ass ring on her finger, right?"

Kilo didn't wait for a response. He gripped the back of the dude's neck and slammed his head into the glass display with a force that made Daphne flinch and me move out the way so fast I felt my stomach tighten.

The glass didn't shatter, but it cracked.

Kilo's forearm was pressed against the guy's throat now, pinning him against the display case.

"I'm two seconds from putting you through this glass." He growled through his teeth.

The guy wheezed, trying to get Kilo to loosen his grip, but his actions only seemed to piss Kilo off more.

"Tell me again what you was gone rub?"

“Kilo,” I said, voice low but sharp. “Baby.” He didn’t budge.

Daphne moved in slow from behind the counter, heading to the front door. The other customers inside didn’t move or say a word. They knew who Kilo was, but it was clear this fool didn’t.

Kilo’s jaw clenched. His nostrils flared.

Then he leaned in closer, eyes locked on the guy’s panicked face.

“If I ever see you anywhere near her again...matter fact, if I hear your name in a whisper near my woman...I’m a crack yo’ skull so muthafuckin’ bad ya mama will only be able to identify yo’ bitch ass through her memories.

” He released him just enough to let the man stumble, coughing hard and red in the face.

“You got half a second to get the fuck outta here ’fore I change my mind,” Kilo finished, turning just enough to block me from view.

Daphne had the door wide open now. The man ran out like his soul was chasing him.

Kilo didn’t speak at first. Just stood there breathing, hands flexing like he was still itching for contact.

Then he turned back to me and walked over slow.

Pressed both palms to my stomach like he needed to feel life after almost taking one.

“You okay?” His voice was tight.

“Yeah,” I whispered. “You?” He didn’t answer right away. Just leaned in and kissed my forehead.

Daphne crossed her arms behind the counter, calm like always. “You want me to pull the footage and delete it?”

“Already handled,” Kilo said without looking back.

After things went somewhat back to normal, he offered the people who were still inside their items for free. Once he was finished with everything he came to do, we left.

He drove in silence. One hand gripped my thigh like it was the only thing keeping him grounded.

“I’m gone black out every time when it comes to you. To y’all,” he finally said. “Ain’t no limit to how far I’ll go ’bout mine.”

“I know,” I said, stroking his wrist. “That’s why I don’t question your heart.”

“You got it, mama.”

We pulled up to Buck and Nic’s about twenty minutes later. Kilo helped me out the truck and escorted me up the steps with his hand nestled at the small of my back.

Benny answered the door butt ass naked with a Spiderman mask on. “RAHHHH!”

“Benny, didn’t I tell you to wait for me?” Nic fussed. “You see the shit I have to live with?” She fussed.

“He’s definitely his daddy’s son,” I laughed.

“I heard that shit, Thugga.” Buck appeared with that dumb ass smirk on his face. He dapped up his brother and playfully shoved me.

“I wasn’t whispering and keep yo’ nasty ass hands off me.” I popped him upside his head.

“Man, come on ’fore I do her lil’ ass something.”

Kilo laughed at his dumb ass brother before kissing me and following Buck. I followed Nic to the kitchen while the boys went out back. Benny ran through the house like he was being chased by demons. Nic sighed while I thought it was funny.

“I love my baby, but damn. He different.”

“He’s wild, but cute.”

“Wild first. Cute second.” We laughed.

I told her about what happened at the dispensary, and she laughed.

“I’on know why I’m surprised. I have the worst one in my house and Stacks is running neck and neck. Kilo is just cold with his shit, though,” Nic asserted.

“Coldest I’ve ever seen.”

“He loves your mean ass, though.”

“Y’all gone stop calling me mean.” I rolled my eyes. “That’s why I love his big ass, though.”

Later, the guys came back in. Buck holding Benny upside down like a sack of potatoes while Kilo stood behind me, hand wrapped around my waist. Our love wasn't loud or over the top, but it was present. We stayed a little longer before I got tired and ready to go home.

"I'll call you tomorrow, Nic." I hugged my sister, then my nephew. "Bye, Auntie baby." I kissed his cheek before he took off running again.

"So, fuck me, huh?" Buck threw his hands up like he was offended.

"Pretty much." I shrugged before laughing.

"That's fucked up, Thugga. Get the fuck out my house." He playfully nudged me until Kilo knocked his hand away.

"The fuck off my woman, Lincoln."

"Fuck you, Franklin. I hope she suffocates yo' big bald-headed ass in yo' sleep." He laughed. The only thing me and Nic could do was shake our heads because this was our lil' family, and we loved it. Dysfunction and all.

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Chapter Three

Kilo

The first thing that hit you walking into Vault was the energy.

Thick, loud, charged like the air before a thunderstorm.

The bass from the music rumbled under your feet.

Money exchanged hands in the shadows. Drinks were being poured, dice were being thrown, and somewhere in the back, you could hear the occasional shout over a busted bet.

Vault was Buck's domain—grimy, dangerous, and thriving.

Tonight was fight night, and the real heat was downstairs in the basement where the fights took place. Me, Stacks, and Buck posted up near the VIP section. Nic and Kasha were seated with in their men's laps while Mel was posted in mine with my hand rested on her belly.

"You see the way he dropped that hook?" Buck said, watching the ring. "Nigga got hands but no footwork. I'd bet my left nut he don't make it out the second round."

Stacks laughed. "That nigga ain't making it out the first one, you ask me."

I glanced over at our cousin, Sophi. She was sitting off to the side, fidgeting with the

straw in her drink, biting the inside of her cheek like she was holding something in. She hadn't smiled once since we walked in.

"You good, Soph?" I asked.

She looked up quick, like she didn't know I was talking to her. "Yeah. I'm straight."

"You sure? You been quiet as hell."

She hesitated, then sighed. "It's just... Malik gets out in a few weeks."

All of us became alert at the sound of her bitch ass ex's name rolling off her tongue. Buck responded first. It wouldn't be right if he didn't.

"That bitch ass nigga?" Buck leaned forward, voice sharp. "Say the word cuz, and he'll never breathe free air."

Sophi gave a weak smile. "I don't want all that. I just... I don't know what he's thinking. He keeps thinking that we're going to be together when he gets out. Like, why would he even think that's an option?"

"You scared of that nigga?" I asked, keeping my tone level.

She didn't answer. That told me everything I needed to know.

Buck stood up, adjusting his watch like that was the end of the conversation. "Cool. So when he gets out, we'll welcome him back with a blunt force trauma to the face. I ain't finna have nobody fuckin' with my people."

"He don't want that kind of smoke," Stacks added. "Not from us, anyway."

Sophi nodded but still looked like she had a weight sitting on her chest.

We dropped the conversation for now just as Juke walked in.

This nigga was the undefeated Underground King.

Built like a brick wall with eyes that stayed half-lidded, like he was always high or always plotting.

Maybe both. He was one of the few niggas who could walk into Vault unannounced and not get a single side-eye.

We respected him, and the feeling was mutual.

“Damn, y’all brought the whole city out tonight?” Juke grinned, dapping me, then Stacks, then Buck.

“You know how I do,” Buck said, nodding toward the ring.

Juke glanced at the two fighters, unimpressed. “These niggas hitting like they in middle school.” That caused the room to fill with laughter.

“You here scout or talk shit?” I asked.

“Both,” he grinned.

His eyes landed on the women’s section. He dipped his head in acknowledgement.

“Lemme know when y’all want me back on the card,” he said. “I need some real competition.”

“You ain’t fought since you cracked Boom’s shit,” Buck said, grinning.

“Ain’t my fault the nigga can’t fight.” He shrugged.

“You know he still wants that re-match?”

“Set it up. I can use the practice,” Juke jested.

The fight ended in a second-round TKO, just like Buck said. We spent another hour watching side matches, placing light bets, and keeping an eye on Sophi, who finally loosened up after a few drinks and laughs with the girls.

Once the night died down, we headed out in pairs. Buck stayed behind to make sure everything was handled. Stacks and Kasha left with me and Mel in tow.

Once we left the parking lot, Mel took off her shoes and leaned sideways in the passenger seat, placing her feet in my lap, giving me that look. I squinted in her direction as I gripped the wheel harder.

“You keep lookin’ at me like that, and I’m gone park this truck,” I muttered.

She smiled slow. “You scared, Franklin?”

“Nah,” I laughed. “But you should be.” I gave her a look that matched hers.

We didn’t even make it upstairs once we got home. No sooner than we walked inside, I had her on the kitchen counter, legs spread, and my mouth buried between her thighs like I was starving. She gripped my head with both hands, hips rolling, moaning my name like a prayer and a threat.

“Sss...Ki—shit,” she moaned as she wet my beard up. Since I was greedy nigga, I kept sucking until she came again. Before she came down from her high, I was sliding inside of her.

“Gah damn,” I growled.

“Oh, shit,” she panted. “Don’t stop. Shit, don’t stop.”

Little did she know, I ain had no plans in stopping no time soon. I was gone die in this pussy if I could.

It seemed like I’d been here all damn day when actually it’s only been a few hours.

I’d wrapped up two meetings back-to-back and was finally taking a second to breathe.

Mel had texted me a picture of her belly poking, captioned “Your son ain’t lettin’ me rest.” Little shit like that is what made me smile like a damn fool.

I was just about to call her when the intercom buzzed.

“Mr. DeLuca?” Rachel’s voice flowed through.

“Yeah.”

“You have a visitor. Says it’s personal.”

I paused.

“Personal? It’s a man or a woman?” I asked.

“Woman.”

I squinted because that didn’t matter. I wasn’t expecting anyone and clearly it wasn’t Mel or any other woman in our family.

My right hand dropped under the desk and pulled out the Glock I kept stashed in the locked drawer.

I clicked off the safety and placed it flat in front of me.

Whoever this surprise visitor was, would know I ain’t got time for the bullshit.

“Send ’em up,” I ordered.

When the door finally opened, I didn’t expect to see the person who walked through it.

My ex-girlfriend, Shayna. I hadn’t seen her in a damn decade and here she was strolling in my office like she was welcomed.

I mean, I didn’t have shit against her, but I closed that chapter of my life at eighteen and didn’t look back.

She was too meek for me and couldn’t stand up to her parents, so I let her go so her people wouldn’t be on her back.

Now here she was, standing in my office like she was ready to pick up where I left her ass.

Same soft brown skin, and deep-set eyes.

Her frame was a little thicker, but it was her, no doubt.

I sat up straighter, but didn't touch the gun.

"Franklin," she said, her voice softer than I remembered.

I blinked once. Still couldn't fully process why she was here..

"Shayna?"

She smiled, awkwardly. "Yeah. It's me."

I stared at her, chest tight with confusion but face blank. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I'm not here to start anything," she blurted. "I just... I needed to see you."

"After all these years? Why now?"

"I moved back a few months ago. I figured you'd be out by now and probably be here. I didn't want to go to your parent's house. I just needed to see you."

She took a few steps in, then noticed the gun on the desk. She paused before looking around the office like she was trying to figure out who I'd become.

"You look good." She complimented. "Grown."

"Fuck you want, Shay?" She was getting on my nerves just standing there.

“I guess I needed to know if I ever crossed your mind.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You serious?”

She shrugged. “Maybe not the way I crossed yours. But yeah.”

“You don’t. Not since the day I ended that shit.”

Her mouth opened like she wanted to say something slick, but the door swung open before she could. Buck walked in without knocking, as usual.

“Why the fuck this door closed? The fuck you in here doing, Franklin?” he asked, walking in like he was in his office and not mine. He stopped short when he saw her. His face turned into a mask of amused disgust.

“The fuck the ghost of bullshit’s past doing here?” He pointed his thumb at Shayna.

“Hey, Buck.” She smirked.

He blinked slow. “Don’t ‘hi’ me. The fuck you doin’ here? In case you can’t read the room, you ain’t welcomed.”

“I’m not here to start shit,” she said calmly.

“That’s good. Because if you were, you’d be leaving through a window instead of that door.”

I rubbed my jaw. “Buck.”

He waved me off. “You entertaining this bitch?” He frowned.

Shayna looked at me, eyes a little dimmer now. “I just wanted to say hi, and that I’m proud of you.”

“You done?” Buck asked.

She rolled her eyes at Buck and gave me one last look. “I’m done.”

She left without another word. The door clicked shut, and Buck turned to me with the most disrespectful smirk I’d seen all week.

“You really let that hoe walk in here on some Aaron Hall I miss you type shit?”

“I didn’t know it was her.”

Buck dropped into the chair across from me like this was his house. “You miss that bitch?”

“Nah.”

“Then why you ain’t said shit yet.”

“I’m just... surprised.”

“Well, get over that shit. I need you to ride with me.”

I gave him a blank stare waiting on him to explain.

“Don’t ask no questions, just bring yo’ big bald-headed ass on. I’ll be in the truck.”

When the door shut again, I sat in silence.

Shayna hadn't said much. She didn't need to.

I hadn't thought of her in years. But the way she looked at me...

like she'd been waiting for something. Maybe closure.

Maybe a second chance I wasn't ever offering.

Either way, it didn't matter. Because the only woman on my mind now was probably at home, barefoot, snapping at the TV, with her belly out.

And I wouldn't trade that for shit.

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Chapter Four

Shayna ‘Shay’ Turner

I told myself I could handle it. Walk in, speak my truth, and be done with it.

But the second Kilo looked at me? Everything I rehearsed disappeared.

I hadn’t seen Franklin DeLuca since I was seventeen.

Since he broke my heart and I moved away with a secret swelling in my stomach and my parents’ voices ringing in my ears, “You better not tell that boy or his family shit.”

So I didn’t. I had a baby... his baby, and I raised her with the help of my parents until they died last year in a plane crash.

I missed them, but without them hovering over me, I was able to move back and finally let my daughter meet her father.

I knew he was sentenced to ten years, so I waited until I figured he was home and adjusted before I approached him.

I didn’t expect Buck’s ignorant ass to be there, but I should have.

He was always with Kilo when they were younger.

It made sense for him to be at their family business.

I just wish he hadn't barged in and interrupted us.

I stepped into his office with heart damn near hammering through my chest, and for a split second...

he looked at me like he remembered everything.

The hallway kisses. That summer. That night.

And then Buck came barging in, loud and ignorant like always, and the air turned too thick to speak.

I couldn't take anymore of Buck's harsh comments or the way that Kilo was looking at me, so I left.

The sun had dipped by the time I made it back to the car.

Liberty sat in the back seat, scribbling in her notebook.

"You took forever," she said, not looking up. "What kind of friend did you say that was again?"

My stomach turned. "Just someone I used to know."

She gave me a side-eye. "This building is huge. He famous or something?"

I laughed lightly to brush her off. "No, baby. Not famous."

She stared at me a moment longer, like she could sense something was off, but she

didn't push it. She went back to her drawing. This one was of a little girl in a hoodie and Timberlands. Her style. Her attitude, just like him, and she didn't even know it.

Back at the house, my brother was in the living room with his feet kicked up like he paid a single bill.

We both got money when our parents died, but he ran through his like it was water.

Tricking on different hoes. Throwing lavish parties and buying anything that had an expensive price tag.

Now he was broke and living with me and Liberty.

Sean didn't even wait for me to speak. Just started bombarding me with questions. "So? You tell him?"

I shook my head and tossed my keys on the table.

He stood up. "You serious right now? What happened?"

"I was about to, but Buck walked in."

"So?"

"So I lost the moment, Sean. It didn't want to tell him with his brother right there."

He snorted. "Man, fuck a 'moment.' You had one job. One. Tell that nigga the truth so he can start sending the cash and paying us back for the money we spent on Liberty all these years."

I spun around. “ We ? You’re not raising her. You ain’t even call half the time we were gone.”

He stepped closer. “You think I care about that kid like that? I care about what that kid represents. You sittin’ on a golden ticket to the DeLuca fortune and actin’ like it’s optional.”

My hands balled into fists. “She’s not a come-up. She’s my daughter. A little girl who never asked for any of this.”

He leaned in, voice low and slick. “And she’s entitled to his fuckin’ money. Stop being stupid and na?ve, Shay. You may have a lil’ money, but you ain’t got that nigga’s money.”

“So, basically, you want me to press my baby daddy because you’re broke?” I raised a brow.

He stepped closer to me and scowled. “Don’t act like I’m just doing this for me.

You said you came here to introduce Liberty to her fuckin’ daddy.

You folded at the first opportunity. You gone fuck right around and that nigga gone have a whole new family if he hadn’t already.

And then what? The fuck you gone do then? ”

I didn’t even think about that. He could move on and forget about me and Liberty before we even had a chance to be a family. I couldn’t let that happen.

“You didn’t think about that, huh?” He smirked.

I didn't even give him the satisfaction of responding. I went upstairs to my room and sat on the bed. I needed to hurry up and tell Kilo about Liberty before I lost my chance.

The next morning...

Liberty sat at the table eating cereal, her curls in a puff, eyes glued to her sketchpad. That little girl loved to draw. I figured I'll tell her about Kilo now while I had the nerve to. Sean was gone and now was the perfect opportunity.

"You remember how I said we were visiting a friend?" I asked softly.

She looked up. "Yeah?"

I sat beside her. "He's not just a friend. He's your father."

She blinked. "Wait... what?"

I took a breath. "Franklin. The man we saw yesterday. He's your dad."

"Why didn't I see him? Did he not want to see me?" She quizzed.

"No. It's... complicated. He never even knew about you. That's why we're going back today. So I can tell him the truth."

She stared at her cereal, silent.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

She shook her head. “No. But I wanna meet him.”

“You will.”

I strolled back into DeLuca Enterprises with Liberty in tow.

I didn’t know how this was going to go, but I’m here now and it had to be done.

I stopped at the front desk to let the lady know I was here to see Kilo.

After eying me and Liberty. She called him and he directed her to send me up.

My breathing shallowed, and I closed my eyes to get a grip.

I felt Liberty squeeze my hand causing me to open my eyes and look at her.

I gave her a small, assuring smile right before the elevator stopped.

I knocked once, then walked into Kilo’s office. He was behind the desk again, looking over paperwork. When he saw me, his expression shifted. His eyes darted to Liberty, then back at me, but he still didn’t speak.

“I know you bet not be walking in here to tell me what the fuck I think you’re about to tell me,” he snapped. Liberty moved closer to me, and I rubbed her back to make sure she was fine.

“This is my daughter,” I started. “Her name is Liberty. She’s nine. And she’s yours.”

He didn’t move. Didn’t blink. Just stared at us like we would disappear.

“You had a baby?”

“Yes.”

“You had my baby?”

Again I answered, “Yes.”

“You serious right now?” he said, voice low.

“I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“I was locked up, not buried. My people still lived in the same place. You could’ve told somebody.”

“My parents found out before I could say anything, Franklin. They hated you. They hated the thought of me having your baby. They said I’d ruin everything if I told you. That you’d use her, or your family would take her from me.”

“So you kept her from me for nine years.”

“. I didn’t take her from you.”

“You took everything from me.”

He stood up, towering, voice rising with every word. “I did time eight fuckin’ years and the whole time I ain’t know I had a fuckin’ daughter out here! Do you know what that does to a man? Huh?”

Liberty flinched at his voice. That’s when he realized she was still in the room.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you ain’t. You sorry it caught up to you.” He walked closer to Liberty and squatted in front of her. “She looks just like me, Shay.”

“She acts like you, too.”

He looked at her for a second before he cleared his throat and spoke. “Hey, baby girl. Uhm, I’m your da—I’m Franklin.”

“You’re my dad, right?” she asked innocently causing Kilo to look at me with fire in his eyes.

“That’s what I heard. How you feel about that?”

Liberty looked up at me and smiled before she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. The action caught him by surprise, but he quickly recovered and reciprocated. Finally, he let her go and stood to his feet.

“What now?” he asked

“I want y’all to get to know each other. She deserves that?”

“And I didn’t?” he snapped.

“I’m not saying that. I’m just—it was a lot at the time. I didn’t find out until after you broke up with me. By then, I heard you had gone to prison. What did you expect me to do?”

“Expected you to be woman enough to do the right fuckin’ thing and not be selfish. Because of that, I missed out on nine years of her fuckin’ life!”

“You were in prison! You still couldn’t have been in her life.”

“You’ on know me like you thought, because there wasn’t a cell in any institution that would’ve kept me from my daughter.”

We stood in silence. The weight between us pressing down like concrete. Finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his before unlocking it and handing it to me.

“Put your number in.”

I glanced at him before putting my number in his phone.

I closed the contact app and before he could get the phone back; I saw a picture of a girl I saw him with a few times back in the day.

She’d gotten a little thicker, but it was her.

I think her name was Mel or something like that.

What stuck out to me was her exposed very pregnancy belly, with Kilo’s hands resting on it as he hugged from behind. They looked happy. He looked happy.

“You have other kids?” I croaked out. I had no business being jealous, but I was.

“That’s none of your business. I’ll be in touch.

” He turned toward Liberty and got eye level with her again.

“It was nice meeting you, pretty girl. I gotta work some things out with ya mama, but I promise this won’t be the last time you see me.

Aight?" She nodded and gave him a hug before we turned and left.

I didn't expect him to have kids that soon after being out, but I guess he wanted to get it out the way.

I guess I couldn't blame him, but I didn't have to like it.

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Chapter Five

Kilo

Mel was in the kitchen, standing by the sink in nothing but one of my tees and a scowl. Sunlight hit her belly just right, making her look like some untouchable goddess. But her mood? Straight war-ready.

“You leavin’ early again?” she asked, not turning around.

“Yeah,” I said, tugging on my hoodie. “Got a few things to handle at D.E. then I gotta go by the dispensary.”

“Every day it’s a few things. You got another bitch up there or something?” She turned, brow cocked, lips tight. “Or is that just where you go to avoid me?”

I paused, locking eyes with her. “Don’t start.”

“Too late. I already feel it. You been somewhere else, Kilo. You here—but you ain’t. You don’t touch me the same. You don’t even look at me the same. What the fuck is going on?”

I stepped forward, voice low. “Don’t talk like I’m neglecting you or some shit. I’m here. I ain’t out fuckin’ around.”

“Then why do I feel like I’m sleeping next to a ghost?” Her voice cracked, just a little. She tried to cover it with attitude, but I knew Mel. Knew that tremble in her

throat when she was hurt. “I’m carrying your son, Franklin. And you look at me like I’m in the way.”

“That ain’t true.”

“Then tell me what is!”

She pushed me, her small palms pressed to my chest, full of frustration. I let her.

“I’m tired of playing guessing games with your energy,” she said. “If you tired of me—if you tired of this —say that shit.”

I grabbed her wrists gently. “Don’t talk like that.”

“Why not? It feel like I’m holding on to a version of you that ain’t even real no more.” Her voice dropped, soft now. “I’ain asking for perfect. I’m just asking you to stop treating me like I’m a stranger in my own house.”

I stared at her. I wanted to pull her close.

To remind her she had no reason to feel that way, because that’s not how I felt.

That her voice was the only thing keeping me from drowning some days.

But how the fuck could I tell her any of that...

when another woman was walking around with a kid that might be mine?

So I leaned in, close enough for our noses to touch.

“I love you, Mel,” I murmured. “Don’t confuse my silence for distance. I just got

some shit I'm tryna sort out right now."

She looked up at me, eyes wet but fierce. "Then let me help you figure it out."

I kissed her. Soft at first, but it grew. Her hands fisted in my hoodie, mouth moving with mine like she was trying to pull the truth out of me with her lips. I let it go there for a minute. Let that fire between us burn hot and fast until I had to pull away.

"I'll be back later," I said, brushing my thumb across her cheek.

Mel's eyes cut sharp, voice low and cold. "Yeah. You better figure your shit out before this silence kills us both."

I wanted to turn around. Wanted to give her the truth. But the weight of it would wreck everything, and I wasn't ready to burn down the house I built for a truth I hadn't confirmed yet. So I swallowed my words and walked out.

I walked into Buck's office and caught him leaned back in his chair, phone pressed to his ear, grinning like the devil in sweats. His feet were kicked up on the edge of the desk, but the second he saw me, his eyes narrowed slightly.

"Nigga just walked in now," he said into the phone. "Yeah, I'll call you back. Tell Benny to stop jumpin' off the fuckin' counters 'fore I break his legs."

He hung up, dropped his feet to the floor, and sat forward. "Look who finally decided to bring his ghost ass in."

"Fuck you, Lincoln," I muttered, sliding into the nearest seat.

Stacks was already in the corner, flipping through a spreadsheet on his tablet. He looked up and gave me a once-over. “You look like the week been beatin’ yo’ ass.”

“Shit, I feel worse,” I said, rubbing my hand over my head before sliding it down my face. “I ain’t slept all fuckin’ week.”

Stacks set the tablet down. “This ’bout Shay?”

“Nah, Liberty.”

Buck leaned back again, eyebrows raised. “The fuck is a liberty? You tryna give an ‘I Have a Dream’ speech or some shit?”

“You one ignorant muthafucka. The fuck you say some shit like that for?” I frowned.

“The fuck was I supposed to say when all you said was Liberty? How the fuck I’m supposed to know what that is,” he snarled.

“Not what...who. Liberty is Shayna’s daughter...my daughter.”

When I revealed that, both of my brothers’ eyes pinned to mine. Theirs filled with questions and mine without any answers.

“The fuck you just say?” Buck spoke.

I told them how Shayna came to my office the next day and had the prettiest little girl with her. As soon as I looked in her face, I knew she belonged to me. I needed time to process the shit and get a DNA test before I said anything to Mel, though.

“Hold up.” Buck pointed at me. “You telling me that bitch showed up here after damn near a decade with a whole kid and just dropped that shit in your lap?”

“Basically.”

Stacks frowned. “You believe her?”

“I mean, she looks like me, but I can’t go off of that alone.”

“So, how you gone handle it?” Stacks asked.

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t know. I don’t wanna believe it, but I can’t ignore it either.”

Buck stood up and started pacing the floor like I just said the kid was his. “Man, fuck that. She could’ve sent a letter or reached out to Mama. Hell, she could’ve told one of us. She made that choice, and now she wanna come back and do what? Be a one big fuckin’ happy family?”

Stacks rubbed his beard. “Did you tell Mel?”

Silence.

“I ain tellin’ her nothing ’til I know the truth.”

“And you dumb as fuck to think you can keep this shit from Thugga and she not beat the skin off yo’ bald ass head. Yeah, that’ll definitely work.” Buck snapped.

“I’m not bringing chaos into our house on a maybe,” I shot back. “Mel is pregnant. She don’t need this shit unless it’s real.”

“And you think this shit won’t be stressful either way?” Stacks added.

“Look, I told Shayna to come back today. Alone. I’m gone let her know we need to

do a DNA test before we move forward.”

Buck scoffed. “Should’ve had a swab in that kid’s mouth as soon as she told you that shit.”

“I didn’t wanna blow up in front of her if she’s tellin’ the truth.”

Stacks leaned forward. “So what’s your move if it is?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “That’s the fucked up part.”

“Mel gone lose her shit,” Buck warned. “You know that, right? Especially if she finds out from someone else.”

“She won’t,” I said.

“Yeah, aight,” Buck snapped. “I’m telling you now, if this shit spills over into my house I’m gone shoot both yo’ fuckin’ nuts off.”

“The fuck?” Stacks laughed. “The kinda shit that is to say? But nah, you need to say something for real, bro.”

“I will when it’s time.”

The intercom buzzed before anyone else could speak. Rachel’s voice came through the speaker, flat and direct.

“Franklin, your visitor is here,” she announced.

“Aight. Send her to my office.”

I stood up to leave, but Buck's dumb ass stopped me.

“Don't have your calls and shit directed here, nigga. I ain't gone be harboring yo' lies and shit.”

I waved his ass off and walked out. I wasn't about to go back and forth with his ass, or I'd be there all day.

“We'll be here.” Stacks assured.

As I walked out, my stomach tightened. My whole life had been about control—managing shit, calling shots. But this? This was the one thing I didn't know how to take control of.

When I stepped into my office, Shayna was already seated—hands folded tight in her lap, foot tapping like she was trying to keep her nerves in check.

Her eyes met mine and I could see the regret spilling out of them before a word was said.

I closed the door behind me, letting it click shut.

I didn't say shit right away. I needed to get my thoughts together.

She looked damn near the same, just more grown.

Softer around the eyes, hair pulled back, no makeup.

Still had that nervous habit—chewing on the inside of her lip.

“Kilo,” she said, barely above a whisper.

I sat down across from her, arms folded.

“Why now, Shayna?”

Her eyes watered. “Because I didn’t know how else to do it. I kept thinking about her and what she’d ask one day. She deserves to know her father.”

I leaned forward, voice low. “You should’ve thought about that nine years ago. Not after you moved away. Not after my whole fuckin’ life changed. You never said a damn word.”

“I didn’t tell you because of my pare—”

“—I don’t give a fuck ’bout yo’ parents,” I cut her off, voice sharp now. “You were grown enough to be fuckin’. You should’ve been grown enough to tell me.”

Tears hit her cheeks, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t about to let her not own up to this shit.

She wiped them fast. “I’m sorry, alright? I know I was wrong. I should’ve fought harder. I should’ve—”

“—you should’ve told me,” I finished for her. “I missed nine years. First steps. First words. All that shit. You can’t give that shit back.”

“I know,” she whispered.

I stared at her for a long time, letting the silence fill the air

“I want a DNA test.”

She jerked back like I slapped her ass

“I... what? You think I’m lying?”

“I’on know shit. That’s why I want the test. You walk back in here after damn near a decade, throw a whole child on my lap, and expect me to what? Just believe you?”

“She’s yours, Kilo.”

“Then prove it.”

She sat back in the chair, crossing her arms. “So what if I say no?”

“I’m still gone get the answers I need,” I said flatly. “One way or another.”

“This wasn’t how this was supposed to go.”

“And how was it supposed to go, Shay? You come back with a kid that you say is mine and I’m supposed to jump at the opportunity?

” I shook my head. “Shit ain’t gone work out like that, love.

I know you saw my girl on my phone and my son in her belly, as well as that ring on her finger.

I have a life and a family already. As soon as we get the test done, Liberty will be a part of that. ”

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“I didn’t bring my daughter here for you to play house with her.”

“Who says I’m playing?” I cocked my head to the side waiting for her to respond.

“You lost the right to try to regulate shit when you kept her from me.”

Silence filled the room as we sat in a stare off.

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

I nodded once. “I’ll have the lab send you a time and place. Don’t make me come look for you.”

She said nothing as she stood to leave. I mimicked her motion, but I didn’t offer her any departing words.

I didn’t drive straight home after Shayna left.

I couldn’t face Mel after that. My chest felt tight, my head was clouded, and I needed something that wasn’t gonna push me over the edge.

Buck was out the question. He’d have something slick to say, and I’d be liable to snap his damn neck, so I went to Stacks’.

I pulled into his driveway and parked beside his bike.

I knocked on the door and waited for somebody to let me in.

Moments later, Kasha came to the door with a smile on her face.

“Hey, Kilo. What you doing here? Where’s Mel?” she asked.

“She’s at home. I haven’t been home yet.” She gave me a look that didn’t go unnoticed. I followed her into the living room where my nephew was looking at some cartoon on TV.

“Uncle Lo!” Jet’s little loud voice bounced off the walls as he ran into my legs like a linebacker.

I smirked. “Damn, lil’ man. You always wilding, ain’t it?”

Jet grinned, mouth covered in what looked like chocolate. “I fast like Flash!”

I scooped him up and tossed him in the air once before throwing him across my shoulder. He and Benny were some tough ass lil’ boys.. Jace came out the kitchen with his phone in his hand, smiling at whatever was on the screen.

“Wassup, Unc?”

“Wassup, nephew?”

Kasha came walking out the kitchen with a towel in her hand, and her eyes scanning me.

“You good, Franklin?”

I nodded, but it was a lie. “Where yo’ husband?”

“Out back.”

She glanced at Jet, who was now pulling at my hoodie string. “Jet, go with your brother. Uncle Lo has to talk to daddy.”

“Nooooo! I wanna stay!” Jet held tighter.

“It’s cool,” I said, adjusting him on my arm. “Let him hang out.”

I stepped out to the backyard, where Stacks was in a hoodie and black joggers, sitting low in one of the patio chairs with a drink in hand and his blunt burning slow.

He didn’t say shit when he saw me. Just tilted his head and gave me the look.

I dropped into the chair beside him, Jet still fidgeting on my lap, and let out a long breath.

“What happened?” he asked as soon as I was seated. I let him know how the conversation went and how she reacted to everything. Of course he had to throw in that Buck was right, but I ain want to hear that shit.

Stacks scoffed. “She ain’t in no position to make demands. She’s lucky the shit is going this smoothly.”

“She lucky I ain press her skull into the table,” I muttered.

Stacks looked over at me, eyes calm but alert. “And if the kid yours?”

I didn’t answer right away. Jet was playing with my hands now, unaware of the storm I was sitting in. That innocence hit hard.

“If she mine... I step up. That’s it.”

Stacks nodded. “What about Mel?”

“I ain telling her ’til I get the test. I already said that.”

“Bro.”

“I know.” I sighed.

Stacks leaned back. “You let this drag too long, and it’s gone blow up in yo’ face. You think she won’t find out? Buck don’t know how to shut the fuck up sometimes. He gone fuck ’round and say the shit and not even realize it.”

“I said I know.”

Jet sneezed in my face and then giggled like it was a joke. I wiped my face with my sleeve and sat Jet down, letting him run toward the door.

“This ain’t some side chick drama. This a whole gah damn human. And I missed her whole fuckin’ life.”

“So now you got a chance to fix it.”

“Yeah, and destroy everything else in the process,” I snapped. “Mel already know something is off. She ain’t said it, but I see it in her face.”

Stacks set the blunt in the ashtray, the tip still smoking.

“She gone be hurt either way. But you gotta choose. Do the shit on yo’ terms or somebody else gone do it for you. That somebody being Shayna.”

I stared at him. “I came here to clear my head. Not to get preached to.”

He smirked. “You came to me. You want Buck or Pops to give it to you instead?”

“Fuck no.”

“Exactly.”

I looked back toward the house. Through the glass, I saw Kasha handing Jet a sippy cup and Jace posted up near the fridge, scrolling his phone.

“You built all that,” I said low.

“Yeah.”

“That shit look peaceful.”

“It is,” he said. “But it came with sacrifice and choices. You gone have that shit, too, bro. Fix yo’ other shit first, though.”

I nodded slowly, like my head had weight.

We sat there for a while, neither of us saying much.

Stacks finally stood and hit my shoulder. “You’ll do what you always do. Handle it.”

I sat there alone, staring at the smoke rising from the ashtray, wondering if handling it would come with a cost I couldn’t afford.

I didn't head home right away. I drove a couple blocks, cut the engine, and just sat there in the silence of my truck, the city low and humming outside the window.

Streetlights buzzed. Headlights passed. But inside my truck, it was still, but my mind was everything but.

I leaned my head back against the seat and closed my eyes.

Liberty.

Even just thinking her name felt strange. Like it didn't belong in my mouth yet. Like saying it out loud would make it real before I was ready to claim it.

She might be mine...She might not be.

But that kid existed either way. A whole little girl with my blood—or maybe not—walking around while I spent years behind bars thinking the only damage I left behind was scars and burnt bridges.

Shayna kept her from me. And yeah, I was pissed.

Still was. But now? Now I was scared. Scared of what the truth would mean.

Scared of what it could cost me. Scared of the look on Mel's face when I finally dropped the bomb she didn't even see coming.

I pulled out my phone and looked at the picture I had Shayna send me.

It was like looking at a smaller, female version of myself with a half-smile that looked too familiar.

I stared at it for what seemed like forever.

Same nose. Same eyes. Same quiet defiance in her stare.

That shit hit deep. I closed my phone and dropped it in my lap.

Mel was waiting for me at home. Probably sitting on the couch in one of my hoodies, eating pickles or something sweet, rubbing her belly like she always did.

And I was about to walk in there with all this shit on my chest.

But not tonight. I didn't have it in me. Not yet. I turned the key in the ignition, stared through the windshield, and whispered to myself. "Handle it." Then I drove home slowly, wondering how long I could keep this secret to myself.

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Chapter Six

Mel

I wasn't gone sit here and pretend like I ain't notice the way Kilo's been moving lately. Yeah, he still kissed me, rubbed my belly, made sure I ate—but it all felt like a routine. Like he was going through the motions instead of really being with me.

He didn't stop loving me. I knew that. But love don't mean shit when the person you need won't talk to you.

He was in the house, but not in the moment.

Present, but unplugged. I'd catch him staring off, jaw clenched like he was at war with something in his head, and when I asked, it was always "I'm good, Mel."

Lies. And I was tired of trying to figure out if the silence meant he was trying to protect me—or push me away.

By the time I pulled up to lunch with Nic, Kasha, and Sophi, my nerves were already fried. They were posted at our usual spot, cackling about something Kasha said. I slid into the booth with a sigh and dropped my phone on the table.

"You good?" Kasha asked.

I didn't respond.

Nic cocked her brow. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I muttered, flipping open a menu like I ain’t already know I was getting the shrimp po’ boy.

Kasha leaned back. “I’m guessing that energy got Kilo’s name on it?”

My silence was enough.

Nic shook her head. “I knew something was off. You walk like you got a cinder block on your chest.”

Sophi slid her mocktail across the table. “It’s cranberry and ginger. Safe for the baby, still strong enough to calm your nerves. Go ’head.” Sophi tilted her head toward the drink, and I took a sip.

“He came over the other day to talk to Jackson. You could tell he was stressed.”

Nic snorted. “I asked Buck what was up. That fool told me to stay in my lane before I end up in a ditch.”

I smirked because that sounded like his ignorant ass.

“He won’t even look at me the same,” I finally said. “Like I’m there, but not really. Like he’s holding something and tryna act like it doesn’t show.”

Sophi rubbed my arm. “He’s still showing up, though. That says something.”

“Or he doesn’t wanna deal with the consequences of not showing up,” I replied. “Either way, it doesn’t feel good.”

“What you wanna do?” Kasha asked gently.

“I don’t know. I’m tired of guessing. And I’m tired of tiptoeing.”

Nic tilted her head. “So stop and press his ass.”

Sophi’s voice came soft. “Y’all solid. But even solid can crack if nobody talks.”

I let out a shaky breath, rubbing the spot above my belly button.

My phone buzzed.

Kilo: You good?

I stared at it, thumb hovering.

Yeah. With the girls.

My response was short and cold, just like he’s been lately.

We wrapped lunch soon after and I headed home, changed into one of his old tees, and curled up in bed. I was tired as hell and needed a nap.

When I woke up, the sun had set, and the night had fallen. I rolled out of bed and went downstairs.

Kilo was on the couch, hood up, scrolling his phone. He didn’t even flinch when I walked in.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs, watching him for a second.

“You home.”

“Yeah.”

“How long you been here?”

“About an hour.”

I sat across from him. “You good?”

“Yeah.”

I raised my brows. “That’s it?”

He finally looked up. “What you want me to say, Mel?”

“I want you to stop pretending like everything’s fine when you walking around here like your soul left your body.”

He exhaled hard, rubbed his face.

“I’m just dealing with something. I don’t wanna throw it on you.”

“Too late. I feel everything. That’s what happens when you love somebody.”

He stayed quiet.

“Tain trying to argue, Franklin. I’m trying to understand. But you shut down every time I get close.”

“I don’t mean to. It’s just—” He paused, jaw tight.

“Just what?”

“Just heavy, that’s all.”

I shook my head. “You got me carrying a baby and now you got me carrying this, too.” I pointed.

He stood like he was about to walk off, then stopped.

“I’m trying, Mel.”

“Try harder. Or at least try with me . ”

He stared at me for a long beat.

“I gotta go,” he said finally.

“Of course you do.”

I walked past him without another word. But when I hit the steps, I turned back.

“Whatever this is... don’t wait too long to let me in. You keep acting like I won’t leave.”

He didn’t say anything...he didn’t have to. The silence said enough.

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Chapter Seven

Jackson 'Stacks' DeLuca

"Pops... I think I like her."

Jace stood in the kitchen, arms crossed, brows drawn tight like he was about to confess to murder. I leaned against the counter, Jet in one arm with peanut butter on his cheek and a sippy cup in the other.

"You talking 'bout that the lil' chocolate one with the nose ring?"

"Yeah. She bad as hell," he said, and when I looked at him, he corrected himself quick. "I mean... she pretty. Real pretty."

"Damn, lil' man," I said, smirking. "You look like you done caught feelings and caught a case at the same time."

"I ain't catch feelings. I just... I'on know. She's different."

"Ain't that what every nigga say when he's 'bout to fall?" I shifted Jet on my hip, grabbed a napkin, and wiped his mouth. "Talk to me."

He exhaled, dropped his bookbag, and sat at the table. "Her name's Layla. She's in my homeroom. She got these braids, like them slick ones Ma be getting, and she smells like strawberries or some shit."

I grinned. “Nigga, you been out here sniffin’ girls?”

“Man, stop playing wit’ me.”

“I’m just saying.” I sat down across from him. “You told her you like her?”

“Hell nah. I can’t say that off rip.”

“But you want to.”

“Yeah.”

“Then say it. Don’t be no scary ass nigga. Be real, be respectful, and be ready for whatever her answer is. That’s it.”

He looked down, nodding slow. “What if she don’t like me back?”

“Then you take that shit on the chin like a man. You feel it, you speak it. Let her decide. Don’t ever hold your tongue outta fear.”

Jet let out a screech like I was talking to him, dropping his cup, and clapping his sticky hands. I kissed the top of his head.

“That make sense?” I asked Jace.

“Yeah, Pops. Thanks.”

“Good. Now go clean up that bookbag up before your mama walk in here and trip over it.”

As if on cue, the front door opened, and I heard heels clicking across the floor. Jet

took off like a rocket.

“Ma-ma!”

Kasha’s laugh rang out loud and warm. “Hey, baby!” She scooped Jet up and blew kisses on his cheeks, then walked into the kitchen, eyes landing on me with that familiar curl of her lip.

“You been home all day and still left Jet’s toys in the hallway?”

“I was having man talk with Jace.”

“Uh, huh.” She set Jet on his feet and gave me a kiss. “And what was y’all talking about?”

“Nothing,” Jace mumbled.

“His lil’ ass in love,” I blabbed, causing him to cut his eyes at me.

Kasha’s eyes lit up. “Oooh...my boy got a little crush?”

“I ain say all that.”

“Yeah, you did,” I said, smirking. “Go do your homework, Romeo.”

When he left the kitchen, Kasha turned to me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“You smell like sweat and peanut butter.”

“You smell like you wanna get fucked.”

She raised a brow. “Nasty ass.”

“You like that shit, though.” I kissed her slow, pressing her body against the counter.
“Missed you today.”

“You always miss me when you wanna be nasty.”

“True,” I whispered against her ear. “But I also missed yo’ fine ass.”

“Boy, shut up.”

She tried to pull away, but I caught her wrist and spun her back into me, hand sliding down to her ass.

“Don’t start what you can’t finish.”

“Stop playing wit’ me, Kash.”

Jet was still babbling in the living room, but we didn’t care. I kissed her again, harder this time, and her breath hitched. She pushed me away, cheeks flushed.

“Let me get him settled, and I got you.”

“Say less.”

“You doing this shit on purpose?” I asked from the bed.

She looked over her shoulder. “What?”

“You know what the fuck you doing, man.” I watched as she strolled her thick ass over to the bed.

She climbed on top of me without a word, straddling my hips. My hands found her ass, her thighs, then her breasts. Everything about her felt like home.

“Don’t be loud,” I warned, flipping her onto her back. “Jace still up.”

“Then you better keep that mouth shut,” she challenged.

“Word.” I squinted right before I kissed her hard, then slid down to taste her. Her hands flew to my head, body twitching under me. She bit her lip, trying to stay silent, but I didn’t let up. I wanted to hear her beg.

“Shit,” she gasped.

“You taste stressed,” I growled with my mouth full. “Lemme fix that.”

She bit her lip, damn near trembling.

“I said be quiet,” I murmured when she cried out, sliding two fingers in to match the rhythm of my tongue.

“Jackson,” she whined.

“Shhh,” I smirked. “What’d I say?”

When I slid inside her, it was slow and deep. We moved like nothing else mattered because right now it didn’t.

She moaned into my neck, whispering curses and love all at once. I gripped her ass

tighter, driving deeper, taunting her.

“Shhh, Kash. Can’t let the boys hear how nasty you are.”

“I hate you,” she cried out.

“You love this dick, though.”

“Fuuuck, Jackson.”

“Mhm,” was all I could manage to get out because her shit was sucking me in deeper.

I kissed her hard to muffle her cries as we succumbed to the orgasms that took over. Afterward, I laid back with her on my chest, fingers playing in her hair.

“I love you,” she cried.

“And I’ll walk through the fire for you, mama.”

The next day, I was at the yard early. Stone was already there, shirt off, wiping down a Harley with a Black in his mouth.

“Look who finally showed,” he called.

“Man, chill. I had shit to handle.”

“Mhm...let me tell you ’bout Gina’s ass?” he said, already laughing.

“Oh, hell. What now?”

“She showed up at Gina’s job with rollers in her hair, talkin’ about she still loved me.”

“Did she fight Gina?”

“Gina wished she would.”

I cracked up. “You attract chaos, nigga.”

“Or chaos just loves me more.” He smirked. “So what’s up with Kilo?” he asked. “Ain’t seen that quiet nigga lately.”

“He’s coming by today. Got some heavy shit going on.”

“Like what?”

Before I could answer, Buck’s black Navigator pulled up, followed by Kilo in his Escalade.

“What’s good?” I asked.

Buck answered first. “This bald-headed hoe still ain’t told Mel the truth.”

I looked at Kilo. “You serious?”

“Didn’t I tell you niggas I was waiting until I got the test,” Kilo said, rubbing his jaw.

“Man, Goldie keeps looking at me sideways like I’m the one hiding some shit. I’m a beat your ass if I lose my pussy privileges behind your secrets.”

Stone hollered. “This nigga said privileges.”

“Y’all wanna talk or y’all just here to air out frustrations?” I looked between my brothers.

Kilo sighed, leaning against one of the bikes. “This shit is fucked up. I ain even processed the thought yet, but I know I need to tell Mel because she thinks I’m out fuckin’ ’round on her and shit.”

Buck lit a blunt. “Nigga, handle that shit ’fore I handle you.”

“You ain’t gone do shit. Y’all act like I’m out here hiding a family on purpose and shit.” He frowned.

“Nigga, we know you scared of Thugga, and right now you got every right to be. The fuck you think she’s gone do when yo’ stupid ass knew for weeks and ain’t say shit?”

“Odd as it may sound. This nigga right,” I countered.

“Fuck you, Jackson.” Buck stuck his middle finger up at me.

“I’m gone tell her. I just need a minute,” Kilo added.

“Nigga, you had three weeks’ worth of minutes. Times up, muthafucka,” Buck snarled.

Kilo cut his eyes at Buck. “I’ll tell her if the test comes back positive.”

“And then what?” I asked.

“Then I deal with that shit. One step at a time.”

I rubbed my jaw. “You better not fuck around and lose Mel behind this. You know

how she move.”

“And she gone handle it by beating yo’ big bald-headed ass and I’ma help her,” Buck picked.

“I know,” Kilo muttered. “That’s why I’m trying to handle it right.”

We talked a bit longer, mostly jokes and jabs, but that weight never left Kilo’s face. I knew he was hurting, even if he’d never say it out loud.

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Chapter Eight

Lincoln 'Buck' Deluca

I pulled up to Linc's to check the scene for myself.

Could've sent somebody, but I ain't one of them lazy-ass bosses who sits back counting paper while shit crumbles under 'em.

I wanted eyes on the product, the people, and the atmosphere.

If energy was off, I'd feel it before anybody else did.

That's why all my shit ran effortlessly.

The second I stepped out the truck, all eyes turned.

Workers froze up a little, regulars got low in their seats, and security gave that tight nod like they knew not to fuck up tonight.

That's the effect I had. Tall, broad, tatted up, locs swinging like I walked outta somebody's bad dream.

I didn't move with a crew. I was the crew.

The last stop. The walking final warning.

Marc was already at the side entrance like I told him to be, taking in the crowd like he always did..

“Boss,” he nodded, straightening up like I caught him slipping.

I dapped him. “What’s up?”

He walked me through the usual. Sales were steady and no drama on the floor. Place looked good. Staff alert. Security checking in. Nobody lounging when they should be grinding.

“Got a new applicant today.”

I raised a brow. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Bartender. Pretty one. Said she worked for you before. Her name was Armani.”

I stopped walking. Just stood there for a beat.

This bitch.

Ain’t heard that name in a minute. Last time I saw her was when I fired her dumb ass for fucking with Goldie.

“You interview her?”

Marc shook his head. “Nah, just took the app. She was talkin’ like she knew the spot was hers already. Said she used to work under old management, wanted back in now that things got real structured.”

“Structured, huh?” I clenched my jaw. That bitch had no business sliding back through like shit was sweet.

“Set up an interview,” I told him. “Not here, though. I’ll give you the location.”

Marc paused, brows knitting a little. “Got it. You want me there or...?”

“Nah. I’ll handle it.”

He didn’t ask any more questions. That’s what I liked about Marc. Solid nigga. He ain’t overstep. He didn’t need to know the past to follow the order.

“Cool. Anything else?” he asked, switching gears.

“New orders. Let me sign off so we don’t fall behind.”

I followed him into the back office, skimmed the list, crossed a few things off that weren’t moving fast enough, and stamped approval on the rest. Everything else looked solid.

Clean shifts and updated schedules,. That’s why Linc’s stayed profitable.

I kept my foot on every neck, whether I was in the building or not.

Before I left, I walked the floor. Let every muthafucka in there feel my presence. Let ’em know the boss ain’t just a name on the payroll.

When I hit the door again, Marc was back at his post.

“I’ll text you that location for Armani,” I said.

“Copy that.”

I was damn near at the truck when my phone buzzed. I smiled when I saw it was Goldie. I hit accept with a smirk. “Wassup, shorty?”

“You on the way home?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Because you were supposed to be done an hour ago, and your phone been dry like you forgot what communication looks like.”

I pulled the door open and slid in. “I was handling shit, Goldie. Had to double back on inventory, talk to Marc, clean up a lil’ bullshit. Damn, baby. Where the love at?”

She snorted. “At home, where you’re supposed to be.”

I leaned back in the seat, letting her voice settle me. “Benny been on one today?”

“What you think? He’s been on one since breakfast. Talking ’bout he wanna fight a bear. Where he even get that shit from?”

I laughed. “YouTube.”

“He’s three, Lincoln. If he squares up with a squirrel, he’s getting jumped.”

“Bullshit. I’ll shoot the fuck out that squirrel.”

She paused, voice softer. “You good?”

I didn’t answer right away. Just let the silence stretch.

“...Lincoln?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Just thinking. It’s been a long fuckin’ day.”

She let out a breath. “Alright. Come home, then. And don’t bring none of that heavy shit inside with you. You know I’ll get it up off you.”

I smirked. “Shit...I’m on the way.”

She hung up, and I sat for a second, eyes on the wheel, letting her words simmer. She didn’t always say a lot, but when she did, it landed. Home wasn’t just a house. It was her mouth, her heat, our wild-ass son, and that sharp tongue that kept me grounded.

I started the truck and pulled off. Time to take my ass home to all of that.

The second I stepped through the door, I heard chaos. Not TV. Not music. Benny.

“Daddy!” His little voice rang out like a damn fire alarm.

This wild-ass boy came running down the hallway full speed. Shirt half on, one sock on, and a cape made from one of Nic’s silk scarves tied around his neck.

“Benny, slow the hell—”

Too late. He crashed into my leg like a linebacker and grabbed hold.

“You fight bears today, Daddy?”

I looked down at his lil’ crazy-ass. “I thought you were the one fighting bears and

shit?”

“Yeah, but I need backup. They too big.” He stretched his lil’ skinny ass arms wide to show how big the bear was.

“You got it, man.” I scooped him up, kissed the top of his wild curls, and walked toward the kitchen.

Goldie was at the counter in shorts and sports bra, stirring a pot. Her hair was tied up, skin glowing, lips pursed like she was deep in thought.

“Your son think he’s a gah damn Power Ranger,” I announced.

“I know. He’s been jumping off the furniture all damn day.” She didn’t even look surprised.

I put Benny down, and he ran to the fridge to grab a juice pouch like he paid bills here.

“I can’t help he got my energy.”

“Mhm. Don’t forget about that mouth.”

Goldie turned to face me, leaning back on the counter with a knowing look. I walked up behind her, slid my arms around her waist, and kissed her neck.

“You smell like outside,” she said flatly.

“Come clean me up.” I kissed her neck again.

She shrugged me off. “Go wash up. Dinner’s almost done.”

By the time I finished my shower, Goldie and Benny were already seated. Benny barely made it through prayer before digging into his plate like he hadn't eaten all day. Goldie sat quietly across from me, just watching. I knew that look. She was about to be on some good bullshit.

"You been acting different," she finally said.

"Here we go," I muttered, chewing on a piece of grilled chicken.

"I'm serious. You're moving like you got something to hide. Is it about Kilo?"

I paused, fork halfway to my mouth.

"What makes you say that?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Because when I asked you the other day, you got slick. And every time I bring him up, you get weird."

"I always get weird when people ask me shit that ain't got shit to do wit' me."

"You better not be lying for your brother, Lincoln." She pointed her fork at me.

I looked at her dead in her face. "You calling me a liar?"

"I'm saying you better not be lying to me and covering some shit up that's gone hurt my sister."

Benny was humming to himself with mashed potatoes on his chin, completely oblivious to the tension.

"I don't know what's going on with Kilo," I said calmly. "If I did, I'd say something."

If the nigga don't wanna talk, that's on him."

Goldie leaned forward on her elbows. "That's your final answer?"

"For now."

She stared at me a second longer, then pushed her plate forward. "If I find out you're lying to protect that bald-headed nigga, I'm busting you in yo' shit."

"You ain't gone do shit." I challenged.

"You'll see when you be sleeping on the couch."

"I ain't sleepin' nowhere but in my bed."

"With no sex."

I damn near choked on my food.

"You got me fucked up, Goldie."

"And you'll be horny."

I leaned back and laughed, shaking my head. "You really got me fucked up thinking you gone punish me for some shit I ain't even do."

Benny looked up. "Daddy, you horny?"

Goldie put her head down to hide her laugh.

"Man, get out grown people business and eat yo' food. Lil' nosy ass."

After dinner, Nic rinsed dishes while I cleaned Benny's sticky little face and hands. He was wiggling in the chair like he had a thousand volts running through his little ass body.

"Be still 'fore I put you in the dishwasher," I warned.

He grinned. "Do it, Daddy."

I couldn't do shit but shake my head because this damn boy was bad as fuck. He laughed, then leaned forward and whispered, "Can we wrestle now?"

"Hell no. You just ate."

"I can still fight. Watch," he boasted.

Goldie turned around and wiped her hands on a towel. "Lincoln, take him and burn that energy off before he body slams himself off the couch again."

"You heard ya, mama. Let's go, champ."

We moved to the living room, and he grabbed a pillow like it was a weapon. I dropped to my knees and gave him a chance.

"Aight, hit me with your best shot."

He screamed and ran full speed, jumping into my chest. I caught him, rolled us onto the floor, and he shouted, "Daddy Down!"

"Aight, you got it."

Goldie leaned on the wall, arms folded, watching us with that soft smirk she only

gave when she thought we weren't looking.

"You two done?" she asked.

"No!" Benny shouted. "One more round, please?"

I let him climb up on my back, and we did one more round of chaos before I finally pinned him down, tickling him until he screamed. By the time it was all said and done, he was limp on the couch, breathing heavy.

Goldie came over and stood him upright. "Come on, Benny Boo. Time for bed."

He groaned but followed her, eyes half shut trailing behind. I followed, letting her run his bath water while I picked out his pajamas. Ten minutes later, we were done, and he was in the bed. After turning his nightlight on and tucked him in, he rubbed his eyes and reached for me.

"Daddy..."

"Wassup, man?"

"You gone fight the monsters while I sleep?"

I pulled the blanket tighter. "Gone fuck 'em up."

He nodded, satisfied, before rolling over onto his side.

Goldie kissed his forehead. "Love you, baby."

"I love you too, Mommy."

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As soon as we got to the hallway, she turned to me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“You good now?” she whispered.

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Still feel heavy, though.”

I looked at her, hands sliding to her waist. “You always know when I’m off, huh?”

“I do. And I don’t press when you ain’t ready to talk. But I’m here. Always.”

That right there? That was everything. All the chaos I dealt with, all the blood and dirt that came with who I was, none of it ever changed the fact that this woman was home.

She leaned up and kissed me—slow and deep, like she needed to pull the stress right out of my chest. She broke the kiss and started to walk away, but I caught her by the waist and pulled her back against me.

“You tryna walk away from me after kissing me like that?” I whispered against her neck.

“I kissed you ’cause I missed you,” she murmured, pushing her ass into me. “But if you tryna do something... do it.”

That was all the invitation I needed.

I slammed the bedroom door behind us, spun her around, and pushed her back against it. Her breath hitched when my hand slid into her bra and squeezed her breasts. I pulled her bra off in one move and went straight for those nipples, sucking and biting until she moaned.

“Buck...”

“Mhm, I moaned with her nipple in my mouth.”

I picked her up, carried her to the bed, and threw her down like she liked it. She loved that rough shit and I loved giving it to her.

“Lay back and shut up,” I said.

I yanked her shorts down, dragging her panties off with my teeth, and buried my face between her thighs before she could say another word. Her thighs clamped around my head as I licked and sucked every part of her pussy like it was the last meal I was ever gone get.

“Fuck, baby,” she cried out, arching her back. “You tryna kill me?”

“I want you damn near unconscious when I’m done.”

“Then don’t stop.”

I didn’t. Not until her legs were shaking, and she was begging me to either finish her or fuck her.

I stood, undressed slow, letting her watch. My dick was already hard and leaking, and

she licked her lips like she wanted me to lodge my shit in her esophagus. Hovering over her, I grabbed her throat. “You want me to fuck you like I hate you or make love to you like I can’t live without you?”

“Both.”

I flipped her over, yanked her to the edge of the bed, and slid in from behind, deep, and slow, making her gasp and clutch the sheets.

“Fuck, Goldie,” I growled.

Smack.

I slapped her ass hard, watching the jiggle ripple down her back.

“Talk yo’ shit, baby.”

“Fuck me, Buck...shit,” she whimpered.

I gripped her hips and went deeper, pounding her until her moans turned into choked cries and curses. She was loud, nasty, wet, and exactly how I liked her. Every stroke hit with purpose, and every sound she made just pushed me further.

“You loud as hell,” I muttered.

“Then shut me up.”

I reached around, covered her mouth with one hand while choking her with the other, my strokes never letting up. Her eyes rolled, and her body trembled as she came around me again, pussy gripping me so tight it almost pulled the soul outta me.

“Fuck, Goldie. You gone make me lose it in this pussy.”

“Do it,” she whispered hoarsely. “Fill me up, Daddy.”

“Say that shit again,” I demanded, pounding harder.

“F-fuck...fill me up Daddy,” she cried out.

That did it.

I groaned as I emptied my seeds inside of her. My hips jerked with the last few strokes before collapsing beside her. Her legs were twitching, and her chest rising fast. We laid there, breathless. Sweaty. Tangled up in sheets and each other.

After a few minutes, she rolled over and smirked.

“Feel better?”

“Hell yeah.” I squeezed her ass.

She laughed, then curled into me, leg tossed over mine.

“I love you, Lincoln.”

“I love you too, shorty.” I kissed her forehead and drifted off into a peaceful slumber.

The next night, I was at my old penthouse to meet Armani’s dumb ass.

I hadn’t used the space in a minute, but it still smelled like control and bad decisions.

Marc had set the interview up like I asked.

Told Armani the meeting spot, didn't ask any questions.

That's why I kept him around. He knew when to talk and when to shut the fuck up.

I stood by the window, looking down at the city lights, arms folded, and locs tied back. Until I heard the door click. She walked in like she was owed something.

"I knew you wouldn't pass up the chance to get with me again," she smirked.

I turned slowly. Let her feel the weight of my stare.

"You here for an interview, right?"

She smiled. "I'm here for whatever you want me to be here for, Buck."

I said nothing.

She walked closer, slowly, trying to be sexy. "I missed you. You ain't call, ain't text... I figured maybe you forgot what this pussy feel like."

I still didn't speak.

Her smile faltered, just a little. "You mad at me?"

I finally stepped forward; eyes locked on hers. "You remember the last time we saw each other?"

She blinked. "Yeah, but—"

“You fought Goldie while she was pregnant wit’ my son. You could’ve killed him,” I snarled.

She sucked her teeth. “That was years ago, Buck. I was young—dumb.”

“You still dumb.”

“What?”

I closed the distance.

“You think I’m stupid? You think popping back up with a tight shirt and a memory gone get you yo’ job back and a spot in my life?”

“I just wanted to work—”

“—No, you wanted to get close. Wanted to slide in like old times. Thought I was still up to the same old shit.”

Her face dropped.

I pulled my gun from under my jacket, not raising it—just letting it show.

Her breath caught. “You serious?”

“You ever see me joke?”

“Buck... c’mon. I’ll leave...I promise.”

“Oh, I know. Just not like the way you think, though.” I smirked.

She backed up slowly. “I didn’t mean no harm—”

“But you did. And if you meant it or not, don’t change what happens next.”

“Buck, please—”

Before she could process what was happening, I let a bullet pierce her forehead, silencing her forever. I looked down at her body like it was trash needing to be taken out.

I pulled out my phone and sent a text.

Come get this handled.

James: On it.

I cleaned my hands in the kitchen, changed my shirt, and took the private elevator down.

What I didn’t expect was Goldie standing there, leaning against the wall with her arms folded. Black jeans, hoodie, and that look in her eye like she already knew too much.

“...The fuck you doin’ here?”

She raised a brow. “Better question is, what are you doin’ here?”

My jaw flexed. “Business.”

“Funny. That’s what you said on the phone when I overheard you ask Marc did the bitch respond to meeting you here?” She cocked her head to the side.

I stepped toward her. “You following me now?”

“I live with you. You talk loud. And I got ears, nigga.”

I stared at her...she stared back.

“You better not have fucked that bitch,” she said, calm but deadly.

“I didn’t.”

She stepped up, nose to nose. “Swear on Benny.”

“I ain even touch her. I handled what needed to be handled. That’s it.”

She looked at me for a long moment, then kissed me, then pulled back.

“If I ever catch you slipping? You better hope death finds you before I do.”

I grinned.

“Damn, I love you.”

“I know.”

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Chapter Nine

Kilo

sometime later...

I wasn't expecting Mel to pop up at D.E.

, but seeing her walk through the door with my son on full display made me snap back to reality for a minute.

She looked good...damn good. Her hair was pulled up in a puff, big curls bouncing with each step.

My receptionist barely got her name out before she was in my office.

"Hey," she said softly, walking up to me.

"Damn, baby. I didn't expect to see you. You look good." I grinned, sliding my chair back.

She leaned in and kissed me, her hands settling on my shoulders. "Just came to check on you."

I held her waist, lips still on hers. "You know I ain't never complain about you showing up."

Her eyes searched mine like she was trying to figure out where I was mentally. I knew she was getting tired of my shit, and for once, I was trying to be present, to let her feel me instead of just see me.

“You good?” she asked.

“Better now.” I smirked.

I kissed her again and right before I was about to get up and lock the door; we were interrupted.

“Aww shit,” Buck walked in, arms wide like he was announcing his damn presence. “Ain’t this cute. Thugga got her claws in my brother again.”

Mel rolled her eyes. “Don’t get fucked up this early, Lincoln.”

“I’m just saying, you over there letting my brother feel on you and shit like you tryna get pregnant again.” He smirked.

I pulled her closer into my chest and kissed her neck.

“Chill, baby,” I laughed. “Let him live.”

Mel kissed me one more time before she got up. “I’ll see you at home?”

“Yeah. You will?”

She nodded but gave me a look that said she still felt like I was keeping something from her. I hated lying by omission, but I wasn’t ready.

When she left, Buck closed the door behind her and dropped into the chair across

from me.

“You told her yet?” he asked, turning serious.

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

He didn’t like that, but he didn’t press it.

“You better figure it out, ’cause I ain’t tryna dodge Goldie’s damn interrogation no more. She know some shit off.”

Rachel buzzed in. “Franklin... she’s here.”

Buck’s head snapped toward me. “Shit. Ain’t Thugga still outside?”

My chest tightened. “I hope not.”

I stood, adjusted my shirt, and nodded toward the door. “Let her in.”

Shayna stepped in slowly, looking around like it was her first time being here. She looked good, but she ain’t hold a candle to Mel.

“You look good,” she said.

I didn’t respond.

She looked toward Buck, then back at me. “I thought we could talk... alone.”

Buck laughed. “Nah. I’m chilling right here. You lucky I ain’t dragged yo’ ass the moment you walked in.”

“Lincoln...” I warned.

“What? You taking up for this bitch?”

“Bitch?” Shayna snapped. “I came back to do the right thing.”

“The right thing, huh?” Buck stood. “So now you care about doing the right thing? Where was that energy nine fuckin’ years ago?”

She looked down. “I was scared. My parents hated you. You were already locked up. I didn’t know what to do.”

I held my hand up to stop the back and forth. “So you here to do the test?”

Shayna straightened. “I will... if we can talk. Just you and me. See where things could go.”

I stared at her.

“You serious?”

“I never stopped loving you, Franklin,” she said. “I know you’re with somebody now, but that could change.”

Before I could respond, Buck stepped up. “You lost yo’ fuckin’ mind. Thugga will peel yo’ shit back and I’m gone help her.”

“Buck—”

“Nah, fuck that. You come in here, hold this man’s daughter hostage, and now you tryna bargain pussy for a paternity test?”

“I ain’t—”

He cut her off. “Listen, I don’t give a fuck if Liberty got wings and came from heaven. You gone take that test or Liberty’s favorite song gone be the one ’bout a motherless child.”

I looked at Shayna, dead in her face. “Ain’t no chance at a me and you. That shit been closed. You wanna prove she mine? Do the test. If not, don’t come back here. I can’t promise the next time I see you will be as pleasant as the former.”

She looked between us, jaw tight, then finally nodded. “Fine.”

She walked out and Buck watched her until the door closed.

“I should’ve drowned her ass in the toilet,” he muttered.

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t because my mind was already heavy.

Before I could get my thoughts together, my phone buzzed.

Mama: Come see me...today

I sighed.

“Now what?” Buck asked.

“Mama,” I said. “She wanna talk.”

“Nigga, you in trouble,” he laughed.

“I’m grown as fuck. How the fuck I’m gonna get in trouble?”

“You gone see...grown ass.”

My brother left, and I got a few things done before I wrapped up and headed to my parents’ house.

I pulled into my parents’ driveway, trying to mentally prepare. I already knew Mama wasn’t gone let me slide on shit. Pops was home, but he was probably on the opposite end of the house. She opened the door before I could knock.

“Took you long enough,” she said.

I followed her inside and sat at the kitchen table. It smelled like lemon cleaner and something baked earlier.

She poured herself tea, then sat across from me.

“Lincoln said I should check on you,” she started. “Said you ain’t been yourself.”

I exhaled through my nose. “I’m fine.”

“Bullshit.”

She sipped her tea like she was waiting for me to stop lying.

“I ran into somebody,” I finally said. “From back in the day.”

“Oh?”

“Shayna.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Shayna-Shayna? The one you dated in high school?”

I nodded.

“She say why she left?”

“She said her folks made her move... because she was pregnant.”

Mama sat still, face unreadable.

“She kept the baby. A little girl. Her name is Liberty, and she’s nine years old. She said she’s mine.”

“Jesus,” she whispered. “Have you seen her?”

“Yes, but I told Shayna I wanted a DNA test.”

“And Mel?”

“I haven’t told her yet.”

My mama stood up, paced a little, then turned back to me.

“When do you plan on telling Mel?”

“When I know for sure.”

Mama’s voice turned sharp. “You wait too long, and you gone lose her, anyway. Whether that little girl is yours or not.”

I stayed quiet.

“She loves you. Carries your child. Holds you down. Don’t disrespect that by hiding.”

“I’m trying to protect her.”

“Lies don’t protect. They burn. You know that.”

She sat back down and grabbed my hand.

“Whatever happens, we’ll figure it out. But fix this before it breaks you... before it breaks y’all.”

I nodded.

Because deep down, I knew she was right.

Chapter Ten

Shayna

I didn't even make it all the way inside before my brother started in.

"Well?" he said from the couch, legs spread like he owned the damn place. Remote in one hand, a half-smoked blunt in the other. "You talk to him?"

I dropped my purse on the counter and leaned against it, arms folded. "Yeah, I talked to him."

"And?"

"He wants a DNA test."

He laughed. "Of course he does. Like you'd lie about some shit like that."

I looked at him sideways. "I mean... can you blame him? I kept her from him for nine years."

"Ma and Pops had you scared as hell."

"I still made the choice."

"Under pressure," he said, standing up now. "You were seventeen, pregnant, scared, and in love with a nigga they hated. They did everything they could to erase him."

I stared at him. “You think that makes this better?”

“No,” he shrugged. “But it makes it what it is. And now? He knows. So where’s the help? Where’s the money?”

I blinked. “This not about the money.”

“Yes, the fuck it is,” he snapped. “It’s always been about the money. That man’s sitting on millions, and Liberty deserves a piece of that.”

I slammed my hand on the counter. “And that’s my fault! I made those decisions. I should’ve told him.”

He walked around the island and got in my face. “But you didn’t. And now it’s time for that nigga to pay up. He owes her.... he owes me.”

My stomach twisted. “He doesn’t owe you shit.”

He laughed again, shaking his head. “You so damn na?ve.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’m tired of waiting. You went to him. You gave him the truth. You gave him a chance to do the right thing. Now we gone make him do it.”

My voice dropped. “What are you talking about?”

He stared at me dead in the face. “I’m talking ’bout hitting one of his dispensaries. Letting him know he ain’t untouchable.”

I froze. “You must be out your fuckin’ mind.”

“Nah, I’m not. He wanna drag his feet? He wanna take his sweet-ass time acting like he gotta verify shit? Cool. Let’s shake the tree. Let’s see how much he care once his shit gets touched.”

“You’re gone get killed,” I snapped. “You touch anything of his, they’ll bury you alive.”

He smirked. “Not if I move smart. Ain’t gotta be loud. Just enough to shake some shit up.”

“You really think that’s gone make him help me? Help Liberty?”

“I don’t give a fuck if he helps you at this point. I’m looking out for me . I got plans. Real ones. But I need that DeLuca plug. You know how many doors that name opens?”

I shoved him back. “You’re disgusting.”

“And you’re weak,” he spat. “Still stuck on some high school heartbreak like that man ain’t throw you away.”

“He didn’t throw me away—”

“He left you, Shayna! Broke up with you before he got locked up. Ain’t looked for you, ain’t wrote, ain’t shit. And now you back. Tryna give him your heart again, like you forgot how that shit felt the first time.”

My eyes burned. “Get the fuck outta my face, Sean.”

He stepped back, but he wasn’t done. “You better figure it out. ’Cause if he don’t come correct, I will. And you can either be part of it, or collateral.”

I didn't say shit. Couldn't. I walked out the room, slammed the door, and pressed my back against it, chest heaving.

I was shaking. Not from fear—but rage. From guilt. From the weight of everything crashing down at once. I walked over to my bed and dropped my head into my hands to try to get my emotions in check.

“Mommy?”

I turned my head.

Liberty was standing in the doorway with a concerned look on her face.

My voice softened. “Hey, baby. You okay?”

She nodded. “You were yelling.”

I motioned her to come to me with opened arms. She came to me without hesitation, pressing her face to my shoulder. I held her tight, rubbing her back.

“I'm sorry you heard that,” I whispered.

“Was he mad at you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but not because of you, baby.”

“Are we still going to see him again?”

My throat felt tight. “Maybe. One day.”

I wasn't even supposed to be out that long. Just a quick mall run before I picked up Liberty. But fate had other plans.

I spotted her near the second floor escalator, checking out baby clothes in some boutique window.

She looked good. Real good. Pregnant, belly round, hair thick, curls bouncing as she turned.

Comfortable. Confident. She had the kind of glow I used to fake when I was pregnant with Liberty just so people wouldn't ask questions.

I almost walked the other way. But something made me stop.

I took a breath and walked up slow. "Mel?" She turned around, and her eyes cut into me instantly. "I just wanted to say... congratulations. You look beautiful. Pregnancy really suits you."

Her face didn't move. "Do I know you?"

"You might not remember me. Shayna. We used to see each other around when we were younger. I was Franklin's girlfriend."

Silence.

I cleared my throat. "I didn't mean to bother you. I just wanted to speak. And say congratulations."

She crossed her arms. "So you just happened to run into me, huh?"

"Yeah," I drawled. "I wouldn't... I didn't plan it or anything."

Another beat of silence. Her eyes scanned me like she was trying to figure out what the hell I really wanted.

She let out a dry laugh and took a step closer. “You know what’s funny? You popping up outta nowhere, and now I’m supposed to believe this was all just a coincidence?”

“I’m not trying to cause problems.”

“Too late for that,” she snapped. “So let me guess, you want to pick up where you left off?”

I didn’t respond.

“That’s what I thought,” she said, eyes narrowing. “Look, I don’t care who you used to be to him. Past tense. But don’t get shit confused.”

“I’m not confused.”

“Then let’s keep it that way.”

“He seems happy,” I mumbled.

Her eyes blazed. “You don’t get to speak on his happiness. I got that under control.”

I nodded. “You’re right.”

“I know I’m right,” she said, turning. “Have a good life, Shayna.”

But before she walked off, I said the words that would crumble her perfect lil’ life.

“I just thought maybe... one day our kids could meet. They’re siblings, after all.”

Mel stopped. Slowly, she turned back to me, face contorted..

“The fuck you just say?”

I swallowed. “I—”

“You said sibling like you know something I don’t.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

She stepped forward, voice low. “You got about five seconds to explain before I make a scene in this bitch.”

“I just meant... my daughter and your baby... they’re connected.”

“Connected how?” she barked. “You better come out and say it.”

I looked her in the eye. “My daughter, Liberty... is Franklin’s.”

Her face didn’t move. Her body didn’t flinch. But her silence was deadly.

“You got some fuckin’ nerve,” she said finally. “Walking up to me like that. Acting polite. Complimenting me. Then dropping that shit like it’s a muthafuckin’ gender reveal.”

“I didn’t mean it like that—”

“—You don’t mean shit,” she snapped. “You been hiding? Keep hiding.”

I was about to say something else, but a girl that favored her just a tad lighter approached us. I knew then it was about to be some shit.

Chapter Eleven

Nicari 'Nic' DeLuca

I knew Mel was going off before I even saw her face. Her voice was sharp, loud enough to echo off the damn skylight in the middle of the mall. I knew then that somebody had her fucked up.

I came around the corner with Kasha and Sophi right behind me, and that's when I saw Mel, standing ten toes down in front of a chick I've never seen before. Curvy, too confident, fake sweet smile. I already ain't like her.

"You got some fuckin' nerve," she said finally. "Walking up to me like that. Acting polite. Complimenting me. Then dropping that shit like it's a muthafuckin' gender reveal."

"I didn't mean it like that—"

"—You don't mean shit," she snapped. "You been hiding? Keep hiding."

I didn't wait. I stepped up right beside Mel, giving the stranger a clean look from head to toe.

"Problem here?" I asked.

The woman blinked at me before responding. "Excuse me?"

“I said, is there a fuckin’ problem? ’Cause whatever you said got my sister ready to pop you in yo’ shit.”

Sophi leaned in close to Mel’s side. “You alright?”

Mel didn’t answer right away. She was still locked in on the girl. “Don’t smile at me. Don’t speak to me. Don’t come near me. I don’t care what the hell you think you know or what your reason is. This? Ain’t the time or place.”

The woman shifted, looking uncomfortable now. “I didn’t mean to cause drama. I just—”

“—It doesn’t matter,” I interrupted. “You should go. Now.”

She hesitated, then turned and walked off without another word.

I turned to Mel, scanning her face. “You good?”

She shook her head and eyes tight. “I’m fine.” She lied.

“What did she say to you?” I asked.

Mel hesitated, rubbing her stomach. “Said she knew Kilo. That they had history... and her kid is his.”

Sophi’s mouth fell open. “Wait, what?”

“She said her daughter and my son are siblings.” Mel laughed bitterly. “Can you believe that shit?”

“Bitch, what?” Kasha hissed. “You serious?”

I clenched my jaw. “You want me to call Buck?”

“No,” Mel said quickly.

I nodded, but it took everything in me not to hit send, anyway.

“I don’t even know that girl,” Mel muttered. “Only reason I remember her face is because she used to be around when we were kids. But that’s it. She pops up now, acting like she knows me and trying to drop bombs in the middle of the damn mall.”

Sophi sat on the bench and motioned for Mel to sit. “Sis, take a breath. That baby don’t need this stress.”

“I know,” Mel said, but she was still fired up.

Kasha handed her a bottle of water. “Whoever she is, she bold as hell.”

“Bold and dumb,” I added.

“Yeah, well... she got the right one today,” Mel muttered. “I’m just pissed Kilo ain’t say shit if this is true.”

We all got quiet. Kasha looked between us. “You think he knows?”

Mel didn’t answer.

Sophi rubbed her shoulder. “Whatever it is, you’re not alone. And you know you don’t have to carry this by yourself.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Pregnant or not, we got you. And if anybody come at you sideways again? They’re dealing with all of us.”

“Even Buck?” Kasha teased.

“Especially Buck,” I smirked.

Mel finally cracked a smile, but I could still see the weight behind her eyes. “Thanks, y’all.”

We wrapped up the rest of the shopping trip on alert, sticking close to Mel and staying tight like we always did. But I was still pissed off. That bitch might’ve walked away easy this time, but something told me this wasn’t over. Not even close.

Before we left, we promised to check in later.

I couldn’t wait to get home and get in Buck’s shit because I know who knew about this shit and lied to my face.

The house was too damn quiet when I walked in. Benny was with his grandma for the night, meaning I didn’t have my usual tornado of energy bouncing off the walls. I kicked my shoes off and dropped onto the couch, and my phone already pressed to my ear.

“She really said they’re siblings?” I asked Mel again, even though I already knew the answer.

“Word for word. And with a straight face,” Mel replied, irritation lacing her voice.

I stretched out on the couch, with my arm propped up on the back cushion. “That shit sounds calculated to me.”

“It was. Ain’t no way she just ran into me.”

“She tryna get under your skin, and probably Kilo’s too.”

Mel sighed. I could hear her frustration clear through the phone. “And he’s been moving funny for weeks. That ain’t no coincidence, Nic.”

“No, it’s not.”

We sat in silence for a moment. I hated this for her. I hated that some back-in-the-day bitch had the nerve to pop up out the blue with some secret baby trope storyline.

“You good though?” I finally asked.

“Not really. But I’m pregnant. I can’t afford to fall apart right now.”

I nodded to myself. “You don’t gotta fall apart. You just gotta let us hold you up until you’re ready.”

“I’m ready about to beat that bitch ass,” I muttered.

Mel let out a soft laugh. “You sound like Buck.”

That made me smile, even though I didn’t want to. “I do, don’t I?”

“Thanks, sis.”

“You ain’t ever gotta thank me for that.”

I hung up and took a breath just as I heard the locks disengage.

Buck walked in like he ain't have a care in the world—shoulders relaxed, phone in hand, locs hanging low. He shut the door and looked up at me.

“Sup, Shorty,” he said, coming toward me for a kiss.

I gave him one, but it was tight.

He clocked it immediately. “Wassup?”

“You talk to Kilo today?”

He paused, brow lifting. “Why?”

I crossed my arms. “Because I was with Mel at the mall. And guess what happened?”

“What happened, Goldie?”

“Some ex bitch of Kilo’s popped up tryna be cute, then said that her daughter and my nephew are siblings.”

Buck let out a sigh and rubbed the back of his neck. “Fuck.”

“You knew.”

“I told Kilo to handle that shit,” he said, voice rising slightly. “It ain’t my place to drag you in it.”

I stepped closer. “So you just thought it was cool to say nothing? Let her run into Shayna blind?”

“She was never supposed to run into her in the first place,” he snapped, then

immediately reeled it back. “Look, I ain’t trying to fight with you, Goldie.”

I stared at him. “So you kept it to yourself. That’s what we’re doing now?”

“I ain’t keep it for shady reasons. I was protecting you.”

“No. You were protecting Kilo.”

Buck sighed again and stepped closer. “You’re my wife. I love you. But I wasn’t about to throw my brother under the bus when he was already spiraling. I told him to talk to Mel from the jump. I told him she deserved to know.”

“And yet here we are. Her finding out in the damn mall.”

“I get it. I do. But it ain’t my secret to tell.”

“You didn’t even give me a heads-up. I’m not asking you to betray him, Lincoln, but damn. That’s my sister.”

His shoulders finally dropped. The defensive wall cracked just enough.

“You right,” he said. “I should’ve said something. I just didn’t wanna light a fire that might’ve been for nothing. That girl might not even be his.”

“And if she is?”

“Then he gotta deal with that. But I told him he got one shot to fix this before it blows up in his face.”

I looked him over. “So you’re not lying to me now?”

“No,” he said.

I didn’t respond right away. Just turned and headed toward the kitchen.

He watched me walk off, then called out, “You still mad?”

“I’m not mad,” I said over my shoulder. “But I damn sure ain’t done.”

Chapter Twelve

Kasha 'Kash' DeLuca

The house felt too still. No toys on the floor, no Jet pulling at my leg begging for snacks, no Jace walking around smiling at whatever was in his phone. Just the soft hum of the fridge and the occasional creak of the wood as the house settled.

Jet was with my parents for the night, and Jace was spending the weekend with Keenan and Mama Sanders. I should've been taking advantage of the peace, but I couldn't relax. Not after what went down at the mall.

I moved through the kitchen, throwing shrimp in the skillet and seasoning like I was mad at it.

Cooking usually helped calm me down, but tonight, all it did was keep my hands busy while my thoughts raced.

I couldn't get out my way of the way she walked up on Mel like she didn't know better.

Like she belonged in that space. Mel was ready to put hands on her, and Nic was two seconds from backing her up.

Even Sophi looked like she was about to throw hands, and Sophi don't even fight.

That girl knew exactly who Mel was. She didn't just accidentally recognize her.

The part that really got under my skin? Shayna talking about the kids being siblings.

That wasn't just messy, that was calculated.

And Mel, strong as she is, looked like that statement cracked something open in her chest.

I couldn't stop thinking about it.

I plated my food, shrimp, and creamy grits, simple but comforting and sat down at the table, but my appetite was trash.

I picked at the food, then pushed it away and took my wineglass to the bathroom.

A hot shower usually worked out the stress better than anything else.

I stood under the water until my fingers pruned, and my head cleared just enough to breathe.

Still didn't mean I wasn't tight, though.

I stepped out of the shower, steam trailing behind me.

The towel clung to my damp skin as I wrapped it around myself, water still glistening on my shoulders.

I grabbed my lotion and started rubbing it into my legs, already thinking about whether I had enough energy left to eat the food I cooked or if it was about to go straight into the fridge.

I was mid-thigh when I heard the bedroom door open behind me.

A familiar presence filling the room before I even turned around.

I looked over my shoulder and saw Jackson staring at me like I was his last meal.

He didn't say a word at first. Just stood there, watching me.

"You good?" he finally asked.

I kept rubbing my legs and looked up at him through the mirror. "I'm fine."

He stepped in closer, resting his hands on my waist from behind, his grip gentle but steady. "That answer don't match the energy in this room, mama."

I didn't say anything right away. Just let the silence stretch long enough for him to feel the weight of it.

"What's going on?" he asked again, softer this time.

I turned, facing him fully now, arms crossed over the towel. "Some girl walked up to Mel saying their kids were siblings."

The look on his face said it all. "You knew?"

He didn't move or didn't blink, just exhaled and rubbed his hand down his face.

"Yeah," he said low. "I knew. I ain't know she was gone pop up like that, though."

"Unbelievable," I muttered, stepping back.

"Listen... he didn't cheat on Mel. This was from before he went to prison. Back when he was still messing with that girl. He didn't know about the kid until she

showed up and dropped that shit on him.”

“That doesn’t matter, Jackson. Y’all helped him keep this from her... from us. This ain’t some street shit y’all tryna keep us safe from. This is a whole damn child!” I was pissed off that this was happening and I know if he knew, then Buck’s ass did, too.

“I wasn’t covering for nobody,” he said, stepping closer, tone firm but not raised. “I told him to tell her. Day one. I don’t believe in lying to your woman, and you know that.”

“You still lied by omission,” I shot back. “You had me walking around smiling in Mel’s face, knowing there was some shit out there brewing.”

Jackson pinched the bridge of his nose. “I didn’t want you mad at me for something I didn’t do.”

“Well, congratulations, nigga,” I snapped. “I’m mad, anyway.”

“I’m not gone make excuses. You’re right to feel how you feel. But I’m not the enemy here, Kash. I don’t lie to you. I never will. And if I could go back and change how that shit played out, I would. I should’ve told you. I just didn’t want this between us.”

I sighed, the towel slipping slightly as I crossed my arms again. “Just don’t do that shit again. We promised not to keep secrets from each other.”

Jackson stepped closer and kissed my temple. “You right, baby. I’m sorry. Aight?” His hands slipped lower, fingers tugging at the edge of the towel. “Now you gone let me make it up to you?”

Before I could respond, his mouth found my neck, peppering kisses as he whispered, “Turn around.”

He pressed up behind me, chest to my back, hands on my hips. “You still mad?”

“Mhmm.”

He kissed down my spine. “Good.”

He bent me over the dresser, one hand gripping my ass, the other sliding between my thighs.

“You wet already, Kash,” he muttered.

He dropped his sweats just enough to free himself, then slammed into me in one hard thrust that had me gripping the dresser for dear life.

“Fuck!” I gasped.

He gripped my hair, yanking my head back, his lips brushing my ear.

“You don’t get to walk around with that attitude and not think I won’t fuck it out you,” he growled.

I felt my first orgasm brewing, and I almost lost my damn mind.

“I feel that shit, Kash. Let it go.” He smacked my ass hard, the sound echoing in the room.

His thrusts were punishing, deep, dragging my soul out with every stroke. I cried out, and he grunted low, picking up the pace until the dresser legs scraped the floor.

“Jackson—”

“Wassup, mama?”

I pushed back against him, meeting every stroke. “Don’t stop.”

“I ain planned on it.” He bent over me, sliding his hand around to rub my clit in tight, perfect circles. “You feel that shit? That’s mine.”

“All yours,” I moaned, clenching around him.

“That’s right. Let it go.”

I came with a scream that would’ve had Jet waking up if he was home. My knees buckled, but he caught me, still grinding into me slow, milking every second.

He pulled out, flipped me around, and lifted me onto the dresser, slipping back inside with no break.

“Fuck, Kash...”

His mouth was on mine, devouring every sound I made. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper.

“You still mad?” he breathed against my lips. “Hmm?”

“No,” I whispered.

“I ain here you.”

“No... shit. I-I’m not mad anymore.”

He grunted and slammed into me repeatedly until he came with a loud growl, head dropping to my shoulder.

He kissed my collarbone. “You forgive me?”

I smirked, brushing my fingers through his curls. “You asking me that after fuckin’ me the way you just did?”

He chuckled. “Just making sure.”

He pulled out gently, grabbed a towel, and cleaned me up before carrying me to bed.

We curled under the sheets, my head on his chest, his hand tracing my arm.

“I’m sorry, for real, baby. I ain’t mean to keep that shit from you. I just wanted to stay out the shit?” he admitted.

“I believe you. Just don’t let happen again.”

“It won’t.” he promised.

Chapter Thirteen

Mel

I didn't even remember how I got to my mama's house.

My hands were on the wheel, my stomach was tight, and my brain was moving faster than traffic.

One minute I was standing in the middle of the damn mall, ready to swing on that bitch.

Next thing I knew, I was parked out front of the house I grew up in, still trying to process how the hell that girl had the fuckin' audacity.

After parking beside my mama's car, I let myself in.

The smell of bleach and lemon hit me first. My mama always kept the place clean like it was her full-time job.

Voices floated from the living room, where Keenan and Jace were laughing over something on the game.

I didn't speak. I headed straight for the kitchen.

Mama was by the stove, back turned, stirring something in a big-ass pot.

“You alright?” she asked when she noticed me.

“Nope,” I said, dropping my purse on the table.

She turned around. “What happened?”

I pulled out a chair and sat down hard. I told my mama everything that happened today at the mall and the bomb Shayna dropped on me. I let her know how Kilo had been acting and how it all made sense now. He was keeping shit from me, and the shit was eating him up. It should’ve done more than that.

Mama’s mouth dropped slightly. “You saying Kilo got a kid?”

“I don’t know what I’m saying,” I snapped. “All I know is I’m out here pregnant and some random chick from his past is dropping bombs on me in public. Meanwhile, he’s been walking around the house like he’s sleepwalking.”

“Mel.”

I looked at her.

“Did he cheat?”

“No,” I said without flinching. “I don’t believe that.”

Mama nodded slow. “So you’re mad because he’s keeping something from you.”

“I’m mad because I’m pregnant and he’s lying. Because I’ve been asking him for weeks what’s wrong, and he just shrugs or kisses me on the forehead like that’s supposed to fix shit. I don’t do secrets. And if there’s a child out there, I should’ve heard it from him. Not her.”

She pulled out the chair beside me and sat down, placing her hand on mine. “You’re right to be upset. But you need to calm down before you walk back into that house.”

“Mama—”

“I’m serious. You don’t know the full story yet. Don’t go off until you get all the facts.”

I looked down at my belly. “I don’t want to be the woman he lies to.”

“And you’re not,” she said firmly. “You’re the woman he’s scared to lose.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Men carry guilt different,” she continued. “Sometimes they shut down, thinking silence protects you. But you ain’t the type to be sheltered from the truth. You want to know. You need to know.”

“Exactly.”

“So go home. Ask him. Not screaming and swinging. Just ask, and then listen. You’ll know what’s real.”

Before I could respond, Keenan strolled in with a Capri Sun in his hand and Jace trailing behind him.

“Damn, sis. Who you fighting with now?” Keenan asked, smirking.

“Watch yo’ mouth and mind your business,” I said, giving him a look.

He chuckled. “That means it’s Kilo.”

Mama gave him a sharp look. “Boy, go on somewhere before I beat your grown ass.”

Keenan held up his hands. “Say less.”

He left, taking Jace with him.

Mama turned back to me. “You got this, Mel. I raised you better than to let a man run you in circles.”

I stood up and adjusted my purse on my shoulder. “He better be ready to talk.”

“Let him know you still love him. Even if you gotta cuss him out first.”

I cracked a small smile and kissed her cheek. “Love you, Ma.”

“Love you too, baby. Go handle your business.”

And with that, I left and headed home to face my issues head on. This time, I wasn’t walking into my house as the girl confused by silence. I was walking in as the woman who deserved the truth.

No sooner that I walked inside my house, I headed upstairs and took a long, hot shower, trying to scrub off the tension clinging to my skin.

I wasn’t sure what pissed me off more. Shayna pulling up bold like she had the right to speak to me, or the fact that Kilo had me out here looking stupid in public.

When I finally walked out of the bathroom and into the bedroom, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, arms resting on his thighs, head down like he was trying to

collect himself.

He looked up as I walked past him to the dresser. “I called you,” he said.

“I know.”

“You ignored me.”

“I did.”

He stood. “Mel—”

“Don’t,” I snapped, voice sharper than I intended, but I didn’t take it back. “Don’t come in here acting like shit’s normal.”

“I’m not.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I muttered, grabbing a tank top and some shorts. “You’ve been moving weird for weeks. Quiet. Off. Then I get ambushed at the damn mall by some girl you used to fuck with, and you wanna act like I’m just tripping?”

His jaw locked. “What happened?”

I turned to face him fully. “She walked up to me like she didn’t know exactly who the fuck I was. Tried to compliment my pregnancy. Then said her daughter and our baby were siblings.”

Kilo didn’t say a word. Just stood there.

“Nothing to say now, huh?” I asked, eyes narrowing.

“I didn’t know she was gone say some shit to you, Mel.”

“But you didn’t tell me either!” I snapped. “You just let me walk around looking stupid while she out here telling people we sharing baby daddies and shit!”

He stepped toward me, voice low but steady. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“You could’ve started with the truth.”

“I don’t even know if the kid’s mine yet.”

“You ain’t say nothing at all!” I was yelling now. “You’ve been quiet, avoiding me, acting like I’m the problem when you the one with secrets and shit!”

Kilo dragged his hands over his face. “I’m tryna handle it, Mel. I told her I want a DNA test.”

“And what about me?” My voice broke slightly, but I kept my chin up. “You trying to take care of everything but your fiancée. I’ve been right here, pregnant, stressed, and confused. And instead of talking to me, you shut me out.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he said, finally meeting my eyes.

“But you did.”

Silence stretched between us.

“You always said you’d never lie to me,” I said softly. “Not even by omission.”

“I know.”

“Well, you did. And it hurts.”

He looked like he wanted to say more, like words were burning in his throat, but nothing came out.

I stepped back. “I need some air.”

“Mel.”

“Nah. Don’t.”

He didn’t try to stop me. Just stood there watching as I left the room, heart thudding in my ears.

Downstairs, I sat on the couch, rubbing my belly as tears welled up in my eyes. I wasn’t crying for him. I was crying for myself. For the version of us I thought we were. For the family we were building that now felt like it had cracks in the foundation.

I didn’t know if the little girl was his.

But I knew one thing for sure... he should’ve told me first.

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Chapter Fourteen

Kilo

I sat on the edge of the bed, jaw locked, heart thudding like I'd just walked out of a war zone.

Mel's words were still ringing in my ears.

Her voice full of hurt. Full of fire. She didn't scream to scream.

She screamed because she was drowning in silence, and I'd been the one holding her under.

I didn't chase her this time. I couldn't. Not with everything crashing down.

My phone was buzzing on the nightstand. Buck's name lit up the screen. I ignored it only for him to call right back.

"What?" I answered.

His voice shot through the speaker, loud and venomous. "Nigga, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

I didn't answer.

"Thugga done got yo' ass, ain't it? I told you to handle that shit. But nah, you had-

headed as fuck. Benny listens better than you. Not only did you get caught in yo' fuckin' lie, but my wife mad as fuck, like I'm the one moving reckless.

"Buck—"

"Nah, fuck that. Don't call my fuckin' name. You had weeks to tell Mel. Weeks to figure out what the hell Shayna really wanted. Instead, you sitting around looking constipated while everybody else cleaning up the mess."

I gritted my teeth. "You think I wanted this shit?"

"You ain't act like you didn't. You let it fester. You act like ignoring the shit was gone make it go away. See how that shit worked out for yo' dumb ass."

My head dropped into my hands. I couldn't say shit.

Buck's voice dropped a little, but it was still sharp with intent. "You love her, right?"

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "You know I do."

"Then act like it. Right now, she's feeling alone in her own house, and you got me looking like a goddamn liar in mine all because I was being my brother's muthafuckin' keeper."

"I didn't ask you to lie."

"But you didn't stop me either. But the crazy shit is, I'd do it all over again if I had to, just make me have to." I couldn't do shit but respect that. I'd be pissed too if his bullshit spilled over into my home.

Before I could respond, my phone vibrated again. Another alert flashed across the

screen.

ALERT: MOTION DETECTED

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Somebody just tripped the alarm at the shop.”

“I’m on my way. Call Stacks.”

“You call him,” I said, already moving to grab my hoodie. “I’m out the door.”

“Kilo,” Buck said before I hung up.

“What.”

“You better start fixing this shit. You think Mel gone keep waiting ’round for you to get yo’ shit together? She won’t.”

Click.

I stared at the screen for a second before tossing the phone back on the bed.

I stood up, chest tight, mind wired. Anger, guilt, and frustration all felt like it was eating me alive.

But for now, I had something to focus on.

And whoever the fuck thought they could break into my dispensary?

They clearly hadn’t done their research on who they just fucked with.

I pulled up first, engine still humming as I parked right out front.

Lights from inside were dim, but the back alert on my phone said motion had been triggered in the storage area.

I killed the engine, stepped out, and scanned the building.

Everything looked untouched. But that meant nothing.

A minute later, headlights swept across the lot and Buck was pulling up.

He parked half up on the curb like he owned the block.

Stacks wasn't far behind on his bike, engine growling low before he cut it off.

Buck stepped out with a sharp expression and headed toward me.

"This better be worth getting out my damn bed for," he muttered. "Goldie already think I'm on some bullshit because of yo' secret keeping ass."

Stacks followed behind, eyes cutting through the shadows.

"What's the situation?" he asked.

I nodded toward the building. "Back door alert. Motion triggered. Could be nothing, but I'm still gone check it out."

Stacks nodded. "Let's roll."

We moved together, eyes scanning every angle. I unlocked the front and pushed the door open slow. Everything looked untouched until we reached the storage hallway.

One of the crates had been cracked open.

“Let me go check the footage,” I said, heading to the back office.

We stepped in, and I brought up the security camera and rewound the footage from earlier. As the tape played, we all leaned in to get a good look. A figure slid through the back entrance. Skinny frame. Hoodie. But the camera caught just enough of his face when he glanced toward the side wall.

I froze. Buck leaned closer.

“Ain’t this some shit?” I muttered.

Stacks stared hard. “You know him?”

I nodded, voice low. “That’s Shayna’s brother.”

Buck let out a staggered laugh. “Nigga, you gotta be kidding me, right?”

“So this muthafucka runs up in your shit like we won’t recognize his bitch ass?” Buck barked. “Nigga, I knew that bitch brought destructive energy. She might be ’bout to gain a baby daddy, but she ’bout to lose a brother.”

I clenched my jaw. “I don’t know if she knew or not.”

Buck turned to me. “You better hope she didn’t, or yo’ ass gone be running a daddy daycare.”

Stacks stepped forward. “You sure it’s him?”

“I’d bet my life it is,” I said.

Buck started pacing. “Man, I been waiting to fuck somebody up. I’m past due. This nigga picked the wrong week.”

Stacks ran a hand over his beard. “This ain’t no random hit. This was a message.”

“And he sent it to the wrong muthafuckas,” Buck growled. “He’ on know who he fuckin’ wit’, but he ’bout to.”

I watched them both, pressure building behind my eyes.

Then Buck added, “Oh, nigga. I should beat yo’ muthafuckin’ ass. Because of yo’ stupid ass, Goldie holding out on a nigga.”

Stacks laughed. “Damn, that’s fucked up. I been straight. Kash ain’t skipped a beat.”

Buck shoved him. “Nigga, I hope you lose feeling in yo’ dick.”

I shook my head but didn’t smile. “This ain’t just about Shayna’s brother robbing my place. This is about him thinking I won’t do shit.”

Stacks looked at me seriously. “So what’s the play?”

I stared at the screen, already plotting.

“We show that muthafucka who he’s dealing with.”

After making sure everything was intact and secure, I locked up and left with my brothers in tow.

I told them I would get with them later to go over the shit before we parted ways.

I guess Shayna didn't warn her brother what kinda nigga I was, or he was just that stupid.

Either way, I was gone have fun showing his ass.

When I made it back home, the house was dark outside of the light over the stove and the light coming from the TV.

I walked further inside and found Mel curled up on the couch with a blanket half-draped over her belly.

One arm tucked under her head, the other resting across her stomach.

That tank top she wore earlier had ridden up just enough for her bump to show. Even in sleep, she looked mad.

I exhaled slow and stepped over to her, careful with my movements. I didn't want to wake her, but I wasn't leaving her out here either. Sliding an arm under her knees and the other around her back, I lifted her gently. Soon as her body left the couch, her eyes opened.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she snapped, voice hoarse.

"Taking you to bed," I said calmly, ignoring the bite in her tone.

"Put me down, Kilo."

I didn't.

She huffed but didn't fight, just clenched her jaw as I carried her upstairs. I kicked open the bedroom door with my foot and laid her down on the bed like she weighed nothing. Once she was settled, she turned her head away from me and pulled the covers up to her neck.

I walked over to the dresser, pulled open the second drawer, and grabbed a pair of boxers and some black basketball shorts.

"Where were you?" she finally asked.

I looked over my shoulder. "Dispensary. Got an alert. Someone broke in."

She just stared, like she was tryna to figure out if I was lying or not. I stepped over to her and leaned down and kissed her forehead.

"I'll crash in the guest room tonight," I said low. "Give you some space."

It took everything in me not to stay in there with her, but I knew she needed her space. I shut the door behind me, leaned back against it, and let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

This wasn't how the night was supposed to end. Wasn't how any of this was supposed to go.

Mel was hurting. And I knew I was the reason. But how the fuck was I supposed to fix it when I wasn't even sure what I was dealing with yet? When all I had was a maybe?

Liberty.

That little girl's name was starting to haunt me.

And Mel. Shit, the way she looked at me now... like I was a stranger she couldn't trust? That cut deeper than any blade ever could. I ran a hand down my face and sat on the edge of the bed. Elbows on my knees. Head low.

Mel hated me. My brothers were on edge. And I had a possible daughter out there that I missed out on for nine years.

This shit was spiraling, and if I didn't figure it out soon... I was gonna lose everything.

Chapter Fifteen

Shayna

“You sound stupid as hell, Sean.”

I slammed the dishwasher shut, spinning on my heel as my brother lounged at the kitchen table like he wasn’t talking about robbing Kilo.

“I’m talking strategy,” he said, calm as ever. “Ain’t nobody gone get hurt. We in, we out, and we get what we need.”

I crossed my arms. “You mean steal from Kilo.”

“I mean, get what’s owed. You were the one taking care his seed all them years. You were the one who held it down solo while he sat up in a cell. He owes you.”

“You don’t know shit about what he owes me and taking it won’t make the situation better.”

He pushed back in the chair, arms folded behind his head, looking like a devil in sweatpants. “I know he got cash, properties, a whole damn empire. And you sitting here waiting on him to figure out if he wanna claim his kid.”

“He just found out,” I snapped.

“It’s been long enough.” Sean said smugly.

“You gone let him take his sweet time while we sit around hoping he’ll step up?” he said. “That’s wild, Shay. You better than that.”

My nails dug into my arms. “You don’t get to push me into this mess just because you’re broke and lazy.”

He stood slow, posture sharp. “You forget who was buying diapers when Liberty was a baby? You forget who was there, taking her back and forth and picking her up from school and shit?”

I glared. “Don’t act like you saved me. She’s your niece. You should want to do those things for her. Everything you did me had a string attached.”

“And it still does,” he snapped. “I need this. We need this. If Kilo won’t step up, then we snatch what we can and move.”

“You rob him, Sean, and it’s over. There won’t be any chance at nothing. He’ll come for you. He ain’t the type to let shit slide.”

Sean took a step closer, lowering his voice. “You think I’m scared of that nigga or his brothers? Fuck them niggas.”

“You should be,” I said coldly. “You don’t know what you’re walking into.”

He paused for a second, just long enough for the tension to stretch.

“Too late now,” he muttered. “I already talked to my people. We’re doing this shit soon.”

“Sean—”

He grabbed his keys. “You either with me or you in the way, Shay.”

The door slammed behind him before I could even say another word.

The next morning...

I stood at the edge of the hallway, arms folded, eyes locked on Sean as he stalked the living room. Hoodie up, voice low, phone pressed to his ear like he was calling in a pizza instead of planning a gah damn heist.

“Nah, we slide through the back. No cameras. I already scoped it,” he muttered. “Hit the stash, bounce. We good.”

My stomach flipped. I stepped into the room, heat rising under my skin. “You serious right now?”

He held a finger up, eyes still on the floor. “I’ll call you back.” He hung up like my voice was irritating him.

“You really planning to rob Kilo?” I said, stepping in front of him.

He grabbed a water bottle from the kitchen counter and cracked the cap like this was just another Tuesday. “I told you what it was. I’m done talking about it.”

I couldn’t believe this shit. “You know what kinda death wish you’re signing up for?”

He leaned on the counter and scoffed. “That nigga ain’t invincible, Shay. I don’t give a fuck who he is. He acting real casual about a kid that might be his? Like he ain’t got no responsibility? Nah. He gone feel something. One way or another.”

I walked up on him, ready to knock his head off his shoulders. “And what happens when he finds out it was you? You think he ain’t gone come for your ass?”

“I hope he do.” He smirked. “Shit, at least then we’ll have his attention.”

“You sound insane,” I snapped. “You gone blow up everything. Me, Liberty—”

“?Nah, don’t do that,” he cut in. “You been hiding that girl for nine years. Don’t put that on me. I’m doing what needs to be done.”

“You’re doing what benefits you . Ain’t shit about this for Liberty.”

He stepped forward, right in my face. “I fed that little girl. I had her back when nobody else did. So yeah, now I need that energy back. Kilo’s rich. He got properties, cars, all that.”

“You acting like some small-time corner boy,” I said, disgust in my voice. “Like this ain’t gone bring heat you can’t handle.”

“I been in heat, Shay,” he growled. “Ain’t nothing new.”

He started pacing again, more agitated. “I’m in and out before he even know it happened. You ain’t gotta do shit but shut the fuck up.”

“Wow,” I muttered. “So that’s what I am now? A fuckin’ accomplice?”

He turned on me, furious. “You act like I owe Kilo something. That man ain’t lifted a finger for Liberty. Ain’t paid a dime. I’m the one who stepped up.”

“And you think robbing him is the answer?”

He shrugged. "If he don't respect his kid, he gone respect loss."

I stared at him, heart thundering, hands shaking. "You gone get us all killed. That man don't play games."

"He better not. 'Cause if he start one, I'ma finish it."

I stepped back like his words slapped me. I didn't recognize the man in front of me. My big brother, the one who used to teach me how to ride bikes and walk me home from school? Gone. This version of Sean was twisted by resentment, greed... and fear.

"When's it happening?" I asked, dreading the answer.

He grabbed his phone off the couch and walked to the door like it was nothing. "Tomorrow night. Stay out the way, Shay."

He paused, hand on the knob, then looked back at me with a smirk that made my skin crawl.

"You better figure out what side you on," he said. "Use that nigga before he toss you like trash."

Liberty was excited about finally meeting her father and now her dumb ass uncle was about to make damn sure their reunion ended in blood.

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Chapter Sixteen

Mel

the next morning...

I woke up alone...again. The spot next to me was cold and untouched, like it had been all week.

It was becoming normal for Kilo to sleep in the guest room while I pretended it didn't bother me.

But it did. It bothered the hell out of me.

I laid there for a minute, staring at the ceiling, trying to push the lump in my throat back down where it came from.

I had no more tears for this situation. I was past that stage.

Now the pain had surpassed to frustration and on top of being pregnant...

I was over it. This shit felt like a punishment.

I got up slowly and moved through the motions like I wasn't halfway broken inside. Tied my curls up into a puff, threw on a black cropped tee, and a pair of gray leggings. This was my go-to pregnancy attire, and I didn't see that changing.

I had a doctor's appointment scheduled for today, and missing it was simply not an option. Regardless of Kilo's desire to pretend everything was fine or to act as if nothing had changed, my unborn child still needed both of us to be present and actively involved.

I came down the stairs expecting the usual cold shoulder, but he was already in the kitchen, dressed.

He looked good...real good. He wore a gray graphic tee that defined his muscles perfectly.

The dark denim jeans he wore did no justice in trying to conceal my favorite part of him.

I hated how my chest still fluttered for a man that had me all twisted inside.

He turned when he heard me. His eyes met mine, and for the first time in days, they weren't guarded. "You good?" he asked as he let his eyes scan over me.

"I'm pregnant," I said, sliding onto a stool at the counter.

He came over, leaned down, and kissed my forehead. It was soft. It made me want to fold and swing again all at once.

"How you feeling...for real?" he asked, standing with his hands on my stomach.

"Tired. Irritated. My back's on fire. And this baby keeps kicking like he tryna square up."

He gave a low chuckle, barely there. "Sounds like his mama."

“And his daddy,” I shot back.

He chuckled.

“I made you something to put on your stomach.”

He turned back to the stove, grabbed a small plate, and slid it across the counter. Toast, fruit, and half a boiled egg. Simple, but thoughtful.

“I wasn’t sure if you could keep much down,” he said.

I blinked. “You been paying attention?”

“Always.”

That hit me deep, but I didn’t let it show. I picked at the toast, chewing slow, my eyes on the plate just so I wouldn’t say something emotional.

“You ready?” he asked after I finished the food.

I nodded, grabbed my purse and Stanley before I followed him out the house.

The ride was quiet, but not awkward. Like two people existing side by side with too much unsaid sitting between them. He kept one hand on the wheel, the other caressing my thigh, lightly.

When we got to the doctor’s, he parked close like always and hopped out to open my door before I even reached for the handle. He still did shit like that. Gentleman by habit, even when his head was somewhere else. Inside, we didn’t wait long before a familiar voice pulled me from my thoughts.

“Well, damn. You look like you’re over all of this,” Eve joked as I made my way to the back, with Kilo following close behind.

Eve was damn near due herself, her round belly leading the way as she walked toward us with her usual energy.

“We look like we’re in the same boat.” I joked.

“Girl, I swear he’s overstaying his welcome.” She rolled her eyes, laughing. “Come on back.”

Kilo helped me up and followed behind like he always did, quiet but at least he was present. Eve started with the basics—weight, blood pressure, and all the routine checks before the doctor came in.

“You having any pain?”

“Mostly just tired and achy,” I said.

“That’s normal once you get closer to the end.” she nodded. “I’ll have Dr. Simms come in shortly.”

“Mostly just tired and achy,” I said.

“That’s normal,” she nodded. “I’ll have Dr. Simms come in shortly.”

She gave Kilo a smile on her way out. “Don’t let her stress too much, daddy.”

He gave a curt nod, still quiet.

Once we were alone, Kilo stepped a little closer. His voice was softer now.

“You ever wonder who he gone look like?”

I glanced at him, caught off guard. “Yeah. All the time.”

He reached out; he placed his hand on my belly.

As if on cue, the baby gave a small kick. His palm flexed against my skin, and for just a second, I saw the stress leave his face. Replaced by something raw...real.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured.

I didn’t respond. Not because I didn’t want to, but because I didn’t have anything left to give right then. Still, I didn’t pull away. That silence between us was enough.

Dr. Simms came in soon after.

“Good morning, you two,” she greeted. “How’s mommy doing today?” she asked, as she put on her gloves.

“I’m okay. Ready to get my body back.”

She smirked.

“That’s understandable. The third trimester is a roller coaster ride for most women, so your feelings are absolutely normal.”

After giving me a few pointers, she pulled over the ultrasound machine and got started.

The intense sound of my baby’s heartbeat sounded off the walls of the exam room.

Kilo stood off to the side, arms folded, eyes locked on my belly like that sound had gripped something inside him.

His jaw ticked, but he didn't say anything.

"Baby sounds perfect," Dr. Simms said with a warm smile. "No signs of concern."

She gave us more notes, scheduled my next appointment, and cleared us to go.

Back in the truck, I buckled up and leaned against the window, my eyes closed.

"You hungry?" he asked as he pulled off.

"Not really."

"You tryna ride for a bit?"

I opened my eyes. "Ride?"

He nodded. "Ain't gotta talk. Just... ride."

I stared at him for a second. Then nodded.

Because even though my heart was bruised, and even though we weren't okay, I still wanted to be near him. Still needed him close. Two people in the same car, searching for what they lost in silence.

We'd been riding in silence for at least twenty minutes, just cruising through neighborhoods and side streets I barely paid attention to.

My mind kept looping back to the baby's heartbeat, to the way Kilo had looked when he felt him kick.

Like, maybe for a split second, he remembered who we used to be before the distance and secrets came between us.

Eventually, he pulled over by a quiet overlook near the water.

No one around. Just water, sky, and tension still hanging between us.

"I gotta tell you something," he said, finally breaking the silence.

My stomach dipped, but I stayed quiet.

He turned toward me, both hands on the wheel like he needed something to ground him.

"It's about Shayna," he said. "And Liberty."

My throat tightened, but I didn't interrupt.

"I got the DNA test scheduled. It's a few days from now."

I nodded slowly. "You still think she might be yours?"

He exhaled hard. "I don't know. I didn't even know she existed until Shayna popped up. Said her parents made her keep it from me. That they moved her away while I was locked up."

I looked out the window, jaw clenched. "And you believe that?"

“I believe it’s possible,” he said honestly.

“Shit’s messy, Mel. But I ain’t lying to you no more.

I can’t have us in that place again. I only kept the shit from you because I didn’t want to stress you out while you’re pregnant with my son over some bullshit.

You gotta believe I didn’t do it maliciously. Baby, I thought I was protecting you.”

That last part made me glance back at him.

His voice was low when he added, “I ain’t been right since she showed up.

My head’s been fucked up. But not because I still got something for her, because I don’t.

That ship sunk a long time ago. If Liberty’s mine...

I’ll be there for her. But that’s it. Shayna ain’t part of nothing I want outside of what I owe as a father. You gotta believe that.”

I stared at him for a long second. Searching his eyes. Looking for the man I fell in love with... the one who used to tell me everything without me having to beg for it.

He looked tired... but honest.

“I wanted you to tell me,” I whispered. “I knew something was wrong. You ain’t been the same for weeks. I thought it was me.”

His jaw flexed. “It was me... all me.”

I leaned back. “So, what’s gone happen after you get the test?”

“If she’s mine, I step up. But you and me?” He reached over and took my hand. “That doesn’t change. I’m here. Ain’t shit gone change that.”

My eyes watered, but I blinked them back.

He rubbed his thumb over my palm. “There’s more.”

I waited, bracing myself.

He cleared his throat. “The dispensary got hit.”

“What?” I snapped. “When?”

“Last night. After our argument.”

My stomach twisted again. “And you didn’t tell me then?”

“You were already upset, Mel,” he said, voice calm. “I didn’t wanna throw more shit on ya plate.”

I sighed, biting the inside of my cheek. “You know who did it?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Yeah. Shayna’s brother.”

I froze. “You sure?”

“Caught him on camera. Him and two other dumb muthafuckas. They tried to move quickly, but I saw his face clear as day.”

“What you gone do?”

Kilo’s whole body shifted. I’ve only seen him get like this a few times. I couple of times while he was in prison, and more recently, when that fool tried to push up on me. His silence was definitely dangerous.

“That nigga moved like he wanted my attention...like he wanted to see me in person. I’m gone give him what he wants.”

My stomach tightened. “Franklin—”

“Nah,” he cut me off, eyes locked on the windshield.

“He put his hands on my shit, Mel. That ain’t just disrespect—it’s a fuckin’ violation.

And now he gone pay for that shit.” He leaned back, cracking his neck.

“I tried to keep this shit clean. Tried to be civil. But now? I’m done being nice. That nigga gone feel me.”

I swallowed hard. “You’re not gone do something crazy, are you?”

“I’m gone handle it,” he drawled. “However the fuck I need to.”

He looked at me again, and there was no softness in his face.

“I’m not letting nobody come at me or mine and walk away untouched. That’s a promise.”

I nodded slowly, heart pounding in my chest. Usually I would be okay with him seeking revenge, but this damn baby had made me soft. “Just... come home after.

Please.”

His face softened just enough to reach me. “I always will.”

I pulled my hand from his and placed it on my belly. “For his sake, Franklin... don’t make me raise him alone.”

He leaned in and kissed my knuckles.

“You got it, mama.”

I held his gaze. “No more secrets.”

“No more secrets,” he repeated. “I promise.”

And for the first time in what felt like weeks, the space between us didn’t feel like it was breaking. It felt like maybe—just maybe—we were patching the cracks back together.

Chapter Seventeen

Shayna

The testing center was cold, quiet, and smelled sterile.

Liberty was holding my hand, her little fingers tight in mine as we stood in the lobby.

Her eyes were big, curious, darting around at everything.

The floor, the people, the buzzing light overhead.

But they stopped when she saw Kilo sitting in the corner with Mel.

I stopped breathing for a second and my stomach flipped.

I didn't expect her to be here. Liberty let go of my hand and started walking toward him without hesitation.

"Hey, Kilo," she smiled.

He stood as soon as she got close, his face softening just enough to kneel and meet her halfway. "Hey, mama."

She threw her arms around his neck and held on. It wasn't long, maybe a few seconds, but it was enough to stab me in the chest. He hugged her like he meant it. Like she belonged there.

When they pulled apart, her gaze flicked over to Mel. “Hi.”

Mel gave her a small smile. “Hey, sweetheart.”

Kilo stood again, his arm protectively around Liberty’s shoulder. “Liberty, this is Mel...my fiancée.”

Liberty’s head tilted slightly. “Does that mean she’s gonna be my step mama?”

“Yeah. It does,” Kilo confidently confirmed.

Mel blinked like she hadn’t expected that question. But she kept it together and smiled softly.

Liberty’s smile stretched wide. “Cool! Are you having a baby?”

Mel chuckled softly. “I am.”

“A boy or girl?”

“Boy.”

Liberty gasped. “I always wanted a baby brother.”

Kilo looked down at her with something unreadable in his eyes.

He wasn’t smiling, but there was a calmness there, like he was taking all this in and still trying to piece it together.

I was still frozen near the front, watching the whole interaction with my heart on fire.

Mel's eyes cut to me next. The look on her face let me know she was holding her tongue for Liberty's sake and nothing else.

Kilo finally turned his gaze on me. His jaw clenched. "Aye, come here." His voice was firm and demanding.

The way he said it wasn't loud, but it was full of warning. The kind that made people sit up straight and think twice.

I walked over slow, setting my purse on the chair beside Mel. She didn't speak. Neither did I. The nurse came out and called our names, causing me to silently sigh because I didn't want to be in the same area with this woman for too long.

Kilo looked down at Liberty. "You ready, baby girl?"

She nodded. "Yes."

He held her hand, then gave Mel one more look. "You coming?"

Mel nodded and followed.

I trailed behind, eyes burning into the back of her head. So much for not wanting to be around her ass.

The room was small and bright. The nurse explained everything clearly so we would know what to expect.

Kilo had his arm on the back of Liberty's chair the entire time.

He had the nurse bring in another chair for Mel to sit in.

She was seated along the opposite wall with hands on her stomach, watching it all unfold.

Liberty followed instructions with ease, squirmed a little at the swab but laughed when it tickled her cheek.

“She’s a tough one.” the nurse smiled.

Kilo smirked. “Yeah...she is.”

Once the samples were collected, the nurse excused herself, leaving us in silence.

Kilo finally turned to me. That cold calm was gone now, only to be replaced with that sharp edge I used to be addicted to.

“I better not regret doing this shit,” he said low.

I squared my shoulders. “I didn’t come here to lie, Kilo.”

“No? But had you not kept the shit to yourself, we wouldn’t be here now, would we?”

Liberty’s eyes shifted between us. I looked down at her and softened my tone.

“She just wanted to meet her father. That’s all.”

“She got him,” Kilo said. “But don’t play like you brought her here just for that. You think I ain’t peep how you moved?”

“We’re not doing this in front of her.” Mel interrupted.

Kilo looked at her, then back at me.

He stepped close, towering like always, and dropped his voice until it was just for me.

“Don’t play with me, Shayna. I don’t care what you thought was gone come from this outside of me building a relationship with my daughter, but don’t play wit’ me, shorty. I’ain never been that nigga.”

I stiffened. “I’ain come back for nothing other than that.”

“Good,” he said. “Keep it that way.”

Liberty tugged on his hand. “Are we done?”

He nodded and crouched again to her level. “Yeah. You did good, mama.”

She beamed. “Can we get ice cream?”

Kilo smiled faintly. “We’ll see.”

Mel touched his arm. “We should get going.”

Kilo looked at me one more time. “You’ll hear from me when the results come in.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Can I go with Kilo and Mel, Mommy?”

I looked at her, then up to Kilo. His bore into mine and I saw the danger that was housed within them.

“Uhm, maybe another time. How about we go get ice cream?” I offered.

“It’s cool. I’ll take her. Just follow us there.”

Liberty’s eyes lit up before she gave me a quick hug before slipping her hand into his.

The three of them walked off like they were one big happy family while I stood behind...alone.

I sat in my car, parked in the parking lot of the ice cream shop.

I didn’t even get out right away. I needed a minute to myself.

I could see them through the window... Kilo, Liberty, and Mel, sitting at one of the round tables inside like they’d done this shit a hundred times before.

Like it was normal. Like that was her family.

Liberty was grinning, talking Kilo’s ear off, waving her spoon like she was giving a full rundown of her life story.

He leaned back, listening, a small smirk playing on his lips like he couldn’t believe how much she reminded him of himself.

Mel sat beside them, cool and calm, belly full and round, gently smiling as Liberty showed her something on her phone.

That was supposed to be me.

I should've been the one on the other side of that glass.

Laughing with my man. Watching our daughter talk his head off.

Being the woman by his side, not on the outside looking in like some damn stranger.

But I did this... I kept Liberty from him.

I let my parents' shame me into silence, let my pride hold me hostage.

I didn't want him to think I was just like every other chick he'd messed with back then.

I didn't want to be a burden while he was locked up.

And now, watching them? It was like the entire world moved on without me.

My daughter found the piece of her she'd been missing all her life...

and she found it in them. I watched as they finished up.

Kilo helped Liberty throw her cup away. Mel rubbed her back.

Liberty leaned into her like it was nothing, like she already trusted her.

When they walked out together, I had to turn away for a second. My eyes burned. I hated how soft Kilo's hand looked on Liberty's shoulder. Hated how easy it all seemed.

That should've been my life.

The ride back home was silent, except for Liberty in the backseat humming to herself, legs swinging as she scrolled through her phone. She was on cloud nine.

“Did you have fun today?” I asked, forcing my voice to stay light.

She nodded fast. “Uh-huh. Daddy bought me the biggest sundae. And Mel said I could help her pick out baby stuff if it’s okay with you.”

I gripped the steering wheel. “She said that?”

“Yeah,” she smiled. “She’s really pretty. And she smells good... like something sweet.”

I couldn’t even be mad at her for it. She was nine. This was the first time she got to be around her father. Of course she’d be excited. Of course, she’d cling to the first woman her father trusted.

“I’m glad you liked her,” I said softly.

“I did,” she smiled. “And I liked the way Daddy looked at me. It felt... normal.”

That broke something in me. I blinked fast and kept driving. I hated she felt like she wasn’t normal or that she was deprived of her father’s love and affection because of my choices.

By the time we got home, the sky was fading into the sunset. Liberty headed straight for the room with her iPad. I didn’t even have a chance to kick off my shoes before I

saw Sean standing in the kitchen, arms crossed, a half-eaten sandwich in his hand.

He looked me over once. “So?”

I closed the door behind me. “So what?”

“You meet with him?”

I walked past him and dropped my keys in the dish. “Yeah.”

He followed me into the kitchen. “And?”

I turned to face him. “And he brought Mel... his fiancée.”

Sean frowned. “He brought her?”

“Yeah. Introduced her to Liberty. She was nice... too nice.”

Sean chewed slow, eyes narrowing. “After the shit you pulled? That sounds calculated.”

“Maybe. Or maybe he just wanted to show me he’s not stupid,” I said. “He watched everything I did like he was waiting for me to slip.”

“He say anything else?”

I paused. “Not directly. But he said I better not make him regret doing it.”

Sean tossed his sandwich on the plate. “That nigga might know something.”

I shook my head. “He might suspect something, but I’ on think he knows it was you.”

He stepped in closer, voice low. “Then keep it that way.”

I snatched my arm away. “Don’t talk to me like I owe you some shit.”

“You do owe me,” he snapped. “You owe me for nine years of helping raise that girl. For making sure you never had to worry about shit. For keeping your little secret tucked so tight even Kilo’s own mama ain’t sniff it out.”

I stared at him. “That was your choice. You didn’t do it for free, and you damn sure didn’t do it for love.”

He smirked. “Don’t get brand new now. I said what I said. You keep him calm. You keep Liberty out of the crossfire. I’ll handle the rest.”

I gritted my teeth. “You’re gonna get yourself killed.”

“No,” he said calmly. “I’m gone get us paid. You just make sure your baby daddy don’t figure that shit out.”

He grabbed his keys and headed for the door like he hadn’t just thrown a damn grenade in the middle of our lives.

And the worst part? I didn’t even know how to stop him.

Chapter Eighteen

Kilo

the next night...

Steam drifted from the pot as I slid the salmon onto her plate, careful not to make it too heavy.

I knew how her appetite came and went lately.

I cooked something light... Tuscan salmon, roasted broccoli and garlic mashed potatoes.

She had this thing about cornbread with everything that she ate, so a slice of cornbread complimented the meal.

I didn't say much while setting the table, just kept my movements smooth and intentional.

Glass of juice in front of her seat. Cloth napkin folded.

Candle flicked on for no reason other than ambiance.

I looked over my shoulder and saw Mel coming down the stairs slow, belly first, one hand supporting her lower back.

Crop top hugging her bump... shorts hugged this ass and thick thighs.

She looked tired, but she still looked like heaven to me.

“Smells good,” she murmured, easing into her seat.

I grabbed my plate and sat across from her. “Preciate it.”

We started eating. Not much talking at first. Just the clink of forks and the faint sound of a playlist humming low from the speaker playing old school R&B. I caught her sneaking glances at me a few times, like she was still unsure what version of me she was getting tonight.

“You been keeping food down, okay?” I asked.

She nodded. “Past couple days, yeah. I still gotta eat slow, though.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“You?”

I raised a brow. “Me?”

She shrugged. “You’ve been walking around looking like somebody stole your puppy. I’m just checking to make sure you’re still here.”

That made me crack a small grin. “I’m here, ain’t it?”

“Physically, yeah,” she muttered. “Emotionally? That’s still questionable.”

She didn’t say it with malice. Just honesty. And I took it, because she wasn’t wrong.

I leaned forward, resting my forearms on the table. “I’m trying, Mel.”

Her gaze lingered before she nodded and went back to her food. We ate in silence for a while longer until I spoke up again.

“She liked you, you know.”

Mel glanced at me. “Who?”

“Liberty.”

She didn’t respond right away, just slowly reached for her juice and took a sip.

“She asked about you when she called me,” I revealed. “Said she hopes her baby brother likes her. She also said that you were pretty, and she liked your hair.”

Mel blinked a few times, eyes shifting down to her plate.

“She’s sweet,” she said finally. “A lil’ nosy, but sweet.” she smirked.

“She liked the idea of a baby brother, too,” I added. “Lit up when you told her.”

Mel let out a soft breath and gave me a small smile. “Yeah, she did. You could tell she just... wanted to belong to something.”

I nodded. “She do.”

Mel looked up at me, her voice quieter now. “So do I.”

That hit harder than she probably meant it to. I didn’t say nothin’ at first, just sat back and took a long look at her.

I reached for her hand across the table and squeezed it.

“You do, Mel,” I said, my voice firm. “You belong to me.”

She looked down at our hands, then back at me.

That softness I hadn’t seen in weeks flickered across her face, but it didn’t erase the pain.

Not fully, but it was a start. We finished in silence.

Not heavy, but not light either. Somewhere in between.

She pushed her plate away and sat back, rubbing her belly.

I stood, grabbed our plates, and started rinsing them off.

“You want a bath?” I asked over my shoulder. “I’ll run it.”

She didn’t answer right away. When I glanced back, she was watching me.

“Yeah,” she finally said. “Okay.”

I nodded, wiped my hands, and headed upstairs.

I let the water run hot first, adding a few drops of that eucalyptus shit she liked. She’d never ask for it, but I paid attention to lil’ shit like that.

The tub filled slow. I dimmed the lights and grabbed her favorite towel—the big cream one she always reached for. When I stepped out the bathroom, she was already in the room, leaning against the dresser, hands on her belly like she was trying to

ground herself.

“You good?” I asked.

She nodded once. “Yeah.”

I crossed over, took her hand, and kissed her knuckles. “Come on.”

She followed me into the bathroom, eyes sweeping over the steam rising from the tub, the low light, the scent in the air.

I saw when it hit her—the way her shoulders dropped just a little, like she could finally exhale.

I helped her out of her clothes, slow and steady.

Lifted her crop top over her head, kissed the curve of her stomach before sliding her shorts down.

She watched me the whole time, lips parted, not saying a word.

“Step in,” I urged.

Once she was settled, I got in behind her, settling so her back was against my chest. My arms wrapped around her, one hand over her stomach, the other resting on her thigh under the water. We didn’t speak at first, just sat there, steam surrounding us, heartbeats syncing.

“You still mad at me?” I asked, voice low against her ear.

“Not right now.”

I smiled into her shoulder before kissing it.

We soaked like that for a minute. My fingers moving slow across her skin. Her head resting back against me. The silence was full but not heavy... just a comfortable silence.

Then I felt her shift. Her hand slid over mine, pulling it up to cup her breast. I moved slow, thumbing her nipple until it pebbled under my touch. She gasped, barely, but I felt it deep.

“Say the word, mama,” I murmured.

“I’ on wanna talk,” she breathed.

That was all I needed to hear. We got out the tub and I wrapped her in the towel, lifting her into my arms, and carried her to the bed.

When I laid her down, she looked up at me like she was seeing something she hadn’t seen in a long time.

My mouth found her skin like it was searching for something. I trailed kisses from her neck... her breasts... the curve of her belly. Every inch of her body was worshipped like I was trying to make up for every fucked-up thing I hadn’t done or said right.

She moaned low when I slid between her thighs. She was wet already... like she was waiting for me. I ate her slow, and with intention. Her legs trembling over my shoulders as she fisted the sheets.

“Kilo...” she whined. “Fuck...”

“I’m right here,” I growled, voice buried in her pussy.

She arched her back, trying to close her thighs around my head, but I held them open.

“Take it, mama,” I teased. “I know you ain’t tapping out already?”

She came with a loud cry, thighs clamping around me, while her hands caressed my smooth head.

I gently turned her over and slid in from the side, one hand gripping her hip, the other wrapped around her throat as I pulled her back into me.

“You gone run from me?” I grunted.

“No—”

“Good girl,” I growled, winding my hips into her.

She screamed, biting my forearm, but I didn’t let up.

“I told you. I’m right here,” I said against her ear. “Ain’t going nowhere.”

“Kilo... please...”

“What you begging for, mama?” I taunted. “What you need from me?”

She shook her head, breathless. “I...I need you. All of you.”

And she got it. Every inch. Every stroke. Every moan and growl that slipped from my mouth like a confession.

When I came, I buried my face in her neck and held her like she was the only thing holding me together. And maybe she was.

I didn't say a word when I slid out of bed. Mel was out cold, one leg over my thigh like she didn't want to let go, even in her sleep. I gently shifted her off, kissed her stomach, and grabbed my clothes. Moved slow, quiet. I didn't want her waking up—not for this.

I threw on an all-black tee and jeans. I tucked my Glock in the waistband of my jeans, slipped on my hoodie, and left out and headed toward the warehouse. By the time I got there, Buck and Stacks were already posted up.

The air inside the warehouse was thick. Not with smoke, but with the looming energy of death.

Stacks was leaned up against the wall, arms crossed.

Buck was pacing the floor, like the disturbed muthafucka he was.

My eyes zoomed in on the three fools tied to the chairs in the center of the room.

One of them was already slumped over—barely conscious, with blood dripping from his mouth.

The other one was screaming behind the duct tape with one eye swollen shut.

My eyes landed on Sean, and he held my gaze like he wasn't moments away from death. He sat up straight, smirking, like this was a game he still had a shot at winning. "Took you long enough," he spit. "Thought you was soft for a minute." He smirked.

I stepped closer and peered down at this fuck nigga. “You got something to say to me? Say that shit now,” I told him.

He grinned. “I already said it. You sitting here like everything was all good. When you found out about Liberty, you were supposed to step the fuck up and break us off for taking yo’ slack, nigga. You living good as fuck and I needed my cut of that,” he spat.

“Is this nigga retarded or some shit?” Buck quizzed. “Nigga, do you even hear yo’ self? The fuck he owe you but a fuckin’ bullet?”

“He owes me for taking care of his fuckin’ daughter!” He bucked in the chair.

“You sound dumb as fuck,” Stacks cut in. “How the fuck you mad about some shit that yo’ bitch ass family concocted? That shit really makes sense to you? You act like my brother knew about that lil’ girl.”

“He should’ve kicked off some bread when he found out.”

“So, that’s what this is about? Money?” I cut in. “You wanted fuckin’ money?”

“You damn right I did. I took care of that lil’ girl, not you!”

“And whose fault is that?” I cocked my head to the side.

“Aye, hurry this shit up. I ain’t come here to hear no fuckin’ monologue,” Buck asserted. I could tell he was getting irritated and ready to kill this nigga.

I turned my attention back to this nigga. “You know what? Had you come to me like a man, I probably would’ve looked out for yo’ pussy ass just off the strength of you doing what I couldn’t. Nah, but instead you chose to be a bitch nigga and chose the

wrong route.”

“Fuck you,” he muttered.

Instead of responding to his dumb ass, I smirked and pressed the button that was on the side of the wall.

When I did, the floor opened and slowly started lowering him and his accomplices into a sea of acid.

I watched in sheer delight at their bodies burning off the bone in a matter of minutes.

The piercing tone of their cries were satisfying.

Nobody moved. Nobody flinched. Buck lit a blunt like it was just another ordinary night. “Damn, I meant to get that nigga’s jacket,” he muttered. “That shit was nice.”

“You niggas need therapy.” Stacks shook his head as he led the way out the warehouse.

Laughing, I said. “This is the therapy.”

“Hell yeah,” Buck agreed.

And just like that, we left the warehouse. No guilt. No regrets. Just another problem eliminated.

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Chapter Nineteen

Shayna

a few days later...

Something was wrong. Sean never went this long without checking in, especially not after some reckless shit like what he did.

It'd been a full day, and I hadn't heard a damn thing.

No calls. No texts. Nothing. I paced the living room, phone in hand, checking the screen like it that would make something changed.

You good?

Hit me back.

Sean, call me.

Nothing.

My stomach twisted, and for once, it wasn't guilt. It was fear.

"Mommy, is he here yet?" Liberty asked from the stairs, swinging her feet while clutching her little backpack like she was heading to Disneyland and not just her daddy's house.

“Not yet, baby,” I said, forcing a smile. “But he’s on the way.”

She nodded and smiled wide, the same smile I used to flash when I thought everything in the world would go my way. “I can’t wait to meet everybody. Do you think my little cousin like fruit snacks?”

I bit my lip, eyes stinging. “I’m sure they do.”

That girl had been buzzing since the DNA test. Kilo hadn’t confirmed it yet, but deep down I knew. And so did Liberty. She talked about him like he was already hers. Her daddy. Her protector. Her world. And now, I was about to hand her over to a man who might’ve just killed my brother.

A knock loud hit the door, causing me to jump out of my thoughts.

Liberty shot up, squealing. “Daddy!” I moved slower. My feet felt like they were made of bricks.

When I opened the door, Kilo stood there in all black and cold, dark eyes. No smile. No softness. Just him and that quiet intensity that had always made people shut up when he walked into a room.

“Wassup,” he said, voice low.

“Hi, Daddy!” Liberty yelled, running past me to hug his waist.

He looked down at her, and just like that, that ice melted a little. His hand slid across her hair, and he nodded. “Hey, baby girl.”

“You ready?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“She got everything she need?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I handed him her bag. “Snacks, extra clothes, inhaler. It’s all in there.”

He nodded and grabbed it. Liberty bounced on her toes.

“Can I ride in the front?” she asked.

He glanced at me. I shook my head. “Not yet, baby.”

She pouted but grabbed his hand like they’d been doing this for years.

As he turned to leave, I spoke.

“Kilo.”

He looked over his shoulder.

“You seen Sean?”

He paused. Just for a second. But it was enough.

“Why would I?”

“I don’t know... I thought maybe y’all crossed paths.” I forced the words out, heart hammering.

He stared at me for a long beat before walking back up the steps—real slow—until he was close enough for me to feel the tension rolling off him.

“Why would I cross paths wit’ that nigga?”

“I been worried,” I shot back, voice sharp.

He leaned in just a little. “Then maybe you should’ve kept him out my way.”

My chest locked. “What does that mean?”

Kilo’s eyes were flat. “It means just what the fuck I said.”

Liberty’s voice cut through the tension. “Mommy! Can I bring my tablet?”

“Yeah, baby. It’s already in your bag!” I called back.

Kilo’s gaze never left mine. “I suggest you worry about Liberty now, not that bitch ass brother of yours.”

He walked back down, took Liberty’s hand, and they headed to the truck like nothing happened. Like he hadn’t just delivered a death sentence.

I closed the door with shaking hands and slid down to the floor.

He didn’t say it, but he didn’t have to. Sean was gone, and it was all Kilo’s fault.

And now, there was no turning back.

Chapter Twenty

Kilo

Liberty was talking my ear off from the second I picked her up.

She had her little bag clutched to her chest, her legs swinging from the backseat like she couldn't sit still if her life depended on it.

Mel sat up front, turned sideways with her arm draped over the seat, smiling like she couldn't help herself.

I ain't say much, just taking it all in. The sound of Liberty's voice, the way she laughed, the way she looked at Mel like she already trusted her.

That shit hit somewhere I wasn't ready for.

"Do you think my mommy will let me come again next weekend?" Liberty asked, eyes wide as she looked between the two of us.

Mel glanced back at her. "That's up to your daddy, baby."

Liberty beamed, kicking her feet again. "I like being with y'all."

I tightened my grip on the wheel. That shit wasn't supposed to feel like a punch to the chest, but it did. All that time lost... because somebody decided I wasn't supposed to know she existed. Mel reached over and squeezed my hand once before letting go.

Just enough to ground me.

“Your grandma is gone love you,” Mel told her. “Your cousin, too. They’re a lot, though. Loud and bad.”

“Like Uncle Buck?” Liberty grinned. “He’s funny.”

I huffed out a breath. “Don’t hype him up.”

“Uncle Buck said he’s gonna teach me how to keep the fuck niggas away,” she added proudly.

Mel raised a brow. “Did he now?”

“Yeah. He said we didn’t hang around those kind.”

Mel laughed. “That sounds exactly like him.”

“I’m gone fuck that nigga up. I ain know he told her that shit.”

We pulled up to my parents’ house, and before I even cut the engine, Liberty was unbuckling herself. Mel gave her a look, then reached back to help her get her things.

“You ready?” I asked, opening the door.

Liberty giggled and grabbed my hand the second she hit the ground. Her little fingers curled tight around mine, and for the first time in a long time, I felt... settled.

My mama opened the door before we even knocked.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” she breathed, hand going to her chest. “You must be

Liberty.”

Liberty nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

My mama smiled so wide I thought she was gone cry.

Inside, it was loud, like always when everybody got together.

Laughter, voices overlapping, and something frying in the kitchen.

The entire crew was there. Pops was sitting on the couch with Jet climbing all over him.

Jace and Keenan posted up by the game console.

Sophi in the corner with Kasha’s parents, holding court like usual.

Everybody paused when they saw us come in.

In a manner of seconds, Liberty was swept up in hugs and hellos.

She met everybody, one by one, and didn’t miss a beat.

She was polite, curious, and bold in that sweet way little girls could be when they felt safe.

“Where the girls at?” she asked after a while, hands on her hips.

Buck leaned down next to her. “Ain’t none, shorty. Just a bunch of bad ass lil’ niggas. Get used to it and learn how to fight if you already don’t.”

Liberty just laughed.

Stacks came over and gave me a look. “She’s already fitting in.”

“I know, right,” I muttered, eyes never leaving her.

“She likes Buck,” Mel said, coming up next to me. “Lord help us.”

“Don’t start,” I warned.

“She called him cool,” she whispered. “We’re fucked.”

Mama came and tugged my arm. “Walk with me.”

I followed her out back, the screen door creaking behind us.

“She’s beautiful,” Mama said, voice soft.

“She is,” I agreed.

“You know what I’m about to ask.”

I nodded. “The test is already done. Results in a few days.”

She gave me that look... soft but strong. “And if she’s yours?”

“Then I’m hers,” I said simply. “Whatever she needs, she got it. Ain’t no other way.”

She nodded slowly, then turned to face me. “And Mel?”

I looked down at the counter. “I’m working on it. We’ve been slowly getting back to

where we were, but it's not quite there yet."

"You lied to her."

"I know."

"You hurt her."

"I know that too."

"Then make it right, Franklin."

I nodded again. "I'm trying, Ma."

We stayed in the kitchen for a few more minutes before she pulled me into a hug and told me to stop being so damn hardheaded.

Later that night, we took Liberty home with us.

Mel showed her the room we'd been working on for her.

She had already told me her favorite color was purple, so I had the walls painted a light purple.

The white Queen sized bed sat in the middle of the room with cloud-shaped pillows, and a purple, white and blue comforter set.

A toy chest already half full, and a beanbag by the window.

Her dresser and closet was already stocked, along with her bathroom.

She had her own sixty-five inch TV mounted on the wall and a new PS5 connected to it.

Whatever she didn't have or wanted to add, she could. All she had to do was ask.

Liberty stood in the doorway, eyes wide.

"This all mine?" she asked.

Mel nodded. "All yours."

Liberty squealed and dropped her bag, running to flop on the bed. "This is so cool!"

"You need help getting ready for bed?" Mel asked.

"Can you?" Liberty looked up at her, hopeful.

Mel smiled. "Of course I can."

I watched them disappear inside of the room, the sound of their voices floating back to me like music. I stood there for a long time, hand still on the doorknob.

That little girl already belonged in every part of my life, and so did Mel. All I had to do now... was make sure I never lost either of them.

After getting Liberty situated inside of her room, Mel crawled into bed next to me and snuggled up against me.

I rolled over and pulled her close, nose buried in her hair.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“For what?”

“For loving her.”

She turned and looked at me in the dark. “She’s a part of you, so it’s easy.”

And just like that, I knew I couldn’t waste another second.

I kissed her forehead, pulled her even closer, and silently promised myself that whatever came next—I was ready.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mel

The morning of my baby shower was straight-up chaos. I woke up to a house full of noise. Nic cussing under her breath, and Kasha arguing with Sophi over which color dress she should wear. I hadn't even made it to the bathroom before I was being yanked in three different directions.

"Mel, sit yo' ass down so I can do your face," Nic ordered, brush in hand, like she was about to perform surgery.

"I just woke up," I mumbled, clutching my robe.

Kasha popped in with a bowl of fruit. "Eat this. You ain't passing out on us today."

Sophi leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "You sure you good? You look... stressed."

"I am stressed," I said, flopping into the chair. "It's like a wedding in here and I'm the damn bride."

"Well, you are the main event," Nic smirked, already dusting powder over my face.

I sighed. "I didn't even get to brush my teeth yet."

"Brush 'em later," she said without pause. "You can't have puffy eyes in pictures."

Kasha was behind me fixing my hair, and Sophi was scrolling through a checklist like a damn wedding planner.

“Y’all are insane,” I muttered.

“Yeah,” Nic said, “but we love you.”

That made me smile.

As the girls moved around, chattering about last-minute details, Sophi suddenly got quiet. Nic glanced at her, then at me.

“You good?” Nic asked her cousin.

Sophi hesitated. “Yeah, just... been thinking. My ex gets out soon.”

The room quieted.

I turned in the chair to look at her. “Damn. I forgot about that.”

“I try to forget too,” Sophi muttered.

Kasha stepped closer. “You worried he might try something?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I ain’t heard from him since he went in, but I just... I don’t trust him. And I don’t want him popping up when I least expect it.”

Nic’s face tightened. “You know we got you, right? Ain’t nobody touching you with us around.”

I nodded. “You’re family, Soph. If something goes down, you need to tell us. Don’t

try to handle that shit by yourself.”

She gave a soft smile. “I know. Just didn’t want to bring drama to y’all, not with everything else going on.”

“Well, now it’s our business,” Kasha said. “You must’ve forgotten who your cousins are, so let him try if he wants to.”

We all shared a moment of silence, the kind that didn’t need words to feel strong.

“Alright,” Nic clapped her hands. “Back to it. Our girl’s about to show out.”

The house quieted for a split second, just enough for me to hear the sound of the front door opening.

Heavy footsteps. Then smaller, excited ones running through the hallway.

“Mama Mel!” Liberty’s voice rang out.

I barely had time to react before her little arms were wrapped around my waist, her face lit up like sunshine.

“Hey, baby!” I laughed, crouching slightly to hug her. “You look so pretty!”

She twirled in her blue dress, her curly hair bouncing. “Daddy, let me pick out my own dress! And I got on lip gloss like Auntie Nic!”

Nic came around the corner, raising an eyebrow. “I know that’s right, baby. Lemme see?”

Liberty giggled and grabbed her hand like they'd been besties for years.

Kilo walked in behind her, tall, calm, and all-black as usual. Even though things were still healing between us, the look he gave me was soft. The kind of look that said everything he hadn't had the words for lately.

Right behind him came Buck and Stacks. Buck went straight to Nic, smacked her ass, and gave her a kiss like he hadn't just seen her this morning. Stacks pulled Kasha into a hug from behind and whispered something in her ear that made her smirk.

"Y'all act like you ain't seen us in a year," Kasha said.

"I missed you," Stacks replied with no shame.

Sophi rolled her eyes. "Y'all need help."

But even she was smiling.

I turned back to Liberty. "You ready for the party?"

She nodded quickly. "I'm gone help you open gifts! Daddy said I could."

Kilo stepped in. "I told her only if she behaves."

"I always behave," Liberty argued, hands on her hips.

We all laughed. That little girl was definitely a part of this family, and was stealing my heart every time I saw her.

The ride to Kilo's parents' house was loud and full of energy. I sat in the backseat with Liberty while Kilo drove. She asked a million questions—how many people would there be, if her baby brother would cry a lot, and if she could help change diapers?

“Let's hold off on the diapers, baby,” I said with a laugh.

Kilo caught my eyes through the rearview mirror, and it was in that moment I saw the love that had never left.

Mrs. Shaunie had the house decorated beautifully. Baby blue balloons, white linen, and custom signs that read ‘Welcome Baby Teddy’ were everywhere. The smell of baked mac and cheese and lemon cake filled the air.

As soon as we walked in, Liberty's eyes widened.

“This all for him?”

I nodded. “It is.”

“Wow,” she whispered.

The whole family was already there, and his mama was front and center, arms wide open.

“There's my babies,” she said, pulling me into a hug. “Look at my grandbaby. You look so pretty,” she complimented.

“Thank you, Gigi.”

“You look just like your daddy,” she smiled.

Buck swooped in after. “Wassup, shorty.”

Liberty ran into his arms like she’d known him forever, when he was just at the house. He spun her around, making her laugh.

The shower went better than I expected. My mom was there, fussing over everything. My cousin Harlow came in place of Saint and Eve. Eve had just given birth a few weeks ago and was still recovering. Harlow made sure I stayed hydrated and had plenty of pictures.

We played games, opened gifts, and took a hundred photos. Liberty sat next to me the whole time, announcing who the gifts were from, like she was hosting a game show.

Then, right as I was opening a box of baby clothes, I felt a sharp pain that caused me to freeze in place.

“Mel?” Kilo said, leaning forward.

I looked at him, then at Nic, who was already standing.

“My water just broke.”

“Oh, shit,” he uttered. “Shit. Uhm, Ma!”

Everyone sprang into action. Kasha grabbed my purse. While Buck was yelling for the keys, Sophi was ushering the kids into the back room. Harlow jumped into action, helping with the kids. Kilo didn’t even panic. He just scooped me up and told me to breathe.

“Let’s go,” he said calmly, carrying me toward the truck.

I clutched his arm, heart pounding.

Sophi volunteered to stay behind with the kids, and Harlow stayed with her. Nic rode with Buck. Stacks and Kasha followed in his car.

The hospital wasn’t far, but the contractions were coming quick. Kilo held my hand the entire time, never letting go.

Hours later... after screaming, pushing, and a lot of pain—I gave birth to our son... Theodore Ky’Shaun DeLuca. He was healthy and looked just like his damn daddy. The moment they laid him on my chest, I cried like a baby.

Kilo kissed my forehead. “You did it, baby. You did good.”

But before the moment could settle, two police officers stepped into the room.

“Franklin DeLuca?”

Kilo’s body went tense.

“The fuck you want?” he questioned, standing tall.

“We need to bring you in for questioning.”

He didn’t flinch. Just looked at me.

“I’ll be back,” he mumbled. “Don’t worry.”

He kissed our son, kissed me, then walked out without a single fight.

Buck and Stacks were right behind him.

I was left there holding our baby... who wasn't even an hour old, while his father got escorted out by policemen.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kilo

I didn't even get to hold my son for a full five minutes before they came in. Two plainclothes detectives, badges out, mouths tight. They already had that look on their faces, like they already had a story in their head, and I was just supposed to play the villain in it.

When we got to the station, my lawyer, Ellis, was already there. Sharp suit, icy stare, and no patience.

Inside the room, they started their questions.

"You know a man named Sean Turner?" The one named Reece asked.

I leaned back in the chair. "Never heard of him."

He gave me a look like he was testing me. "He's Shayna Turner's brother."

I shrugged. "That don't mean I know the nigga."

"You didn't recognize him when he came to your dispensary?" the second detective—Smith—asked.

I kept my face cold. "Didn't know who he was. Could've been anybody. Shit happens all the time in this city."

Reece tapped his pen. “You’re saying you have no clue why Shayna would accuse you of doing something to her brother?”

“I ain saying shit.”

Smith leaned in. “You sure about that?”

Ellis cut in, voice sharp. “My client is not obligated to speculate. He already stated he doesn’t know Mr. Turner. Unless you’re charging him, we’re done here.”

There was a long pause before Reece sighed and shut his folder.

“You’re free to go. For now.”

I stood, fixing my collar. “I’ll be seeing y’all ’round.”

When I walked out of the precinct, Buck was leaning against the Range, arms crossed, jaw tight. Stacks was opposite him with his face balled on.

Soon as I stepped out, Buck snapped. “You good?”

“I’m out, ain’t it?”

“What they say?” Stacks asked.

I ran it down. Told ’em Shayna put a bug in their ear about her bitch ass brother.

“I told you that bitch was trouble,” Buck spat.

“Yeah, well, it’s time to fix the problem.”

“What you tryna do?” Stacks asked.

I looked between both of them. “Take me to her house.”

Stacks stood up slow. “You sure?”

“I been sure since she opened her mouth. She not breathing another night.”

One kick and we were inside... fuck knocking. Shayna was in the living room, suitcase half-packed, phone in her hand. She froze when she saw us—Buck first, then Stacks, then me walking in behind.

“The fuck you going, Shay?”

“I—Kilo, wait. Just let me explain—”

“No need.”

I stepped closer. She backed up against the wall.

“You tried to set me up. Put the cops on me after your brother tried to rob me. You thought this was a fuckin’ game?”

“I didn’t know—”

“Save it,” Buck cut in, face hard. “You knew everything. You played the victim. You used Liberty like a damn pawn.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “I just wanted help—”

“You could’ve asked,” I snapped. “But instead, you brought that bullshit to my door.”

Shayna looked at me, desperate. “I didn’t mean—”

“Nah,” I interrupted, voice sharp. “You meant every move you made. And now, you gone pay for it.”

She screamed when I pulled the piece out, but I didn’t flinch.

“I hope you enjoyed those first nine years because that’s all you gone get.”

One shot, and she dropped like dead weight, mouth still open in shock.

Stacks stood behind me, quiet. Buck stared down at her like he was watching trash rot.

“You want me to call cleanup?” Stacks asked.

I nodded. “Make it disappear.”

back at the hospital...

Mel was dozing when I came in. Her hand rested on our son’s little cap. He looked just like me. I sat down beside the bed, exhaling for what felt like the first time all night.

She stirred. “You okay?”

“I am now,” I murmured.

She looked at me, concern written all over her face. “What happened?”

“She set me up,” I said. “She told the police that I had something to do with her brother disappearing. I handled it, though.”

Mel was quiet, then nodded once. “Handled?”

“Handled,” I confirmed. “It’s done.”

She didn’t ask how. She didn’t need to. I kissed her forehead, then looked down at my son. Nobody was ever gone threaten what was mine again.

Not without consequences.

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Epilogue

Kilo

wedding day...

For once, my mind wasn't running, wasn't filled with shit I had to fix or enemies to handle. Today was about Mel. About us. About the life we built from ashes.

I stood in the suite at the Richmond Royale Hotel, fixing my cufflinks in the mirror. My tux was black on black. Benny was running around in his little suit, refusing to stay still. Jet was posted on the couch with a juice box, watching cartoons after his daddy threatened his lil' ass.

Stacks was leaned against the wall, arms folded, watching the chaos with a grin.

"Boy, sit down somewhere 'fore you spill something on that damn tux," he told Benny.

"Ain't gone spill nothing!" Benny shouted, grinning wide, locs bouncing.

Buck was on the other side of the room, pacing while he talked on the phone. Something about the catering. He was always doing the most—even on my damn day.

"Tell them if the crab cakes ain't hot, I'm flipping the whole fuckin' table over," he growled into the phone, then turned to me. "You good?"

I nodded, adjusting my tie. “Yeah.”

“You don’t look nervous,” Jace said from the armchair, flipping through his phone.

“I ain’t.”

“That’s ’cause he knows she the one,” Stacks added. “Real ones don’t get cold feet.”

I gave them a slight smirk. They weren’t wrong.

Keenan came in then, straightening his collar. “Gigi said bring y’all asses.” Buck smacked him upside the head because he was closer, but we did as he said because I didn’t want no smoke wit’ my mama.

I took one last look in the mirror before following behind my brothers and nephews.

The ballroom at the Richmond Royale looked like something out of a dream. Dark florals, gold accents, candles lit like firelight kissed every table. The aisle was lined with petals in a sea of blue and cream, with an arch at the end that looked like it belonged in a fairytale.

But I wasn’t thinking about none of that.

Not once my eyes landed on my forever. She stepped into the doorway slow, with Keenan escorting her as a soft instrumental version of ‘If This World Were Mine’ playing low.

Her veil was light, floating like it wasn’t even there.

Her dress hugged her body just enough, classy but bold, like her.

Cropped sleeves, shimmer trailing behind her like she came from the sky herself.

She locked eyes with me and everything stopped. Every bit of pain, every secret, every fuckin' ghost in my past—it all faded.

Tears burned behind my eyes, but I didn't let them drop. I just swallowed the lump in my throat and stood taller as she came down the aisle on her brother Keenan's arm. He kissed her cheek before placing her hand in mine.

"Don't make me fuck you up, 'bout my sister," his bad ass said before walking off to take a seat by his mama.

"You ready?" I whispered.

Mel nodded, eyes already glassy. "Been ready."

The ceremony started. The words were traditional, but they hit different coming from her lips. And when it was my turn, I didn't just read the vows... I spoke from the place in me only she had access to.

"If there's a question of my heart, you got it," I told her, voice low but strong.

"You always had it, Mel. Even when I ain't know what to do with it.

You held me down when I couldn't give you the full version of me.

When I came home, you gave me a reason to be better.

You gave me love, a family, a second chance.

I don't take that lightly. I never will. "

Tears slid down her cheeks.

“I got you. Through every storm, every high, every low. I love you. And I swear to protect you and our babies with everything in me. That’s my vow.”

By now she couldn’t stop the tears if she wanted to, as well as the other women in the room.

Once we exchanged rings, the officiant pronounced us husband and wife.

When I kissed her, it was deep. Full of every promise I’d ever make.

The crowd cheered as we made our way back down the aisle, toward our future... toward our forever.

Reception flowed smoothly. We walked in as husband and wife and cheers erupted around the room.

Benny danced like the ain’t have no sense, Jet ran straight to Nic and threw his juice box at her lap, and Buck cursed him out while laughing the whole time.

This was what was important to us...family... dysfunction and all.

Saint’s sister Harlow came up to hug us, and my mama pulled Mel into her arms for a long time. There were so many faces, so many voices, but through it all, she never left my side.

Our first dance came next. The DJ slowed it down. ‘Matrimony’ by Wale played soft in the background as I pulled her into my arms.

She rested her head against my chest. “You didn’t cry.”

I chuckled. “Almost. You looked too damn good.”

Her lips curved into a smile. “I love you.”

“I love you more, mama.”

We swayed slow, wrapped in the fog that surrounded us. My life hadn’t been perfect—far from it, but right now, everything felt whole.

“I never thought I’d get this,” I said, voice quiet.

“This?” she asked.

“Peace. Family. You.”

She turned in my arms, looking up at me. “You earned this.”

“Nah,” I muttered. “I fought for it. Damn near bled for it. But you—you made it worth fighting for.”

She rested her hand on my chest. “And I always will.”

I kissed her again. Slow. Like I had all the time in the world.

Because now? I did.

Later that night, back in our suite, she was asleep—curled beside me, breathing even, soft.

I stared at the ceiling, the weight of everything we'd been through pressing in.

Shayna. Sean. Prison. All the pain that came before her.

Mel never asked me to be perfect—just present. Just honest. And I'd failed more than once.

But I made a promise, and now I had every intention of keeping it.

I got a daughter who's smart as hell, a son who'll look up to me, and a woman who took every scar I carried and never flinched.

So yeah—if there's a question of my heart... she got it... always did... always will.

The End...