



It's Love I'm After

Author: *Riley Baxter*

Category: Romance

Description: Chaniya O'Neal

My mother won't release me from her mistake. I was my ex's unplanned side chick and his something to do. I'm struggling to forgive myself for my reckless decision nearly six years ago. Then I encountered him, the sexy stranger whose presence gave me a flicker of hope. The problem is . . . my scars. Is he worth taking a chance with?

Germane Malone

My ex won't get the hint that our time has ended, no matter how much I ignore her. My sister fell into the trap, placing me in a situation where I needed an immediate replacement. A minute in her presence had me imagining more than a plus-one at my sister's wedding. The odds are stacked against me, but I've never been one to quit before achieving success. If only I could convince her to give me a chance to show her that she can trust me with everything. We've had two prior encounters. Will the third run-in be the charm?

Will Chaniya and Germane push beyond the haze of uncertainty to pursue a love they've never known? Find out within the pages of It's Love I'm After.

Total Pages (Source): 25

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

CHANIYA KATIA O'NEAL

The O'Neal Chat

Nana: Ain't that boy too old for a rat party? Y'all need to stop being so cheap.

Kenyatta: And is. I keep telling Niya she gonna turn my little nigga into a pussy.

Nana: You better mind your mouth, Kenyatta Jenkins.

Turquoise: Leave my baby alone. He can go to Chuck E Cheese as long as his heart desires.

Gina: Tuh. I bet I don't keep coming to see that fake ass rat with dingy clothes. Niya needs to stop with the bullshit. Oops, sorry, Nana.

Nana: I see you heathens are gonna make me break out the Dial.

Kenyatta: I'll be cool, Nana. Too much Dial growing up is why my left eye is lazy, and my mouth stays diving into a random chick's pu—never mind.

Turquoise: *laughing emoji*

Gina: *slaps forehead* I hate you, Yatta.

The family group chat has been buzzing since I sent the message about having Caleb's fifth birthday party there.

Unbeknownst to them, I had already told my baby this would be his last party at Chuck E.

Cheese. I wish I could say I didn't see being a single mother in the future, but I had two things working against me.

I come from a generation of women who are single mothers.

The second thing is that too much alcohol had me dropping it low and spreading it wide.

Here I am, a thirty-two-year-old mother of a son whose father is as much of a mystery as whoever my father is.

It's crazy that I got pregnant after attending a house party for fraternity and sorority people when I only had a high school diploma.

Yet, my dumb ass let my excitement over being invited to the frat party take me out of my head.

Now, I'm trying to overcompensate with Caleb because I slept with three men at the same time and have no clue which of them is the father.

To make matters worse, all three of them have become ghosts because I haven't seen them since that night.

However, Caleb will never feel his father's absence because I will always make things shake for him.

My guilt over being too drunk to stop the reckless sexual encounter is also a constant reminder of my baby being without a male role model.

My cousin, Kenyatta, isn't the person to give Caleb good advice because of how he lives his life.

Kenyatta has babies all around the city and baby mamas popping up like dandelions in Nana's yard, so I limit Caleb's time with him.

I don't need Caleb picking up any of what Kenyatta is putting down.

bzz, bzz

Nana: Ms. Chaniya, we've been chit-chatting, and you ain't said anything yet. Where are you, girl?

Kenyatta: Probably hiding, Nana.

Turquoise: Or ignoring us like I would be doing because y'all are so out of pocket today.

Nana: Ain't nobody ask you to open those loose lips, Quoise.

Turquoise: You got it, Nana. See y'all at the party.

Chile, I'm ignoring y'all because there isn't a single reason for me to chime into this foolish conversation. Nobody is paying for a thing, yet everybody's mouth is running. Rolling my eyes, I exit the family group chat and lock my phone.

zzt, zzt, zzt

"If this is one of my cousins calling me with mess, I'm hanging up.

I ain't got time for the extra today. None of their asses is about to ruin my baby's

day,” I rant when my phone rings before I can set it down.

A smile upturns my lips when I see the name flashing on the screen, causing me to quickly answer. “Hey.”

“Ain’t nobody calling for you. Where is my baby? I want to sing to him before the party,” Isis asks.

Isis Toles is one of my best friends and has been for as long as I can remember.

She was with me the day I found out I was pregnant and has been holding me down since.

It never fails that regardless of what I plan for Caleb’s birthday, Isis calls to sing to him beforehand.

She says she likes for him to know how much she adores him without all the pomp and circumstance of the party attendees.

“Hold on.” Pulling the phone away from my ear, I place it on speaker before calling my baby. “Caleb! Caleb!”

A bright smile slides into place when I hear little feet rushing toward me, causing me to turn to see the little person capable of brightening every day for me.

“Yes, Mommy,” Caleb says, stopping in front of me.

Staring into the brown orbs of my toffee-skinned son causes warmth, butterflies, and adoration to flow through my body.

Caleb stands before me in an all-black short set with black tennis shoes.

The little waves in his freshly cut hair and the earring resting in his right ear remind me of Kenyatta's light influence on my son.

Kenyatta takes Caleb to the barber shop so I don't have to do it.

Kenyatta claims that mothers complicate things in a barber shop, so Caleb would be better going with him instead of me.

After a draining back-and-forth conversation, I gave in and let Kenyatta have the task for now.

Kenyatta is also the reason Caleb has an earring in his ear, and I nearly burst a vessel in my eye upon seeing it after one of their barber shop trips.

I have gotten used to the adornment on my baby, only because Caleb loves it.

"Happy Bir—th—day to you," Isis sings, snapping me out of my admiration of my son, who's becoming a big boy right before my eyes.

Caleb immediately giggles upon hearing Isis because of the dramatic way she's singing Happy Birthday to him. Shaking my head, I hold the phone, letting Isis complete her personal serenade that Caleb enjoys. Drunk night or not, Caleb O'Neal is the best thing to ever happen to me.

Dedrick: Tell my little nigga, Caleb, I said happy born day. Call me so I can break your back. I know you miss me while you're over there playing hard and shit.

"This nigga," I whisper, locking my phone without acknowledging the text.

Dedrick Ward is my boyfriend who's on his way to becoming my ex.

We've been arguing the last week, and he hasn't gotten the hint that I'm over his bullshit, despite me ignoring his calls and texts.

Dedrick doesn't seem to understand that his controlling ways are a turnoff, no matter how many times I have to tell him that I'm not attracted to a man who likes to know my every waking moment.

Ugh, it's so irritating, especially when I'm already stressed as a single mother.

"I told the manager that the rat smells like old mop water and stale cheese. The old biddy had the audacity to tell me she didn't smell anything," Riele rants while taking a seat across from me before taking several bites of her pizza.

Riele Parker is my other best friend, and I love her like a sister my mama should have given birth to. Riele is the spark plug to my low flame and has been adding to my life since our friendship began.

"I hate to break it to you, boo, but most things these days have your nose twisting," I provide while looking toward her lap.

Riele is nearly nine months pregnant and has been dealing with heightened senses since the beginning of her pregnancy.

It doesn't take much for things to disturb her nasal passage, so I'm not surprised that she complained to the manager about Chucky.

I gagged the minute the person in the custom costume for this establishment came to perform for us.

I should have known Riele wouldn't take it lightly when she got a whiff of the pungent smell.

“Ooh, honey, no. Baby, you need some Tussy. How are you running ’round here smelling like that? My Lord, . . . you funky,” Nana rants loudly, causing me to see her fanning her face while talking to Chucky, who’s circulating at the table of people next to ours.

“Mama!” Ma shouts, trying to grab Nana’s arm.

“Don’t mama, me. I know you smell that stank, Vernise,” Nana returns, frowning.

Laughter sounds around our table as my family gets a kick out of Nana’s shenanigans, making me thankful for the kids being back in the play area.

One thing about Edna O’Neal that most of us value within the family is that she doesn’t pull any punches with anybody.

Nana tells it like it is and doesn’t care who her words hit when they leave her mouth.

“That’s not nice though, Mama,” Mom shakes her head, trying to usher Nana away from Chucky.

I fight not to roll my eyes at Mom, trying to come to the rescue of someone else. She has no problem being kind or merciful to everyone but me.

“See, I told Chaniya. I tried to tell the double chin heffa who manages this raggedy place, but she acted like her nose is broken or something.” Riele interjects.

“Where is your husband?” I ask, looking around the space, searching for the one person who can reel Riele in.

Riele and East have been married for five years, and he balances my girl like nobody’s business.

I love the way East not only handles Riele but loves her too.

According to Riele, East is the jelly to her buttered toast, whatever that means.

The two of them met through their cousins, who were friends and felt they would be perfect for each other.

Now they're expecting their first baby who I can't wait to spoil.

"I sent him to get me some more nachos. Your god baby loves the bland cheese and salty chips," Riele provides.

"Whew, I'm tired as hell," Isis says before plopping into the empty seat beside me.

"You're the one insisting on keeping up with Caleb like he ain't got more energy than Red Bull. Hell, if I wasn't playing weeble wobble with every step, I wouldn't entertain my baby like that. Caleb tires me out just watching him," Riele adds.

"That's exactly why I sent Turquoise's sons with him. I need my energy for the after-party when all this is over. I ain't about to play with Caleb," I say, smirking.

"Wait, where's the after-party, cuz?" Kenyatta cuts into the conversation.

"My all-purpose patio with some wine, an edible, and some Earth, Wind, and Fire playing," I provide.

"You and that weak edible. I'd rather smoke a blunt than indulge in that baby high you be messing with," Kenyatta says.

"Tuh. Don't knock it until you try it. The smoke shop I buy from has these fire-ass Rice Krispie edibles, and I'm addicted to them," I inform him.

“That reminds me, Chaniya. I need a refill.” Nana interjects.

“Aw, hell nah. You got Nana eating edibles, Niya?” Kenyatta asks with bulging eyes that bounce between Nana and me.

“You better quit playing with me. A little high ain’t never hurt nobody. I get the best sleep after eating two of those rice treats. Don’t be trying to block my blessings, boy.” Nana waves Kenyatta off, causing Isis, Riele, and me to laugh at her antics.

“You better tell him, Nana. If I could take them while pregnant, I would be high right now,” Riele says just as East returns to the table with her nachos.

“Thank the Lord, because I can’t deal with you when you’re in the stars,” East says, handing Riele the plate before kissing her lovingly on the cheek.

“Let me go check on Caleb.” I walk from the table to check on Caleb, hoping he is ready to wrap up this party.

The loudness in the room is indicative of the enjoyment of the children taking part in whatever event brought them to this establishment.

Light energy flows through me when I take in the smiles on the kid’s faces that I pass.

My steps falter when I reach the outside of the ball pit where Caleb is playing.

A man is holding a little girl whose face is wet with tears, comforting her while kissing the dainty finger she’s holding in front of him.

My chest pinches when I see Caleb watching the display with a somber expression.

“Hey, baby,” I say, grabbing Caleb’s attention while fighting the tears swelling within me upon seeing Caleb’s slight smile.

“I want to go home, Mommy,” Calebs tells me once he’s standing before me inside the ball pit.

Staring at my world, I nod to acknowledge his words because if I reply verbally, I won’t be able to contain the sob, ready to break free. Damn, Chaniya. You really messed this up .

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE KADEEM MALONE

“ A ye, G man. What’s good, bro?” My boy Desi greets me once I answer the phone.

Desi Williams has been my best friend since our sandbox days and my man one hundred grand.

He’s also my only friend who I’ve had to fight before working to fix our friendship.

If Desi was of the opposite sex, we would be the perfect inspiration for a breakup-to-makeup love ballad.

Yet, I wouldn’t trade him because he’s never ceased to have my back whenever I need him.

“Chilling, man. I needed this day off because my ass has been staring at more open vaginas than my eyes can stand. I’m tired and need today to breathe more than amniotic fluids. What’s good with you?”

I’m not sure how my thirty-year-old ass got into the field I’m in, but despite my griping, I love my job.

As a physician’s assistant, I get the opportunity to practice medicine without having the responsibility of holding the title.

I work at Baxter Medical Center and tend to float around every available department because I love variety.

However, for the last ten months, I've been working in gynecology, assisting doctors with birthing babies.

Getting the opportunity to help mothers bring new life into the world is something I didn't think I would enjoy.

Yet, it's one of the best things I've done since obtaining my credentials.

"I can dig it. Although, I'm wondering when you're gonna get tired of working with the gynie squad. You couldn't pay me to push my fingers into pussy that I'm not making cum," Desi states.

"This is why you stay in trouble. What do you want, though?"

"You gotta talk to Nay's ass, dawg. She's tripping, and I'm tired of going back and forth with her stubborn ass."

Chardonnay, or Nay as Desi calls her, is my cousin and the woman he entertains, which is the root cause of some of our past fallouts.

I tried telling Desi to leave my cousin alone, but his stupid ass got lost in the family curse, .

. . big butts. The problem occurred when Desi attempted to be with Chardonnay and decided to explore her options.

Chardonnay was raised by my uncle Cooper who taught her that relationships are for suckers.

Uncle Cooper not only got left at the altar by Chardonnay's mother, but she also left him to raise Chardonnay.

Her actions made Uncle Cooper bitter, which spilled over into how he raised Chardonnay.

“Come on, G. Say something. Your cousin got me sitting outside her condo, looking like a simp. I can’t keep fighting for this girl like this,” Desi says.

Desi has been around too long to not understand that Chardonnay isn’t gonna change her ways until she’s ready to do so, no matter how much he pleads with her.

It’s the main reason I warned him not to go there with my cousin, but a hard head makes a soft behind.

Therefore, Desi is in the fuck around and find out phase of his mating dance with Chardonnay.

“Remember what you said after our last fallout. Now you gotta stand on that rah-rah foolishness with ten toes down. This situation is above me. I’ll holla, though.” Disconnecting the call, I drop my phone in my lap, returning to *Bad Boys For Life* .

“I don’t know why that boy doesn’t leave Chardonnay alone. They’ve been mismatched from the beginning. My son got that girl acting like she’s a man without feelings, and poor Desi didn’t see it coming,” Grandma Jolene speaks up, reminding me of her presence before I can focus on the movie.

Jolene Malone is my father’s mother and the woman I value as much as I do my mother. Jolene keeps to herself and doesn’t intervene in anybody’s business for the most part. She generally speaks her peace and moves on, which is more than likely what she’s doing now.

“Mhm,” I utter noncommittally.

“A man has gotta know when to drop the cards and take the loss on the chin. That’s what Desi needs to do because Chardonnay is gonna keep running over him like a freight train.

Poor girl ain’t had a womanly instinct since she was born.

Cooper refused to let me help with her, so it’s too late for me to try to change her now.

It’s a shame too. Chardonnay is such a pretty girl, but she’s gonna lose all her wits running around here living out her Cooper Malone instructions. ”

Come on, Grandma Jolene. I ain’t trying to consume myself with business that ain’t mine. Desi told me to mind the business that pays me, so I intend to do just that.

“Why would you invite her, though, Sis?”

Staring at Essence, I try to control the inferno boiling within me from the information she just shared with me.

Essence is the baby between her and me, which often means she gets her way with our parents and me.

At this moment, I want to wring her neck because I’m not sure why she made the decision to invite my ex to her upcoming wedding.

If I had it my way, the last thing Essence would be doing at twenty-one is getting married.

Yet, neither of our parents sees a problem with her age or the fact that her fiancé is eight years older than her.

Essence hasn't told me where she met the dude, but I think she's too young and inexperienced to make a lifetime commitment of this magnitude.

"I felt bad for her because she knows about the wedding and looked so hurt when she saw me having brunch with my bridesmaids," Essence informs me.

"That was just her way of playing on your sympathies, baby. If nothing else, Sherita is a master manipulator who wants nothing more than to get your brother to fall for her foolishness." Ma interjects, taking the words from my mouth like she has a mirror inside my brain, reading my exact thoughts.

"Not to mention, she's an opportunist who desires to snag a man to take care of her. My son ain't about to fall for the okey doke as long as I'm living," Dad adds before I have a chance to speak on Ma's statement.

I should have known that spending quality time with Grandma Jolene would lead to unplanned visits from my parents and sister. Yet, I love Grandma Jolene's company too much to worry about the three of them interrupting the bonding between Grandma Jolene and me.

"I don't know why y'all came in here with all this negative energy, interrupting our flow.

Essence, you know that Sherita set your gullible too nice behind up.

I've been dying to slather oil on her like Crisco, so don't be mad if I wreck your wedding if the demon shows her cards during your nuptials.

" Grandma Jolene interjects, pulling out the travel-size bottle of Holy oil she keeps on her at all times.

A low chuckle escapes my mouth at the look of determination on Grandma Jolene's face, because it wouldn't be the first time she's threatened to bathe Sherita in oil.

After dealing with Sherita's crazy antics, I should have let Grandma Jolene have her way before ending the relationship.

Yet, subjecting myself to Sherita's split personalities any longer wouldn't allow me to keep progressing in a dead end situation.

Messing with Sherita Albert, I plan to take my time with the next woman I allow in my space romantically.

ding

Sherita Albert has tagged you in a post on Facebook

"See, now you got this crazy ass girl tagging me in posts because you wanted to be nice," I say, looking at Essence before going to social media to see what's awaiting me.

Sherita Malone-Albert

Don't tell me God doesn't answer prayers. I'm one step closer to securing my blessings with that man. Haha, take that haters... he's coming back home.

#myman #myworld #foreverus

"If delusional and needs medication is a person, Sherita would be the spokesperson. See what the hell you started?" Turning my phone so Essence can see the post from Sherita, I stare daggers into my little sister's gullible ass.

“Sorry, Gernayne. I didn’t think to clear it with you before inviting her,” Essence says, hanging her head.

“Hm. That’s the problem, and now I have to find a way to avoid cuckoo at all costs. Thanks a lot, Sis.” Walking out of the living room, I head to my room to cool down so I don’t wind up shaking some sense into my baby sister.

“Why the long face, sweetie? Whatever it is can’t be that bad. Cheer up. Brighter days are ahead,” Nurse Lucy says when I exit the employee locker room the next day.

In typical Nurse Lucy fashion, she doesn’t slow her strides to receive an answer to her inquiry, which causes me to shake my head and continue to my destination.

My mood isn’t the best because Sherita made another post on Facebook sharing an old picture of the two of us.

People were celebrating our reconciliation despite having any confirmation from me, which pissed me off.

It took every single sense the good Lord gave me to stop myself from responding to the bullshit.

Like the idiot I am, I got on Facebook this morning, only to see that the post had over three hundred comments and nearly five hundred reactions.

“Unless you want those expecting mommies to chew you up and spit you out, I suggest you change that frown into a pleasant smile,” Dr. Carpenter suggests once I reach my destination roughly ten minutes later.

“Oh, don’t trip. You know those women can’t resist my handsome face, frowning or not,” I tell Dr. Carpenter before sitting in the empty chair beside her.

Gladys Carpenter is one of the best doctors to ever practice obstetrics and gynecology at Baxter Medical Center.

Working alongside her has been one of the most extraordinary things in my career, because Dr. Carpenter ensures she supervises and teaches me.

It's one of the reasons I've been working in the baby department for so long, but I'll deny it if anyone asks me because I want to keep Dr. Carpenter to myself.

If others knew how thorough she was, they'd be trying to be a part of her team, and I can't have that.

"Bigheaded much?" Dr. Carpenter smirks with her left brow hiking before returning to the monitor she's watching.

"Mhm. Mama said it ripped her from the rooter to the tooter when I was born," I reply, causing Dr. Carpenter to laugh while covering her mouth.

"You're a mess, Dr. Malone."

A warm smile upturns my lips at the moniker Dr. Carpenter has been calling me since I first worked with her. No matter how many times I tell her it doesn't fit, she waves me off and continues calling me the unfitting name.

"How many babies are we expecting today?" I ask.

"Chile, only God knows. We have about a dozen women here, but some might need to go home if nothing happens within the next few hours."

"Hm. Do any of them need anything I can provide?"

“Maybe. Check on Ms. Cline in room 229. She might benefit from your charms since her child’s father is MIA.”

Shaking my head, I stand, tap Dr. Carpenter on her shoulder, and head toward the room where Ms. Cline is laboring.

Dr. Carpenter says this isn’t Ms. Cline’s first or second rodeo.

It’s also not the first time I’ll be meeting Ms. Cline, because she was here two nights ago experiencing Braxton Hicks, and we had to send her home.

I met the child’s father when he rushed the nurses to discharge Ms. Cline because WrestleMania was on, and he was missing it.

To know his ass chose to not show up with Ms. Cline pisses me off.

“I see you’re back. Will today be the day?” I ask Ms. Cline after entering her room five minutes later.

“I hope so. I’m tired of being pregnant. This baby is stubborn, just like his daddy.” Ms. Cline’s voice is raspy, and her face is beet red with exhaustion shining within her eyes.

“Alright. Let me check you and see if he’s tired of keeping you waiting.” Pulling a pair of latex gloves from the box, I head to the foot of the bed to check her cervix for dilation.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

CHANIYA

“ I ’m not sure why we keep having these same conversations. I’m not ready to move in with you, nor am I comfortable with you having sleepovers at my house. I don’t want Caleb to get the wrong idea about what’s going on. I also want to make sure that Caleb understands that lying up with random?—”

“Hold the fuck on, Chaniya. I ain’t some random nigga, and Caleb is cool with me.

How can we work on strengthening our shit if you keep throwing up these bogus ass roadblocks?

I said I’m sorry about tracking your location.

You know I love your ass, and I hate when you don’t tell me where you’re going or what’s happening when you get there,” Dedrick explains, causing me to shake my head at his possessive ass.

Every day I continue engaging in this relationship with Dedrick, I feel less like the independent woman I’ve always been.

I honestly don’t know why I’m still dating Dedrick, because the more he talks, the more irritating he becomes.

I think sleeping with Dedrick before knowing his character or background is why I’m in the situation.

Dedrick comes from a long line of men who think tracking their women and keeping them on a tight leash is acceptable.

The first time I met Dedrick's parents, I found out that his mother was forced to quit her job after having Dedrick's older brother.

Hearing Dedrick's father, Dedrick's brother, and Dedrick quoting a woman's purpose like some sort of mantra should have been my cue to end the budding relationship.

Hell, I'm about to consider paying a random woman to entice Dedrick into her bed so he can deem her worthy of his bullshit and break up with me.

"How many children do you have?" I ask.

"None. How is that relevant to this conversation, though?"

"Your question just proved my point without me speaking on it, but let me clarify for you. You have no clue how important it is to not confuse young children with false narratives. You and I aren't married, no matter how often I've let you slip between my legs.

Therefore, I don't want to confuse my impressionable son with untruths.

In the two years we've been dating, you only tolerate Caleb, which makes it easy for me to keep him away from you.

I'm also not looking for a man who can only occasionally entertain my son. "

beep, beep

"Hold on. I need to answer this call."

“Who the fuck is calling you, Chaniya?” Dedrick barks, making me roll my eyes before answering my other line.

“Hey, Mom. Is everything okay with Caleb?”

“Of course it is. I know how to take care of a child, Chaniya Katia. You’re proof of my capabilities.”

Rubbing my temples, I close my eyes, not up for a debate with Mom after going comment for comment with Dedrick.

“I know, Mom. What can I do for you? Dedrick is on the other line.”

“Can you go to the store for me? I forgot I hadn’t gotten a chance to do so after work before picking Caleb up. I have a list and can send it to your phone.”

“Sure. Send it over, and I’ll head out in a few minutes.”

“Great. Thanks.”

When loud rap flows in my ear, I sigh before announcing my return to this unnecessary and outlandish conversation with Dedrick.

“I’m back,” I say.

“Who was that? Why did you leave me on hold for so long? It better not have been another nigga, Chaniya. I ain’t in the business of sharing my bitch with another nigga.”

Ugh. This nigga.

“Unless you’re the man dating multiple people, I don’t know what bitch you’re referring to.”

“Man, chill. Who was on your line interrupting our conversation?”

“Last I checked, your name isn’t listed under father on my birth certificate, nor is it listed as the account holder with my cell phone provider. I gotta go, though. Bye, Dedrick.”

“Wa—” Disconnecting the call, I stare at the space above my TV while trying to quiet The Spinner’s song from 1974, echoing in my mind about love-loving nobody.

“Now, God, I know you and I aren’t the best of friends, but if you can find a way to remove Dedrick from my life, I’ll start praying more regularly. I’m growing very tired of this nigga.”

“Damn, Mom. Why the hell did you have to be so specific about the brand of fabric softener, and why the hell did they put it up so high?” Ranting, I stretch, trying to reach the Downy Unstoppables on the top shelf, damn near falling into the shelf.

“Let me help you before you hurt yourself.”

Do the stanky leg, do the stanky leg . . .

My pussy begins chanting when the deep, gravelly masculine voice pierces my ears, instantly causing the hairs on my arms to stand up. Straightening my body, I stand to my full height in time to see a long, muscular, and heavily tatted arm moving toward my intended object.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! Chaniya, girl, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.

My conscience echoes, and my eyes roam up from the unfamiliar arm to the man's face, and oh, what a face it is.

Warm cappuccino skin with a fully trimmed beard, dark brown, almond-shaped eyes, thick bushy eyebrows, and a thick bottom lip that instantly makes me want to suck it into my mouth greet me.

There's a twinkling merriment within the man's eyes as a slight smirk upturns his lips.

"Like what you see, half-pint?"

"Um—"

"No worries. My eyes are happy and content watching you too. Let me get this Downy for you, though."

Pleaseee . . .

My pussy purrs when the man moves to do my bidding, and a whiff of his light citrus and woody cologne hits my nostrils.

I'm trance-like, watching the man effortlessly grab the softener for me.

Unlike my five-foot-four height, this man has to be somewhere in the six-foot range or taller, making him the ideal person for retrieving the object.

It also doesn't help that I'm thicker than a Snicker, which can occasionally work against me in times like this.

I wish I could blame it on baby weight, but Caleb is old enough that I could and

should have lost whatever weight I obtained while pregnant with him.

My problem is I love food, and it loves my thighs, ass, and titties just as much.

“Here you go. Enjoy the rest of your evening,” the mystery man says, placing the Downy in my cart before walking away with a swag that has me clenching my thighs.

I bet that nigga is packing a sledgehammer between those thighs.

Chips, fading eggplant, outdated . . . oh shoot, are those spider webs? I need to buy one of those Swifter dusters with the extension handle so I can get that down. Damn, that’s disgusting, Chaniya.

I ponder as I lie on my back. Dusting and updating the paint in my bedroom needs to be in the immediate future. It’s been this same color since I bought this house. Oh crap, is that a crack in the ceiling too?

“Mmm. You feel so good,” Dedrick pants from above me.

Humph, I don’t know what color will look best in this room, but I’ll figure it out soon enough. Or maybe I just need to hire an interior decorator.

“So good,” he continues.

Hmm, maybe I should add some sheer valances or curtains to spruce it up in here so it has more of an inviting feeling .

“Oh God. Chaniya, I’m about to cum.”

Finally.

“Grrr. Fuck!”

Hold up, is this nigga growling like he went to zoo school or something? Nigga, I ain’t sweating or wet. Be for real.

“Damn baby, that was so good,” Dedrick tiredly expresses, slipping off to lie beside me.

Good? For whom? I’ve been lying here redecorating, and you haven’t noticed my lack of enthusiasm.

“Hmm. That’s nice for you,” I utter, rolling my eyes in the dark.

This is yet another reason I need to end my relationship with Dedrick because it’s one thing to be a possessive ass, but a non-fucking ass is ridiculous.

Like, how do you have the size and girth without the ability to fuck?

Dedrick is fine with enough dick to put me to sleep from two pumps, yet I’m lying here wondering if I charged my rabbit after the last time he half fucked me.

“I’m gonna do right by you, girl. We’re gonna get married, and I’m gonna fill you up with four of my babies,” Dedrick declares before crickets sound around my bedroom because I ain’t about to entertain his post-coital murmuring.

“Alright, you need me to get you a washcloth, or are you gonna shower at your place?”

“Fuck you me?—”

brnnng, brnnng

My phone ringing cuts Dedrick's objection off, and I reach over to grab my phone. My heart rate increases upon seeing Riele's name flashing on my screen.

"Hello." I breathlessly answer the call before rolling my eyes when Dedrick's body pushes against me as he attempts to listen to the conversation.

"I'm—ooh. I'm in labor and heading to the hospital," Riele informs me.

"Okay. I'm on my way."

"On your way where?" Dedrick asks when I disconnect the call and move to exit my bed.

"The hospital. Riele is in labor."

"I'm coming too."

"Uh, no, you're not."

"Yes the fuck I am. You need to stop tripping and let your man be a man, Chaniya."

Rolling my eyes, I head to my bathroom with Dedrick hot on my heels, and I ignore him because I don't have time to argue with him right now.

"I'm not sure why you felt the need to bring your ass with me. I didn't and don't need a personal escort. I also don't need you hovering and trying to stick to me like Velcro."

Dedrick and I have been arguing since he got his ass in my SUV, insisting on accompanying me to the hospital. I'm not sure what his motivation is because he doesn't like Riele or East, so being a part of this momentous occasion for them is

foolishness.

“It’s late, and I’m a man. You didn’t need to be out by yourself, especially when I was with you when you got the stupid call. Hell, I’m not sure why she called you anyway. You’re not the person who put her in this situation, so you don’t need to be here.”

“No, your ass doesn’t need to be here. Why would you suffer through this moment when you know it’s the last place you want to be?”

“I’m not about to keep fucking explaining to your stupid ass. I said what I said, and you see I’m here whether you want me to be or not. You need to learn your place. This is why the fuck I shou?—”

“Wind up being admitted to our fine ICU floor. Back up, my boy.” The hairs on my arms stand at attention like a military personnel saluting a senior officer, causing me to swallow over the sudden lump in my throat.

My eyes move from Dedrick, who’s hovering dangerously close to me, to the mystery man from the grocery store several days ago.

“Who the fuck is this man who’s comfortable enough to speak on what I’m saying to you, Chaniya?” Dedrick’s voice is low and menacing, instantly shifting my gaze from the mystery man to see Dedrick’s nostrils flaring.

“The better question is, why are you still breathing your hot ass air in her face? I’m not a fan of repeating myself, my boy.” The mystery man interjects.

“Man—”

“Five . . . four—” The mystery man cuts Dedrick off when he starts counting, sending

a chill down my back.

Oh shit!

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE

“That’s it. Push, Mrs. Parker. Your baby is right there,” I coach, sitting on the stool at the foot of the bed, sliding my fingers around the rim while the baby crowns.

My ability to shift from nearly knocking a nigga on his ass to preparing to deliver someone’s baby should be studied, because I’m doing it effortlessly.

Although my outward countenance is calm and professional, there’s an inferno teeming within me.

Thankfully, the buster with the balls the size of Florida got the hint of my seriousness before I got to two.

Like the fool he is, he walked off from the woman whose presence made it impossible for me to ignore their arguing.

Seeing her in the grocery store in a pair of leggings, a T-shirt, and some Crocs was nothing in comparison to now.

Tonight, half-pint is wearing a two-piece jogging set with a pair of tennis shoes, and her beauty is radiant enough to stop traffic.

Or cause a traffic collision from the glow of her cashew skin the sun isn’t present to enhance.

Her glossy lips made me want to pull her in for a kiss hot enough to transfer her lip

balm once it was over.

Her hair is in braids, resting in a bun on her head.

Her body . . . good God in Heaven. Her body is what babies and dreams are made from.

Disappointment hit me like a Mack truck when screams sounded from the room of the laboring woman I'd been headed to check because it cut off my perusal.

whaa, whaa, whaa

The wailing from the newborn cut off my wayward thoughts and back to the situation at hand. Thankfully, I've delivered enough babies that my actions have become robotic because my brain was elsewhere.

"Congratulations, mom and dad. It's a boy," I inform the parents, holding the screaming baby up for them to see.

"You did it, Ri baby. You did it," Mr. Parker gushes, kissing his wife's face.

"No. We did it," Mrs. Parker returns, water slipping from her eyes.

"Alright, dad. Cut the cord, and the nurse will get him squared away," I say.

My chest pinches when Mr. Parker takes the scissors and cuts the umbilical cord, freeing the baby from his mother. This isn't the first baby I've helped deliver today, so I'm unsure why I'm feeling the impact of this particular birth.

"Oh my God! You're a mommy, Riele," she gushes behind me, instantly increasing my body temperature.

“Mhm. You’re an auntie/godmom, Chaniya. I love that for you,” Mrs. Parker utters lowly.

Chaniya, huh?

“Excuse me. Can I have a minute of your time, half-pint?” I ask.

Containing my professionalism has been damn near impossible the longer I watched half-pint gush over the Parker’s baby boy.

The slow steps I had taken to deliver Mrs. Parker’s afterbirth should have been illegal, but my focus was off like a mothafucka.

Not to mention I had to visualize Grandma Jolene dropping down to suck on her neighbor Renaldo’s dick after removing her dentures, to get my dick to go down and not embarrass me.

“Half-pint?” Mrs. Parker’s voice echoes around the room, but neither the woman I’m speaking to nor I respond before I exit the room after throwing away the paper towels I used to dry my hands.

“I—”

“Hold on. I’d rather have a private conversation.” I stop her from speaking before heading toward the family waiting area that’s usually empty on this floor.

Our exchange, while unorthodox, can’t be prevented, because the magnetic pull I’m experiencing with this woman won’t let me walk away from her again empty-handed.

Entering the waiting room a few minutes later, I close the door after she crosses the threshold.

Desperate to ignore the urge to touch her, I quickly put my hands in my pocket.

“Wh-what?—”

“Breathe, half-pint. You’re not in any danger. I just wanted to ask you to accompany me to my sister’s wedding.” My chest is beating like a drum at an HBCU band competition, and my eyes peer intently at her while holding my breath in wait.

Shit! Did I really just ask this woman to go to Essence’s wedding with me?

A smirk slides into place when half-pint’s eyes balloon, and her mouth opens then closes like a pucker fish.

“Um—what?”

“I want you to be my plus one for my sister’s wedding weekend that’ll include the ceremony.”

“We-uh-you don’t know me.” A wide grin slides into place upon seeing the cute pout on her lips.

Stepping closer yet leaving an inch of space between us, I extend my hand while giving her my best, irresistible smile. “Germane Malone.”

My heart stalls when a puff of air escapes half-pint’s mouth, hitting my face at the same time as bursts of light sparkle within her eyes, leaving me momentarily unable to move.

Fuck! She’s sexy as hell.

“Ch-Chaniya O’Neal,” she replies breathlessly.

“I have never heard a more fitting name than yours,” I say, sounding lame without game.

What the fuck are you saying, nigga? How did your dumb ass go from a real nigga to a lame nigga after coming to this woman’s rescue not long ago? You are about to lose your player card over that weak ass line. Damn shame, nigga.

Chaniya laughs while covering her mouth with her hand, making my internal rants valid and timely.

“Do other women find that flattering?” Chaniya asks, smirking.

“Hell nah. Please forgive me. You’re little ass got me out here nervous and fumbling like a juvenile.”

“You’re funny. I’m not sure that accepting your offer is appropriate, though. Fumbling or not, we’re still strangers.”

“How about we go to the cafeteria to get some coffee or whatever beverage you would like? That way, we can remove our stranger status.”

Now your lame ass is begging like a simp. You’re going out sad.

“Hold up. You did what?” Jarrod asks, laughing hysterically.

Jarrod Moody is my other best friend and the guy named class clown when we were in high school because there isn’t a situation he won’t find humor within.

“It ain’t that damn funny, nigga,” I snap.

“Shid. Were y’all in one of the areas where the cameras are? I need to see

something,” Desi interjects.

“Shut the fuck up with your crying over Chardonnay bitch ass,” I snap.

“Ooh, you big mad, huh?” Desi laughs.

“Right. His ass is probably over there about to burst a vessel in his eye and everything. It’s okay, bro. We won’t tell nobody but the team you went out like a sucka.” Jarrod interjects.

“Fuck off my phone.” Disconnecting the three-way call, I toss my phone aside, still reeling over Desi and Jarrod finding humor in my being shot down.

My ego still feels the sting of Ms. Chaniya turning me down, because I found a woman enticing for the first time in a long time.

Generally, I let my dick lead me into relationships, but encountering and conversating with Chaniya had me reaching an epiphany.

The sad part is I have never fumbled speaking to a woman before, and my inability to say the right things had me out of sorts.

It’s also crazy because my tongue didn’t get tied when I saw her in the grocery store.

It was coming, which is why your ass got out of dodge before you could look lame. Although you ended up doing that anyway. Sad shame.

ding, ding

Back-to-back notifications sound from my phone, forcing me out of my head to grab the device.

Jarrold: Awe, G man. Do you need a hanky?

Desi: Or some Kotex? Midol?

Jarrold: I can bring you some chocolate and a blankie to go with your hurt feelings if you want, pumpkin.

Desi: Bro, your ass is wild. Did you just call that nigga pumpkin? Lmao.

Me: Didn't I tell you fuck niggas to get off my line. Why the fuck are y'all still talking to me?

Desi: See, I told Mama Adele not to let your ass wear those bobo's to school in sixth grade. Now look, your ass ain't learn the concept of sticks and stones. Damn shame, bro.

Jarrold: Wait, this nigga wore shoes that snapped across the foot with Velcro? Say it ain't so. Damn, no wonder this nigga is being rejected by hot women and shit. She probably can still smell the knockoff residue on his ass.

Me: Fuck you niggas

Jarrold: Type *11 if you need me to buy you some of the latest K. Patt Kicks. I know you wannabe doctors are surviving on oodles and noodles and shit. I'm my brother's keeper, so I don't want to see you go out like this.

Desi: No, for real. You know bro stay eating oodles and noodles. Lmao.

Feeling the vein in my temple pulsate out of control, I mute the group chat and then silence my phone before locking the device. I ain't got to be playing with Desi and Jarrold's asses. I have been off work for hours, and I'm still in my feelings about not

securing a connection with Chaniya.

“Damn. How the hell did I fuck that up with Chaniya?” Hanging my head, my mind flashes back to how my conversation with Chaniya ended.

“I can’t get a drink with you, Germaine. Although he’s an ass and skating on thin ice, I’m in a relationship with the man I was talking to earlier.”

“Hm. He doesn’t deserve you. Any man who doesn’t value you enough to discuss your differences privately is incapable of holding a place in your heart.” Subconsciously, I rub Chaniya’s hand but stop when a jolt of awareness surges through my body.

What the fuck was that?

“I hear you, and I’m not disagreeing, but until I’ve closed the door on what we have, I can’t accept your offer for a drink or anything else. It’s a respect th ? —”

“You don’t have to sell me on your reasons. While I may not like it, I definitely respect it. It’s another reason you are a diamond who shouldn’t live in the rough.”

“I hear you. Believe me, I do. Nevertheless, he’s who I’m with at the moment.”

Something about the inflection of Chaniya’s words cause a lopsided grin to slide into place because all I hear is that nigga is on his way out the door. Nodding, I smile while taking slow steps backward.

“On that note, I’ll respect where you are . . . at the moment. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Ms. Chaniya.”

“I’m not a praying man, but God, let my desires align with Chaniya’s needs.

Unlike Satan's imp wasting her time, I'm all the man she'll ever need.

" Standing, I begin disrobing before heading to my bathroom to shower and prepare for bed.

"Alexa, play Mokenstef, 'He's Mine,'" I say upon entering the bathroom.

Alexa: Playing Mokenstef . . . He's Mine

Turning on the water inside the bathtub, I start bobbing when the nineties jam starts playing, causing me to remix the words to fit my situation.

"She might be doing you, but she's thinking about me. So, nigga, think about another lover and go find another woman," I sing loudly before stepping in the shower once I have the temperature how I like it. "Damn, this woman got me remixing and singing love ballads. How the hell did I get here?"

Grabbing my bodywash and washcloth, I begin cleaning my body, losing the desire to sing the sappy-ass song echoing inside the shower wall. Chaniya got me feeling like imitating crazy-ass Sherita, and I'm not a stalking or pressed nigga.

"This woman gonna have me praying daily until God crosses our paths again. I need her in my life. Never have I ever been thinking about and praying for a woman who rejected my dumb ass without hesitation."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

CHANIYA

bzz

“W hat in the ‘Barbara, . . . this is Shirley’ hell is going on?” I grumble upon reading the incoming text.

Between the unsaved phone number and the name given, I have no idea who this person is or how she got my number.

Me: How’d you get my number, and who is he?

Nana always said curiosity killed the cat, but I can’t help responding to the cryptic message to probe for information. This Jorgie doesn’t know that the only man I’m in love with is the one I’m raising.

380-426-1532: Aren’t you Dedrick’s bottom bitch? *eyes emoji*

Bottom bitch? Who the hell does this chick think she’s talking to? My brows furrow, and a frown slides into place.

380-426-1532: I know your place in his life, which is why I got your number from his phone.

You need to understand that while you might be his bottom bitch, I’m the bitch who incubates and delivers his nappy-head children.

I'm pregnant with our fourth baby, and I need you to understand that Dedrick won't be playing stepdaddy to that little bastard of yours.

Fire shoots from my ears, and my fingers begin frantically typing a response as I bite my bottom lip.

Me: Bitch, this conversation is done but drop your location.

Once my message is sent, I exit the thread, dialing the number of the man causing this unknown stray to type out the nonsense she has. Tapping my fingers on my couch, my lips twist when the ringing sounds in my ear.

"What you want, Chaniya?" My frown deepens upon hearing Dedrick's nonchalant question with an aggressive tone.

Pulling the phone from my ear, I turn it over several times with my eyes tight before placing it back against my ear.

"Who's Jorgie?"

"Fuck if I know. Why are you calling me asking about random names? What the fuck are you on right now, Chaniya? I'm busy."

Pain radiates in the back of my head, a metallic-like taste fills my mouth when I bite my lip hard, and a burst of air escapes my mouth from hearing Dedrick's questions.

"You know what . . .? I'm done. We're done. Whatever you got going on is no longer my concern." Disconnecting the call, I block Jorgie and Dedrick's numbers from my phone.

Not knowing about Jorgie or that Dedrick has children I know nothing about doesn't

matter.

Ending our farce of a relationship has been necessary long before now.

This is just the confirmation I need to release me.

I'm just grateful that the darkness of Dedrick's foolishness came to light and gave me the opportunity to walk away scot-free.

I bet you wish you wouldn't have turned down that invitation to get to know Germaine.

You have no business coming to this store this time of night, Chaniya. You ain't gonna be satisfied until some mad rapist snatches your butt up.

Mom had taken Caleb for the night, and sometimes, not having my baby boy in the house throws off my sleep pattern.

Exiting my vehicle, I hit the lock on my key fob, secure my crossbody, and head briskly toward the front entrance.

It's nearing one in the morning, and I couldn't sleep, so coming to Ribax Supercenter was a means for me to kill time.

I'm also hoping to tire myself by walking the aisles because I have no single item on my agenda.

My FitBit is on, so the walking will help me with my daily step goal, which is a win-win in my book.

"Welcome to the Supercenter," a greeter states when I enter the sliding doors, causing

me to jump from their unexpected presence.

With the late hour, I didn't expect the grocery store to have someone greeting customers who come in at this time.

Grabbing a cart, I give the older man a subtle nod before continuing through the gate at the entryway.

It's been nearly three weeks since my breakup with Dedrick, and I should be good, yet I'm still angry over the situation.

I don't know if it's because Dedrick has been possessively holding onto me for two years, knowing he was living foul, or the fact that my loyalty had me resisting a man I had been more attracted to than Dedrick.

Not to mention Dedrick's inability to make my toes curl, my pussy pop or lubricate, and he was unable to suck the lining out of my inner lips, making me feel like I played myself.

Be for real, Chaniya. You didn't know that man to accept an invitation to attend a wedding or funeral with him. All's well that e ? —

“My grandmother has always said that if someone is destined to be yours, they'll find their way to you, even if you've foolishly let them get away.

Then my mama backed Grandma Jolene up by telling me that the third time was a charm.

This moment right here proves that both of them are right.

You are a sight for these tired eyes, Ms. Chaniya.

” My steps halt upon hearing his voice just after entering the first aisle I come to.

Germayne’s voice melts over me like butter on freshly popped popcorn, and chills fill my body. My back is still facing his front while I attempt to regulate my breathing and the thumping in my lower region.

“Turn around so I can see those beautiful browns, Ms. Chaniya,” Germayne urges, causing me to clamp my lips together to prevent the moan rushing to the surface from escaping.

Please don’t embarrass me in front of this man, kitty. Stop purring, girl.

Slowly and with bated breath, I turn toward Germayne and damn near swallow my tongue when I take in his attire.

Now, why the hell would you come out here like this, Germayne Malone? Sheesh.

My eyes rake over Germayne’s attire of a simple black tee, black joggers, black socks, and black slides on his feet.

Nothing out of the ordinary, and I shouldn’t be fighting the need to fan myself from the instantaneous overheating within my body.

Yet, the black joggers fit Germayne like a pair of gray ones, and the slight bulge in his lower region has me swallowing the moisture forming in my mouth.

A simple outfit has me on the verge of pushing this fine ass specimen against the shelves and pushing my tongue down his throat.

“I don’t know whether I should be excited or scared with how you’re staring at me right now.”

My eyes slowly disconnect from the hammer in Germayne's lower region while being curious to know how it handles slow banging, rising to see Germayne smirking.

“I—”

Pop, pop, pop

“Don't fucking move, or I'll blow your head off your shoulders. Empty the register and do it expeditiously.” An unknown male voice rings out, immediately ending my words and all thoughts.

“Damn. Of all times for us to be in here,” Germayne whispers so only I can hear before placing his hand over his mouth while grabbing my hand.

My heart is beating wildly, and my eyes are alternating between watching Germayne lead us toward the opposite end of the aisle and behind my back to see if anyone is following us.

Somebody is robbing the store! Oh my God!

See, this is why your butt should be home on your tenth sleep roll instead of wandering grocery stores.

Tears slip from my eyes the second Germayne and I exit the aisle while moving briskly toward the back of the store.

Pop, pop

“I ain't fucking playing, cunt. Empty this register!” the robber shouts, causing me to trip and nearly faceplant on the floor, but Germayne slows his strides long enough to scoop me into his arms and begin a low jog.

Oh God, I can't die. Please don't let me die. My baby can't grow up without me.

My tears are falling heavily from my eyes, and my heart rate is racing along with my thoughts, causing me to bury my head in Germayne's chest. The pounding from his chest lets me know that I'm not alone in the seriousness of this situation.

The creaking coming from a foreign place has me lifting my head to see Germayne pushing through the door of some back room, quickly hitting the light and instantly darkening the area.

Germayne lowers to the floor without effort or shifting my body, which is a skill I'm surprised he has.

"We're gonna stay in here until the coast is clear. Please stop crying, though. I can't go out there and beat that man's ass for disturbing your peace since he's already wasting bullets."

My lips twist, and I fight the laugh I want to release from Germayne's words that bring me a slight tinge of calmness. Lifting my head, I kiss his neck before responding to his statements.

"Thank you."

"You just did. I hope you know that your pretty ass will have to be my plus one now. Your lips just sealed the deal and our fate. Let's get acquainted while we're here."

I should climb out of Germayne's lap, but comfort and the security of being in his arms keep me in place.

"What would you like to know?"

“Why the lame you’re dating didn’t accompany you to this store at this time of night, for starters?” The gravely yet aggravated tone in Germaine’s question hit me in my lower region like a wrecking ball in the process of demolishing a house.

With Dedrick, my pussy was dryer than the Sahara when he tried to put bass in his tone while speaking to me. Yet, Germaine makes me want to cross a line I shouldn’t be considering, given our current predicament.

“We’re not together anymore.” I shrug.

“Mhm. The third time is definitely a charm, and now I understand why I’m in this store after waking up craving ice cream like a pregnant chick.”

Giggles escape my mouth before I remember where we are, and I quickly slap my hand over my mouth to stifle my humor.

“I kid you not. I was in a deep sleep and comfortable under my blankets, but the craving wouldn’t release its hold on me. Now I know Cupid won the fight with the sandman. Big ups to my miniature compadre Cupid.”

More giggles sound from behind my hand at the outlandish statements coming from Germaine’s mouth.

“You’re a mess,” I whisper.

“Nah, I’m right where I’m supposed to be. What’s your favorite color?”

“Random much,” I say.

“Nah. We’re getting acquainted. You thought I was joking?”

Butterflies take flight in my stomach at the serious tone in Germaine's delivery, and a small smile forms.

"Yellow," I answer.

The sound of heavy footfalls approaching prevents us from speaking, and my heart starts racing as I cling to Germaine's shirt for dear life.

"I feel your heart pounding against me. Don't worry. Not a single hair will be out of place when you leave here. I'll gladly sacrifice myself for you. Get behind me," Germaine states before gently easing me from his lap so I can do what he's instructing.

There's roughly a minute between my scooting behind Germaine's back and the door being forcefully pushed open.

"Shit!" a pale-faced middle-aged man shouts after flipping the switch on and seeing Germaine in a fighting stance.

"I thought all the customers fled the store." Lifting the walkie-talkie in his chubby hand, the man speaks into the device.

"Uh, there's two customers in the employee lounge.

Let the officers know. I'll send them your way. "

"Roger that, Clive," someone returns.

"Alright, folks. The store has been cleared, but you'll need to speak to the police before you're free to leave. They'll meet you up front. Sorry for the inconvenience," the man says, holding the door open.

“Come on. We’ve had enough excitement for one morning,” Germayne tells me, extending his hand for me to take.

“This might be unethical or out of line, but can I have your phone number, Germayne? I’d like to talk to you once I get situated. We have shared something traumatic, or at least it was for me, and I would like to hear your voice before I fall asleep,” I ask.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE

“After all that excitement, I’m glad I don’t have to work today. I think I’m gonna hide in my house watching mindless TV. That was the most adventure I’ve had in a very long time.”

“I hear you, and thankfully, I don’t go in until this evening, so hopefully, I’ll be able to sleep it all off,” I say.

While the robber at the store was an unplanned nuisance, I’m not mad because I was victorious in shattering Chaniya’s wall of reservation about me.

After an hour of recounting the events with RPD, Chaniya and I were cleared to go home.

Now, here we are forty-five minutes later, conversing on the phone.

The goofy smile on my lips is only one of the indicators of how I’m feeling about my current situation.

“Tell me something that’ll get my mind off what we encountered.”

“I got you. So, you know what I do for a living, and I love it, but I can live without patients whose bowels release during labor,” I say, shaking my head.

“Stop, that doesn’t happen.” Chaniya laughs, and the sound has warmth dancing across my chest.

“Believe me, it does, and more than people in the field will admit from being the recipient of someone’s feces.”

“Tell me you’re joking, Gernayne.”

“I’m not. I had a level of secondhand embarrassment I’d never experienced before.

Most people release their bowels during labor, but this woman shit on my hand while I was stitching her up.

I washed my hands ten times, even after washing them three while in the delivery room.

The nurses and my supervisor teased me for a month about it.

What’s worse is the woman’s grandmother had a blowout in her Depends but had no sense of smell to make her aware of the occurrence. ”

“Oh my God.” Chaniya laughs heartily.

It’s fast approaching four in the morning, and Chaniya and I are talking like time is of no consequence to either of us. What’s more interesting is I’m not sleepy or fatigued and perfectly fine with talking to Chaniya for as long as she wants to.

“Yeah, I had to call on Him to keep from flipping out while looking at the handful of shit covering my gloves.”

My heart skips a beat when Chaniya’s laughter increases, and she snorts before my low laughter escapes my mouth. Finding out that she works at Baxter Paws Animal Hospital as a veterinarian assistant was intriguing.

“That is too funny. That reminds me of when I had to assist with a cat’s delivery. Everything would have been cool if the temperamental hussy wouldn’t have used my arm as a finger file for her nails.”

“I feel you. Do you think you’ll ever go to school to become a veterinarian?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest. I love animals, which is why I sought out the job at the hospital. I’m just unsure if my love is enough to keep me in the field for endless years. What about you? You look good, birthing babies. Do you see yourself completing the process?”

“Maybe. I didn’t realize how much I would love what I do. The only downside to the job is having to coach a mother through a stillbirth.”

My chest pinches at the past instance of delivering twin boys who died after their mother was pushed down two flights of steps by her boyfriend. It took Dr. Carpenter and me hours to encourage the woman to keep pushing. When those babies came out silently, there wasn’t a dry eye in the room.

“Not that it’s the same because it isn’t on the same scale, but I can understand your difficulty with it because I have often had to comfort my boss after that occurrence with animals. It’s also one of the occurrences within the field that make me not want to further my education.”

“Understandable, because it’s hard for everyone in the room. Let’s change the subject, though. I don’t want to put a damper on our moods.”

“I’m good with that. Tell me your perfect Saturday activity if work wasn’t blocking the day.”

A low chuckle escapes my mouth because I can imagine how Chaniya will react to

what I'm about to provide for an answer. Nevertheless, I push forward, ready to hear her rebuttal.

"Fishing."

"Ewe. Seriously? Do you like that? I thought that was something only the melanin lacking folks do for fun."

"I'm not sure if I like the judgment in your tone, Chaniya. Have you ever been fishing before?"

Silence pierces the line, providing my answer without Chaniya's confirmation, making me interject before she has a chance to speak.

"Mhm. That's what I thought. How about I take you on your first fishing adventure? Then you can form an opinion based on experience and not bias."

"I don't know about that. How much fun can a fishing outing be?"

"Actually, I don't enjoy it for the entertainment factor that some fishermen receive. I?—"

"Really? Why do you go then?"

Another chuckle escapes my mouth, surprising me because it's been a while since I've enjoyed a light banter between me and a woman. Chaniya is providing me with more than her outer appearance to be attracted to, and that's the bonus I anticipated experiencing upon our initial engagement.

"Honestly, it's about the peace I get when I'm sitting on the river bank.

Me and my grandfather used to go when I was a kid.

Yet, I only realized after going once he died how much I love it.

I can sit out there for hours and only catch five fish, but it never bothers me.

I can also get caught up in watching the fishing ripples moving, bringing me necessary calm. ”

As a kid, I didn't understand why Grandpa Melvin insisted on teaching me how to fish. The beauty in the hobby happened the first time I went after his passing when I didn't catch a single fish. Hell, had it not been for the fish stealing my minnows, I would have thought the lake was empty.

“Hm. Maybe I'll let you take me so I can see what you're talking about.” Chaniya cuts into my wayward thoughts, returning me to the conversation.

“You came for my favorite pastime, so you can bank on me dragging you out to the water. In fact, it'll be how we spend our first date.”

“First date seems a little presumptuous, don't you think?”

Taking a minute to note the time, I smirk because Chaniya doesn't realize that the groundwork for our first date is presently being laid.

“The minute you asked for my number was the confirmation I needed to know that you've become comfortable with me. A date is definitely forthcoming, Chaniya.”

“Why are your eyes so droopy, and why are you moving so lethargic, Son? It's not hot outside, which is why I asked you to come over to cut the grass.

I would have let your father do it if I knew you were looking haggard.

I already had to promise to make him a strawberry shortcake to let you do it instead of him.

” Ma frowns, staring me up and down with her hand resting on her waist.

After laying up on the phone with Chaniya until after five this morning, the last thing I felt like doing was cutting grass.

However, giving Dad a break and spending a little time with them motivated me to get out of bed this afternoon.

Caking on the phone is something I haven’t done since high school, but I don’t regret a single moment.

Hearing Chaniya’s laughter, snorting, and seductive yet low voice will always make me forfeit sleep for the opportunity.

“I know you hear your mother talking to you, son.” Dad’s deadpan voice has me blinking and scrolling through my mental rolodex for Mom’s words.

“Not enough sleep, but I’m good. Giving Dad the chance to relax will never be a burden. Although, a piece of your strawberry shortcake sounds great.”

One thing about Glynn Malone that I admire is his work ethic, which he made sure to instill within me.

Dad is also the one man I trust without reservation because he has always been intentional with his teachings.

Having a father who doesn't simply preach things to their son without understanding has been one of the most significant rewards of having Glynn Malone for a father.

"We'll see." Ma smiles before leaving the kitchen.

Thanks to Mom's mom, she knows how to cook and bake, which meant Essence and I always had homecooked meals growing up.

It's also why I know how to do more than boil water and am able to feed myself whatever my stomach craves on any given day.

Adele Malone didn't play that lazy man thing, so Essence and I received the same teachings and instructions on what it takes to run a household.

In fact, I can get stains out better than Essence because, unlike my baby sister, paying attention wasn't lost on me.

"What's the real reason? You're looking like you been down in the gutter?" Dad asks after looking over his shoulder to ensure Ma is gone.

"Love jonesing or at least trying to." A smirk slides into place because I can never get anything past Dad.

Dad gives me a blank stare, and a shout of laughter leaves my mouth when a frown forms.

"It wasn't Sherita, man," I inform him after getting myself together a minute later.

"I was about to say. If you ain't learned anything else from that skeezer, it should be to become Usain Bolt whenever you're in her presence. I'm not sure what trap school her lineage comes from, but you don't need any parts of the education."

A lopsided smirk slides into place from hearing the negative and old-school derogatory name Dad calls Sherita.

Dad has always communicated his displeasure with her since the first day I brought Sherita to meet my parents.

Dad said Sherita moved like a snake, even from the beginning, and he didn't trust her.

"Trust me, we're on the same page. Sherita Albert was the worst mistake of my dating life, and I've been dating many women over the years. I can't wife or date a woman who can't be bothered to adequately clean her menstruation undergarments."

"Ewe." Dad's face contorts, and his nose twists, inciting my laughter again.

bzz

The single vibration coming from my pocket has me sliding my phone out to see who's trying to contact me. The proud grin upturning my lips can't be avoided when I see Chaniya's name on my lock screen.

"Ah. It must be the object of the heavy bags resting under your eyes. I'll give you some privacy, but I'll be waiting to hear more about whoever she is soon," Dad says before exiting the kitchen.

My fingers trip over themselves, trying to unlock my phone to read the message from Chaniya, and my heart rate increases with every second that passes.

Chaniya: I'm just waking up, but I wanted to tell you again how much I enjoyed talking to you.

I've never been through anything like that before, so I was afraid to go to sleep which

was the cause of asking for your number.

Ten minutes into our conversation calmed me enough to sleep, but your soothing tone prevented me from releasing you so we could get some sleep.

I hope it wasn't too much of an inconvenience for you.

With the work you do, I can imagine how crucial sufficient rest is for you.

Forget getting this woman to accompany me to the wedding. I need to make her an expectant bride.

My body temperature, heart rate, and pulse elevate while reading Chaniya's text, and my nerves begin firing all at once from the thought of locking her down.

Closing my eyes, I try to fight the fluttery feeling in my stomach that has never happened before.

Opening my eyes, I push the air gathering in my lungs and type a response that contradicts what I want to say: Marry me, Chaniya.

Me: There will never be a time when you'll inconvenience me. Thank you for allowing me to spend hours with you. Calming you ultimately calmed me.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

CHANIYA

“ O h my God! Oh my God! You didn’t tell me you were gonna be taking part in killing little fishes. You’re a murderer,” I say while backing away from Germayne, who’s wearing a Cheshire grin.

A week after the robbery, with Germayne and I sitting on the phone for hours, I let him talk me into going on a date.

The problem is I didn’t think he was serious about the type of date we would be having until last night.

Germayne instructed me to wear my oldest clothes and some beat-up tennis shoes, yet I thought he was joking.

Caleb was with Kenyatta, who had a sleepover for two of his sons, so I didn’t have to worry about asking Mom to keep him again.

I haven’t told Germayne about Caleb yet, because whatever this is between him and me isn’t serious.

If things change, I’ll talk with him about the fact that I’m a single mother.

One of the problems with Dedrick is that I let things move too quickly and allowed him to meet Caleb within a month of us being together.

Dedrick hadn’t proven anything to me in that short timeframe, so I shouldn’t have

been so careless with my son.

“Come here, girl. These little fish ain’t gonna bite you. Look, he’s harmless,” Germayne tells me, dangling a small fish in his hand.

“It’s bad enough that you got me in these woods without something to protect my hair from the bugs and spider webs.

Now you want me to mess up my aloe vera soft hands by touching those.

Um, how far is the parking area? I gotta get my out-of-place ass out of these woods.

This can’t be God’s will for my life.” Ranting, I turn left and right, wondering if I can remember where Germayne parked before leading me into temptation.

Thunderous laughter echoes around the area, causing me to turn and look at Germayne to see him reacting to my statements like he’s at a comedy show.

“Man, I needed that damn laugh. Bring your scary ass over here. I put it back in the bucket.”

“I ain’t scared. I just don’t see why you have to kill that little fish like that. I thought you said this was a date, anyway. I ain’t ever been on a date where the man tortured me. You might need to learn what it means to invite a woman out, because this isn’t it.”

“Awe, poor Chaniya. Come here, suga. A little kiss will make it all better.” The sinister grin Germayne’s wearing has me folding my arms over my chest while staring intently.

“Nah, playboy. I don’t trust you. I’ll stand he—ah! Quit playing! Quit playing!”

Screaming, I dash through the woods' opening when Germayne charges me with a minnow in his hand.

My heart is beating erratically, and my arms are moving like I'm running a race, seconds away from passing the baton. Crackling and swooshing hit my ears as I ran from side to side, trying to avoid Germayne.

"Okay. Okay. Come back, Chaniya. I'm done. I'm done." Germayne's humorous voice penetrates my ears, but it takes me a minute to register that he's no longer chasing me. "Whoa. Wat?—"

"Oh shit!" I shout when I run into a tree branch that slaps me in my face, causing me to fall back and land on my butt, hard. "Ow."

"How's that feel? Better?"

Nodding, I lift to look into Germayne's concerned eyes after he finishes putting the Neosporin on the scrapes on my palms.

"Next time you want to plan a date, . . . don't. From now on, I'll be handling all of our outings. You suck at first dates, mister."

Leaning in, Germayne places a light kiss on my lips before standing to his full height, and I repeatedly blink from the soft caress of what shouldn't be categorized as a first kiss.

Yet, the zing of electricity flowing through my body from the minuscule contact of our lips lets me know that I didn't imagine it.

"I'm guessing you're done, and our fishing adventure is over, huh?"

Snapping out of my brief haze, I pout because surely this man doesn't want me to return to the crime scene.

After falling, Germayne scooped me into his arms and carried me to his SUV to retrieve the first aid kit.

My comfort with being in Germayne's arms shouldn't have been as easy, yet I held onto him like a damsel in distress.

This is crazy because I can't stand weak women, but to be held by Germayne, I will happily put on airs.

"Let's make a deal, Ms. O'Neal."

"I don't know if I like the sound of this, Mr. Malone." Emphasizing his last name is necessary because, why are we adding them right now?

"If you allow me to erase how this began by starting over, I'll let you plan our next date."

"Hm. How's that a deal when I already stated you won't have the privilege?"

"The deal comes with me cooking for you to ensure that everything but our do-over sticks with you after today."

Hm. Intriguing, because I have never had a man cook or offer to cook for me before.

Germayne steps closer, removing the space between us, which charges the air when his eyes glisten with seduction and merriment, making it difficult for me to resist.

Mm. You're a charmer, I see.

“What do you say? If you allow me to fix this, I guarantee it won’t be something you regret.”

Damn.

The husky, gravelly, and low octave Germaine is using hits me dead center of my lower region, making me give in, despite my reservations.

“Okay.” The single-word answer is breathy and unpreventable from my inability to deny this man.

“Good?”

I blink slowly after Germaine removes his finger from my mouth after allowing me to taste the sauce he’s making.

After stopping at a small grocery store to grab things for Germaine to make us dinner, I’m sitting on his counter, taking it all in.

The meal is simple yet one Germaine makes appear elegant despite me cooking it often.

Caleb is a fan of salmon, so I make salmon alfredo with broccoli on a monthly basis.

However, I never take the time to make the sauce from scratch because I don’t have time, and Bertolli is my BFF.

Yet, watching Germaine move around his kitchen, chopping fresh broccoli, pan-searing the salmon, and then expertly making alfredo sauce, has me thinking I’ve been shortchanging my poor son.

“Is it good, Chaniya? Or do I need to add something else to it?”

Between Germayne’s smirk and his finger still hovering near my mouth, I’m struggling to get myself together.

My juices are making their way to the seat of my panties, which isn’t something I need right now.

Yet, my body is overheating, just experiencing this man making what most, including me, throw together within thirty minutes or less.

“I-it’s good,” I answer, crossing my feet at the ankles, hoping Germayne isn’t aware of my chest rising and falling or my labored breathing.

“Bet. Let me get everything mixed, and we’ll be all set. You can head to the table, and I’ll bring our plates momentarily.” Without preparation, Germayne lifts me from the counter before placing me gently on the floor.

Okay. Okay. You cannot sleep with this man on the first date, Chaniya. You’re trying to remove reckless living from your character. Lock it down. Clink! Clink!

My conscience begins chanting the last two words like a mantra with every step I take to the table Germayne has in his large kitchen. I’m unsure of the time between my arrival at the table and Germaine’s approach with our plates, because I’m unsure how present I am with reality.

“Alright. What would you like to drink? Do you need parmesan cheese?”

“Water, please.” Cooling this heat in my body is imperative, or I will swipe everything off this table and be your dinner, sir. “Oh, parmesan cheese would be great. Thanks.”

“Here you are. Let’s bow our heads for a quick prayer.”

“I like him, but is it too soon? I just ended things with Dedrick. I don’t want to become fodder for gossip.”

“Girl, bye. Dedrick’s been needing his walking papers,” Isis says.

“Okay. Besides that, fuck anybody who can’t be happy for you. Unless they’re gossiping about the shit stains in their underwear, we ain’t got time to entertain bullshit,” Riele adds.

“Riele Parker, I know you better stop moving like that while holding my child.” East’s statement comes through the receiver, causing me to smile.

“You better tell her, brother-in-law,” Isis instigates while snickering.

Riele begins pleading her case with East, causing me to laugh when East doesn’t ease up on how she’s handling their child.

This is the kind of man and father I should have had when I became a mother. Maybe God will give me a do-over so I can get it right the second time.

“Anyway, . . . back to our conversation. Tell me what he looks like, Chaniya. Is he fine enough to make you sit up in your bed while high-fiving God post-sex? Have you been able to see a print or nah?” Riele questions.

“I see you want me to crash out in here. Why are you asking these dumb-ass questions, Riele?” East’s deadpan voice incites Isis’s hysterical laughter.

“I’m sorry, baby. It’s this six-week drought we’re suffering through. I need some dick,” Riele whines, and I burst into laughter upon hearing her words.

“Penetration isn’t the only form of sex, bae. You don’t talk about another nigga in retaliation. Matter of fact, hang up and let me get you right,” East says.

beep, beep, beep

“Wait, did this bitch hang up without saying anything?” Isis asks the rhetorical question that the beeping in our ear already confirmed.

“What’s worse is my ass is over here rolling my eyes from jealousy. Hell, I want a man to boss up on me like that. Make me throw away the doctor’s postpartum instructions in the diaper genie,” I say.

“Well, we’re gonna send up some prayers now that the Risen Savior will deem you worthy of such a man. I’m only praying for one to fill me with multiple orgasms six out of seven days a week,” Isis states.

bzz, bzz

A Kool-Aid grin fills my lips upon seeing Germaine’s name flashing on my screen, interrupting my ability to respond to Isis’s foolishness.

“I gotta go, girl. This man is calling, so maybe God is already working things out for me. Tootles.” Disconnecting the call before greeting Germaine, hoping I don’t sound as cheesy as I feel. “Hey, you.”

“Did you get hijacked, kidnapped, or some shit, Chaniya?” My thighs clench subconsciously upon hearing Germaine’s aggressive tone penetrate my ears.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m guessing you’re hard of hearing and incapable of comprehending.

Let me remind you, though. When you left my house, I specifically remember asking you to call or text me when you got to your crib.

It's been an hour, and from your relaxed tone, I'm assuming your pretty ass is comfortably lying in bed. ”

Germayne and I met up at the Supercenter at the start of today's date because I wasn't ready to give him my address.

Instead of taking two vehicles for our fishing expedition, I rode with Germayne, which also made it easy for me to accompany him to his house for dinner.

However, I was kicking myself when Germayne drove me to my car, and I had to drive home on a full stomach.

Getting a call from Riele and Isis to catch up had me forgetting to call or text Germayne after getting home.

“Chaniya?”

“How old are you, Germayne?”

“Thirty, but what does my age have to do with this present inquiry?”

“I'm just wondering why a man with your career and credentials speak with such heavy Ebonics. It seems highly inappropriate.”

“What's highly inappropriate is you not following simple instructions so the man you've spent the day with doesn't have to lose his mind over worrying about you.

To answer your question, just like the knobs that control the water that flows from my

faucet, I know how to turn my professional versus non- professional dialect on and off.

I'm still waiting for your answer to my original question, though. ”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE

Things have been going well after the nearly failed first date with Chaniya, and my feelings have been moving at hyper speed.

Chaniya's witty personality is a flex after dealing with Sherita's hyperaggressive urge to force me into a lifelong commitment.

Enjoying and reciprocating Chaniya's sense of humor has been a breath of fresh air.

Seeing the deer-in-headlights expression on her face while I held up the minnow will forever be one of my most memorable first dates.

Then to see her running like she was auditioning to be a track team member had me in stitches.

I didn't think she could move so fast. I guess it goes to show why you shouldn't judge a book by its cover.

Chaniya proved that her thick thighs were more than capable of saving her life.

Seeing her scraped and bleeding palms had me ready to kick my own ass for causing her pain.

It also was a sign that I had to correct the date so I would be given another opportunity to spend time with her.

For the first time in my life, a woman has my nose wide open, and I'm unsure how I feel about it.

It's only been a few days since the date, and I'm already craving Chaniya's presence.

"Who's got you staring into space, bro?" Jarrod asks.

Jarrod asked me to tag along with him to his cousin Kyree's auto repair shop to check on his truck.

I should have known Jarrod's ass only wanted me to go so I could save him some money by not scheduling an Uber.

Instead of accompanying Jarrod, I should be sleeping since I have to work tonight, but here I am.

"Nobody. Why are you watching me?"

"I wasn't, but Kyree pointed out how sad your ass was looking, so I came to check on you. Don't be embarrassing me. You know cuz is extra sensitive with his old lady being pregnant."

A low chuckle escapes, and I shake my head at Jarrod before laughing when Kyree walks up and punches Jarrod in his stomach.

"Stop capping and leave my old lady out of your gossip session," Kyree says before turning his attention to me. "Yo, you good, G? I'm not used to you sitting anywhere quiet. Your dog died or something?"

"His ass has been acting funny since he met some shorty who has been giving him her ass to kiss. I'm about ready to schedule him to see a head doctor because my bro

is down bad.” Jarrod interjects.

“Wow. You’re reaching, but I’ll let you have it.”

“Oh, what happened then? You found out she eats toe jam with her toast?” Jarrod asks.

“Wait, what? That’s some nasty shit. Please tell me it ain’t nothing like that,” Kyree asks, twisting his nose like he smells something foul.

bzz, bzz

Ignoring Kyree and Jarrod, I remove my phone from my pocket, and a shit-eating grin upturns my lips upon seeing Chaniya’s name on my screen.

Chaniya: I was just thinking about you. Have you gotten rid of your nasty attitude, or do I need to block you again?

“Oh shit! This nigga must have gotten something from old girl. Look at this goofy ass grin,” Kyree says, laughing.

“Right. He has stars in his eyes and everything. Wow. This nigga already fell for ole girl based on the thirty-twos currently on full display. Damn,” Jarrod adds.

I refuse to admit how out of sorts I’ve been feeling since Chaniya went silent on me the night of our date.

I might have gone overboard in how I handled not hearing from her, but in my defense, her perfume still lingered in my kitchen, reminding me of her absence.

Not wanting to keep Chaniya waiting, I ignore the niggas in my presence and type my

response.

Me: Let me make it up to you, love. When are you free again?

A strong desire to lock Chaniya into our next date hits me like an ocean current, causing me to hold my breath while waiting for her reply.

Chaniya: I'm not sure. My baby is sick, and I need to focus on nursing him back to health. I can let you know when my schedule opens up. Until then, have a great day.

"Wow. Wow," I express while rereading Chaniya's words because I had no idea she had a baby.

My body overheats, and my eyes are stuck on the message, trying to determine whether this is a deal breaker.

Chaniya wouldn't be the first woman I've pursued or dated with a kid, but my previous experiences have left me a bit jaded.

I had seen and heard a lot from women who were settling with me because their child's father didn't want them.

Or they were still sleeping with him while entertaining me.

What has me the most hesitant is the past experience that had me ready to lock the woman down only for her to pop up pregnant by the deadbeat baby daddy.

"Damn. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, she tanked your battleship that fast. Aye, cuz, do you know any head doctors? My boy can't keep going through this depressive state." Jarrod's voice penetrates my ears.

“Fuck you. Aye, Kyree, can you take this nigga home? I gotta make a run.”

“Wow. I get it, though. You need time to cry alone in the car. Be easy, bro. It’ll get better.” Jarrod smirks before jogging toward the back of the garage when I stand.

Flipping him off, I head out of the shop without another word because although I’m not gonna cry in my car, I do need time to process the bomb Chaniya just dropped.

“Fee, fi, fo, fum, walk away while you’re still numb,” I chant while playing with the honey nut Cheerios on my table. “Red fish, blue fish, should I take a chance with this fish?” Picking up a dry Cheerio, I throw it in my mouth.

I have no idea why my overly grown ass is chanting nursery rhymes or playing with this cereal.

Yet, my mind has been consumed with how I should handle Chaniya having a child.

I’m unsure how it will affect what I desperately want to build with her.

While my mind is in turmoil, my bitch ass heart is crying at the thought of walking away.

My mind wants me to disappear without a trace, but my dumb ass heart wants me to see how things go.

bzz

Chaniya: Can you call me?

My heart races, and my chest stretches upon reading Chaniya’s text because I still haven’t decided what to do. Dialing Chaniya’s number, I get up from the table and

head to the living room before plopping on the couch just as the call connects.

“Hello, stranger.”

My dick twitches at the soft, melodic voice hitting my ear, which causes me to lick my lips before replying.

“My bad. I’ve been working longer hours at the hospital due to an increase in laboring mothers. I-uh, was gonna call you, but time hasn’t been on my side. How are you, though?”

When did you become a rambler?

Hanging my head, I rub circles on my chest when a dull ache forms as I wait for Chaniya to speak.

“Hm. Okay. I understand busy schedules and all. I just was wondering why I didn’t hear anything after telling you about my son.

I was wondering if you still wanted to be friends or if my being a mother has turned you off?

I also sent you a friend request on Facebook that’s been ignored.

What’s up, Mr. Malone? Are you ghosting me? ”

I saw Chaniya’s friend request but left it in the cue while I attempted to figure out how I wanted to proceed with whatever this thing is between us.

Oh, that’s cute. Now, you don’t know how to define your desire to be with this woman. Wow. Tighten up, nigga. A baby ain’t the worst thing this woman could have

shared with you.

“My bad, Chaniya. No, I’m not trying to ghost your pretty ass. I’m also not interested in being your friend. Friends are platonic, and that’s the last thing I want from you.”

“Oh really? What do you want from me, then?” The laughter and a tinge of merriment in Chaniya’s voice make me smirk at her subtle way of questioning my objective concerning us.

“To be your man, Chaniya. What do you think about that?”

“I think I can be open to giving you a test run.”

Chuckling, I shake my head because, who the hell poses such a thing with someone who wants them?

“A test run?”

“Mhm. The fact that I had to reach out to you when you’ve previously been gung-ho about contacting me, protecting me, and pursuing me makes my suggestion necessary.

At thirty-two, I’m too old to continue letting you niggas play in my face.

Either you want to be serious about being in a relationship or you don’t.

The choice is yours, but the agreement to make things permanent is mine.

I suggest you react accordingly.” With that, Chaniya disconnects the call, and my dick hardens while pushing against my pants at her boss lady move.

“Damn. You better put me in my fucking place then.” Dropping my phone on the couch, I head to my bedroom to take a cold shower to relieve the pressure in my dick.

“Hey, Son. What brings you by? Your mom is at her line dance class.” Dad greets me when I enter the den, before standing from his recliner and pulling me into a one-arm hug.

“Oh, okay. I didn’t want anything, just came to see how you were, that’s all. I didn’t know Ma was doing a class like that.”

I want to talk to Dad about Chaniya, but I need to feel him out before jumping into a conversation that could become heavy.

While I’m 89 percent sure that I’m going to continue pursuing Chaniya, there’s still a lingering 11 percent doubt within me.

Unlike the others who fit Chaniya’s situation, my feelings for Chaniya are deeper.

I can see myself putting a ring on Chaniya’s finger in the future and giving her children for us to raise together.

“Oh yeah, she’s been doing it with Candace for the last week or so. I’m about ready to pop up on her ass because I need to see what’s causing the extra bounce in her step when she comes home after class.”

A smirk falls in place because Dad ain’t about to pop up on Ma regardless of how she returns home.

Dad taught me that a confident man never has to become an insecure one where his woman is concerned.

If a man loves his woman with everything he has, she will always remain loyal to him, no matter what joker grins in her face.

“What does Mrs. Candace’s husband think about her attending class?”

“That fool goes with her and tries to get me to go too. His lame ass bought him and Candace matching fans to flick and everything. That old fool ain’t about to convince me to throw my hip out trying to prove I still got a damn thing. He can have it,” Dad tells me before both of us laugh heartily.

“I’d love to see you flicking a fan, though, old man. Where dem fans at?” I ask, laughing and dodging Dad’s fist coming toward me.

“Go home, little nigga. Your visiting privilege has been revoked for today.”

“My mama told me I’m welcome here whenever I see fit to come through.”

“Your mama ain’t here with your grown ass. Get out.” Dad playfully shoves me toward the door.

“Fine. I hope Ma finds a man to teach her how to get low at her little class and leave your cantankerous butt.”

“Well, I hope your little pecker goes limp when you try to fuck on that woman who had you grinning the last time you were here.”

“Wow. That’s low, man. Why would you wish such a thing on me like that?”

Dad’s laughter pierces my ears as I leave the den, heading toward the front door after losing the battle between him and me.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

CHANIYA

Germanyne: Alright, Ms. Chaniya. Will you be mine?

“Can I play my game, Mommy?” Caleb asks, distracting me from the incoming text from Germanyne.

Pulling my gaze from the phone, I look at my baby standing in front of me with unkempt hair and his play clothes. Kenyatta hasn’t taken him to the barber shop, so my baby is starting to look like one of those kids whose mothers spend the child support on themselves instead of the kids.

“Maybe later. Have you taken your shower today?”

“Yes, ma’am. I brushed my teeth too.”

“Good. Go put on something from your going out clothes. I’m gonna take you to get a haircut. Then we’ll run by my job before I take you to get something to eat.”

When Caleb goes to do what I’ve said, I return to the open message from Germanyne and send my answer.

Me: Depends. *thinking emoji*

Germanyne: On what? You’ve laid out what it takes for me to win your heart, so don’t throw another roadblock now that I’ve accepted your challenge.

Me: Touche. Alright, I'll agree to be yours, but remember, this is only a trial run.

Germaine: All I heard was... you understand I'm playing for keeps. Let the marathon begin, Chaniya.

Me: *winking emoji*

"Caleb! How long does it take you to change clothes?"

"I couldn't find my other shoe, Mommy. I'm ready now," Caleb says, running toward me, and my heart stretches upon seeing the wide smile on his face.

I have today off because our schedule is light enough so that the other assistant can handle whatever appointments we have without me.

With Caleb about to start kindergarten soon, I relish the opportunity to spend time with him.

I also need to resume taking Caleb to get his haircuts because I can't afford to rely on Kenyatta for him to disappear on me.

Keeping Caleb's hair neat and cut is something I will never take lightly or allow someone else to do.

If I had to guess, I would say that Kenyatta is sniffing behind a new woman because it's the only time he can't be counted on.

I'm good with him being absent because it's what I needed to see, to take control of Caleb's maintenance routine myself.

"Can you take me to a new barber shop, Mommy? I don't like the lady who cuts my

hair anymore.”

My hand hovers over the gear shift when Caleb asks his question because I wasn’t aware that a woman has been cutting his hair. I always assumed that Kenyatta was taking him to another guy. Yet, I never asked either, so this is news to me, causing me to probe a little further.

“Why don’t you like the lady anymore?”

“When cousin Kenyatta is around, she’s really nice, but then she stops talking to me when he leaves the room. I also want a boy to cut my hair because I don’t want to be called baby during the cut.”

Shaking my head, I put the gear in drive and head out of the driveway, even more satisfied with my decision.

“I hear you, big boy. Mommy got it from here.”

“You’re the bestest Mommy ever.” Caleb gushes when we’re leaving the barber shop he’ll now be coming to on a weekly basis.

Ricardo Majors is Caleb’s new barber, and after seeing his detailing and precision cut of Caleb’s hair, I’m happy to let him be the person responsible for keeping Caleb together.

Ricardo has a small shop inside one of the salon lofts, and I stumbled on him after talking to one of the clients at work.

“I want some ice cream,” Caleb demands.

“First off, bestest isn’t a word. Second, that’s not how we ask for things we want, is

it?”

“Sorry. Can I please have some ice cream? I was good for Mr. Ricardo, like you told me.”

Kid logic will never be something adults can question or comment on because they often have no rhyme or reason for the things they say.

“I guess. However, you have to eat all your lunch first. Where do you want to go?”

zzt, zzt

Tapping my earpiece, I answer the incoming call without checking to see who's calling. “Hello.”

“This is me making sure you know how invaluable your position in my life is.” Germaine’s voice flows through the gadget, instantly making me smile.

“Seeing how we just confirmed your upgraded status, your effort is duly noted, Mr. Malone. Thank you,” I say, giggling, before remembering that Caleb is with me and getting myself together.

“I’m on the early shift today, so I’m on break and thinking about you. What you got going on?”

“Oh. I just finished getting my son’s haircut. Now, we’re headed to get some lunch.”

“How old is your son? I assumed you had a baby.”

No wonder Germaine had gone silent on me after telling him about Caleb. I understand how complicated it could be to learn the woman you’re interested in has a

baby. I also understand how sticky and complex of a situation Germaine might assume me to have.

“He’s five, and although he’s out of the infant stage, he’s still my baby.”

“Mommy!” Caleb interjects before Germaine has a chance to react.

“What? You are my baby,” I tell Caleb.

Smiling, I hit the unlock button on my car before waiting for Caleb to get in and sit in his booster seat before securing his safety belt.

“I can respect little man for not wanting you to keep him in that phase. Don’t be stunting his growth.” Germaine’s humorous delivery has me rolling my eyes while smiling wider. “I’ll let you get to mommy mode. Enjoy your time with little man. Call me if you’re able to this evening.”

“My mommy was talking to some man, Nana. She was smiling and everything,” Caleb tells Nana, who’s eating up the information while sipping from whatever is in her coffee mug.

Edna O’Neal doesn’t drink coffee, so I know it has to be tea or something she doesn’t want Caleb to see. After running around with Caleb earlier, we stopped by Nana’s house to spend some time with her. All was going well until Caleb decided to share my business with his great-grandmother.

“Oh, you don’t say. What’s his name?” Nana probes.

“I don’t know, but she was talking fast, and I couldn’t hear everything.” Caleb shrugs before eating the grapes Nana gave him.

“Next time, pay closer attention. Nana wants to know everything. Okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Caleb confirms before I interject to prevent this conversation from spiraling any further.

“It’s not Caleb’s job to spy on me, Nana. I’m sitting right here, so why not just ask me whatever you want to know?” I ask.

“Hm. You’re Vernise’s child, so I know you’re sneaky ass ain’t about to be forthcoming. My baby will tell me everything while cutting through the weeds of the roundabout information you’ll share.”

“Hey, Nana. Oh, hey, Niya. Hey, munchkin,” Gina says, entering the room and effectively ending the useless conversation Nana is attempting to have with me.

Since Gina is here to shift the focus from me, I open Facebook to do some mindless scrolling. I’m only a minute into my observations when I see that Germaine has been tagged in a post causing me to pause my scrolling to read it.

Sherita Malone-Albert

I can’t wait for next week so we can get back to us.

#weddingseason #foreverus #forevermine

Wrinkles stretch across my forehead, matching my frown and eyebrows that are hiking after reading this generic post about the man who’s seemingly supposed to be mine. Before I can catch myself or climb down from petty mountain, I type a post of my own, also tagging Germaine.

C. K. O’Neal

Since he wants to play Chess, let me move around some pieces. I got the first move...

#Iwarnedyou

Once I upload my post, I exit Facebook with new energy coursing through my veins because I told Germaine about his trial run before this thing started. Now, it's time to show him better than I can tell him.

“Can you keep Caleb for a couple of hours, Nana?”

“Mhm. I’ll feed him and get him ready for bed so you don’t have to worry about doing anything but taking him home and tucking him in.”

Single mother or not, my family has always held me down where Caleb is concerned, and for that, I’m forever grateful. I never have time to need a break because either Mom or Nana regularly steps in to keep Caleb.

“Thank you, Nana. Gina, you should come with me to Club Stew for a little bit. I want to get a couple drinks.”

“Let’s go.” Gina co-signs without hesitation.

ding

G. Malone tagged you in a post on Facebook

“Hold on,” I say to the man grinding against my ass on the dance floor at Club Stew.

My petty ass went live not too long ago with this man behind me, begging me to let him take me home. Opening the social media app, my heart rate elevates rapidly as I go to my page to see what Germaine tagged me in.

“Oh shit!” I shout, cupping my free hand over my mouth when I read Germayne’s post.

G. Malone

Why the hell would you get on Marvin Sapp’s internet talking like you ain’t got a man who ain’t afraid to set some shit off behind you?

Oh wait, you don’t know that side of me yet.

I keep telling your hard-headed ass that my profession won’t prevent me from crashing out.

Tell that fake-ass Keith Sweat that the only way you’re gonna need a side nigga is if my body is stinking in a grave.

“Uh, cousin. I don’t think this one is like the other niggas you date. Playing with him might be hazardous for this man’s health. Aye, playboy, you’re barking up the wrong tree,” Gina walks up saying after looking at her phone.

I’m speechless and trying to quiet the pussy popping in my lower region at Germayne’s reckless mouth that is turning me on something fierce.

Maybe I’m the one who needed to understand something by agreeing to a trial run with Germayne.

It’s clear that while I’m playing chess, Germayne is clearly playing checkers, and I just lost. Here I was, throwing my age around with Germayne not long ago, and he just told me that age doesn’t make a person mature.

My petty antics contradict the woman I am, and I shouldn’t have let some random

woman get me out of character.

Going to Germaine's page, I no longer see the woman's post telling me that although he's seen it, it wasn't worth his response.

Germaine: Agreeing to be mine means you activated the dormant crash out. Now, are we forging through this phase of our relationship the easy or hard way, Ms. Malone? I personally can move either way.

My panties are done for when I read Germaine's text because my gullible and self-destructive ass can't hide how much I love his aggression. Maybe I need my head examined or something because I should be ending this thing before it gets too deep and running in the opposite direction.

Germaine: *gif attached* Judge Judy tapping her watch.

Say less, Germaine.

"Sorry, but I gotta go. Thanks for the dance," I say to the man hovering despite Gina's warning. "Come on, cousin. Pushing this man any further isn't wise." Grabbing Gina's hand, I lead us toward the club's exit.

"You almost had me worried that you were about to become one of those irritating women who can't see the forest for the trees, cousin. If you have a man at home, why the hell are you in this club acting single?" Gina asks once we're in my ride less than ten minutes later.

"My dumb ass had a momentary lapse in judgment, but I'm burying the idiot who foolishly walks into situations reminiscent of this one. Hopefully, it won't cause a setback in this budding relationship. I really like this one, cousin."

“Then act like it, because this isn’t even the kind of woman you are.”

The music playing from the radio becomes background noise, allowing me to exit the spot I’m in and head back to Nana’s to grab Caleb to take my ass home.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE

“ C heck it . . . Never let another woman cause you to stoop to bird brain status, especially when there’s no context to the bullshit they release from their mouth.

From the beginning, I’ve been trying to be about you.

Therefore, you shouldn’t place me in a predicament that forces me to place you in every category but the one I prefer you to be in. ”

Staring into Chaniya’s eyes, I can only hope she’s picking up what I’m putting down because there won’t be a next time. Respect is a two-way street, and I don’t play about getting what I effortlessly provide.

“I’m sorry. I should have called you and not reacted without thinking. It was petty and totally uncommon for how I handle things. It’s just that I have been blindsided be?—”

“I’m not the nigga that played with your heart, so don’t hold his mishandle against me. Until and unless I show you something foul, give me and us a fighting chance. I’m not here to fuck you over, Chaniya.”

“Okay. I’ll trust you until I have a reason not to.” Fear and uncertainty flash in Chaniya’s eyes, which makes my blood boil because it’s a sign of her relationship trauma.

The encounter between her and her ex resurfaces, which causes a renewed passion to

show Chaniya that I can be a man worthy of her heart.

Convincing a woman who's dealt with trash men in the past to judge you based on what you show her can be challenging.

Yet, I'm planning to allow my actions to be the loudest thing in the room between Chaniya and me, so she has no choice but to acknowledge my differences.

"Now that we have that out of the way, I still need you to be my plus one at my little sister's wedding. Unless you want the Facebook poster to have a mi?—"

"We're working through our brief disagreement. Don't piss me off. When is the wedding?"

"I see your mad ass only took away the cliff notes of old girl's post. Next weekend. Do you have prior plans?"

"Mommy! I had a nightmare. Can I sleep with you?" A squeaky voice interrupts the conversation, preventing Chaniya from responding.

Her face leaves the camera, and ruffling sounds hit the line before a little boy's curious face stares into the camera.

"Hi," he says sheepishly.

"What's up, man?" I return the greeting for the little boy with identical eyes to his mother, but his complexion is a shade lighter.

"Who are you?" he says with a slight frown.

"You need to mind the business that pays you, Caleb Trevon. Ain't nobody talking to

you. Either get on your side and go to sleep or go back to your room.” Chaniya interjects before I can respond, which I appreciate because I’m not sure what to say to a kid this young about adult affairs.

“Okay, Mommy. I want to stay here, so I’m going to sleep.”

A grin slides into place because I don’t blame little man for wanting to sleep with his mom after a nightmare. As a kid, I had a few nights of sleeping at the foot of my parents’ bed after a bad dream or two.

“Can I call you after he goes back to sleep?”

“How about we follow his lead and get some rest too?” I suggest.

“I’m not ready to be done with you.”

“Say less, Chaniya. Call me when you can.”

“Do you think proposing during E’s wedding would be inappropriate?” Desi asks the next day.

“Propose what? Commitment? Cohabitation? What are you talking about?” I ask, adjusting the suit jacket I’m checking out with the tailor.

Essence’s man either doesn’t have family and friends that like or tolerate him, or he’s a yes man who is willing to relinquish complete control of his wedding to Essence.

Either way, I think he’s trying too hard because not only am I one of his groomsmen, but so are Jarrod and Desi.

I understand including me, but my future brother-in-law doesn’t know Desi or Jarrod

from a can of paint to have them standing with him on his big day.

“Better than that, what about Chardonnay makes you believe she’s ready or open to saying yes to a proposal?” Jarrod adds.

“Don’t. Me and Chardonnay are on better terms, so I want to ask her to marry me,” Desi tells us.

“You’re about to lose more than the cost of this suit if you ask that girl to marry you. You’re lucky she agreed to fake dating your ass. Don’t push it.” Jarrod looks Desi up and down before shaking his head while walking away.

“Isn’t my love enough, though?” Desi asks dejectedly while staring at Jarrod’s retreating back.

“This ain’t that, and I don’t want to see you go out bad. Give Chardonnay more time, bro.” Patting Desi on the shoulder, I follow Jarrod’s direction, feeling bad for my friend.

My cousin has him in and out of his feelings like she’s in a game of double Dutch, and I hate it for him.

I have done my best to steer him away from Chardonnay, but his no-listening wannabe in-love ass refuses to hear anything but Chardonnay’s rants, so it’s above me at this point. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I dial my woman’s number, chuckling lightly because she could have me strung out like Desi if I’m not careful.

“Hello, handsome. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I’m wondering what you plan to wear to the wedding. I can’t have you not matching my fly and shit.”

“Tuh. You’re reaching, but what are the wedding colors? I’ll find something to blend in,” Chaniya informs me.

“Hold on a second,” I say when another call hits my line, instantly piquing my interest upon seeing the hospital’s number flashing on the screen. “Hello.”

“Hi, Germaine. Dr. Carpenter asked me to call you. There’s a few mothers in active labor, and she needs your assistance,” the scheduling assistant provides after my greeting.

“Okay. I’m on my way.” I speak again when the call ends, resuming the connection with Chaniya. “I’m back. I gotta head to work. If it’s not too late and you’re free, I’d like to cook for you again. We can discuss the wedding details then.”

“Ooh. I have Caleb, so tonight isn’t good for me, but call me when you’re able to talk.”

“Say less.”

Dating a single mother comes with challenges, yet those obstacles won’t be the reason Chaniya and I don’t work out. Meeting her made me consider my future and settle down in hopes of finding a woman to commit myself to for a lifetime.

“What’s your relationship with your son’s father like? Y’all get along and shit?”

No matter how often Chaniya and I talk, it’s never enough for me, so I’m always down to sit on the phone with her whenever and however long the opportunity arises.

It’s weird because I’m not a man who likes sitting on the phone, talking about everything and nothing.

Yet, being with Chaniya makes me cherish every phone conversation and time I get in her presence.

“Nonexistent. Caleb’s father isn’t present.

I’m taking care of him by myself with some help from my mom, grandmother, and family.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and I, for one, can attest to the truth within that statement.

Without my family, I don’t know what I would do.

They’ve never turned their backs on me and are always willing to spend time with Caleb. ”

An immediate and deep frown slides into place upon hearing Chaniya’s words because, as a man raised by both parents, I don’t respect any man who doesn’t take care of their child.

Having an amazing father, I can value and appreciate what it means to have one, which irks me to know Caleb’s father didn’t step up to help raise him.

“Where is he at? Maybe he needs a little motivation because although his sperm was free, his responsibility isn’t.”

Silence becomes a backdrop after I make my statement, causing my brows to wrinkle when Chaniya doesn’t respond.

“Why are you so quiet, Chaniya?”

“I’m to blame for doing this shit on my own.” Chaniya whispers so low I almost didn’t hear what she said.

“Nah, you did?—”

“I was drunk and slept with three men, and they vanished into thin air, making it impossible for me to track them down for a paternity test.” Chaniya’s spiel is aggressive, with a hint of hurt and sadness that pinches my heart.

I don’t know which makes me madder: Chaniya blaming herself or the careless men who didn’t strap up despite the risky behavior.

“Man, fuck that. You didn’t fuck yourself, no matter how many people you entertained. Those niggas had a responsibility to, at minimum, cover their dick that night. This ain’t all on you, so stop blaming yourself. There has only been one virgin capable of delivering a baby, Chaniya.”

My heavy, deadpan, and aggressive tone can’t be helped due to the fire flowing through my bloodstream.

“Owning my mistake, that soon became my blessing, has been something I’ve done since the morning after the escapade with those men.”

“Hm. Well, it’s time for you to stop that shit. Listen, we’ve all done some reckless shit in our lives. While yours resulted in you getting pregnant, mine resulted in the need for a double restraining order. We?—”

“Hold up. You’re not about to push past that like it didn’t cause some questions. Spill the tea.”

“In my early twenties, I went to a party and wound up sticking dick to two cousins

and one of their best friends. It's another reason I can't attempt to condemn or judge you for your behavior. We all have a past, Chaniya. As long as you still aren't moving the same way, all is well."

"Nope. Definitely learned my lesson, and after dealing with my ex, I'm scared to let you meet Caleb.

That's why I quickly shut down his inquiry into who you are. I don't want my son to feel backlash if things don't work out. I also don't want him to think his mother is okay with parading random men around him. "

"Listen, you never have to explain being a mother to your son. I'll respect your wishes, and whenever you feel like it's time, I'll be ready. I ain't going anywhere."

"Thank you, Gernayne. I appreciate that. It's been so hard trying to maneuver what we're starting to build and not failing Caleb."

"Take the pressure off, Chaniya. I promise I'm not on any bullshit. We're doing things organically minus your pretty ass escorting me to Essence's wedding," I say, chuckling.

"No worries. I have my babysitter lined up, so I'm yours for the weekend if need be."

My dick stands at attention at Chaniya's words, causing me to close my eyes to control the rapid beating within my chest.

"Hell yeah, there's a need for you to be with me. All weekend is a bonus I should have gotten after delivering six babies back-to-back."

"Then you got me, Mr. Malone. Where are the festivities anyway? Oh, shoot, what are the colors? I need to make sure I have my ensemble together."

“It’ll be at some resort-style place about two hours away, so you staying with me for the weekend will be clutch. Purple and white are her colors. Do you have something? If not, we can hit up the mall to get you together. It’s last minute, so I’ll expense whatever you need.”

“Oh no. I got something in both of those colors. I’m good, but thanks for offering. Are we going to be leaving on Friday? I need to determine if I need to leave work early.”

“Yes, we’re leaving on Friday. What time do you get off?”

“We close at two on Fridays.”

“That’s perfect. Take your stuff with you, and come to my house when you leave work.”

“Okay. This is gonna be so much fun. I love weddings.”

“Say less, Chaniya.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

CHANIYA

“So, you’re gonna spend the weekend with this man after barely knowing him?” Mom asks before stirring the grits she’s preparing for breakfast.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Hm. Don’t come back here talking about you got another bastard baby on the way, Chaniya Katia. Once is an accident, the second time is stupidity, and I didn’t raise you to be giving out pussy with no retribution.”

One thing I have always disliked about Vernise O’Neal is her self-righteous attitude and ability to make me feel lower than scum.

While she has no problem babysitting Caleb or doing whatever is necessary to make his life unproblematic, she has given me nothing but judgment since I announced my pregnancy.

It’s why I prefer Nana over her because while Nana can be blunt and nosy as hell, she’s never judgmental.

It’s crazy to me how Mom has no clue who my father is but has been judging me for repeating her risky behavior. Not to mention how supportive Nana has always been toward her when she was the woman without knowledge of her child’s father.

“Do you hear me talking to you, Chaniya? I’m serious. Mom and I keep Caleb regularly so you can live a normal life without feeling overwhelmed. However, the

quickest way for me to let you have it is to get pregnant again by another no-count man who leaves you holding the bag.”

A heaviness settles within my body, and dejection spreads through me like a wildfire with endless acres while I try my best to suppress the tears begging for release.

Mom had no problem with me dating Dedrick because she said she didn’t expect him to marry me or fill me with babies for him to abandon.

What’s worse is her happiness knowing that Dedrick and I had broken up.

My own mother seemed happy with my pain and heartache, which baffles me beyond understanding.

“Chaniya!” Mom shouts.

“I heard you, and it's not like that with us, but I like him, and we’re dating. Accompanying him to his sister’s wedding is another way for us to establish our relationship. I?—”

“You don’t have a good track record with men, nor do you know how to read what they aren’t saying to your gullible ass.”

“I’m not a child, so?—”

“You better watch your tone before you are sitting at home with your son instead of chasing behind some strange man you just met. I don’t know where I went wrong with you, but you really need to make better choices.

When are you gonna get tired of being some man’s cum bucket?

You ain't tired of having sex with no rewards yet? ”

Tears slip from my eyes faster than I'm able to stop them, causing me to quickly turn my head so Mom doesn't see the effect her words are causing.

Growing up, I have paid the price for the man Mom didn't know fathered me, and it hurts me to catch her unmerited wrath.

The only good thing about how bad Mom treats me is that Caleb never gets any of her anger, disappointment, judgment, or any other negative thing she constantly gives to me.

“Are you done with the grits, Grandma? My stomach is about to fall out,” Caleb asks, causing me to wipe my face so I don't alarm him.

“Almost done, sweet face. Do you want sausage or bacon?” Mom says, causing me to roll my eyes at her rapid code-switching now that she's talking to Caleb.

“Can you actually put everything in containers? We have another stop to make.” I interject before Caleb has a chance to respond.

My need to escape is heavy, and I have to get out of here. I'm going to go by Nana's to ask her about keeping Caleb for the weekend, because dealing with Mom won't be the reason my weekend is ruined.

“I know that's your mom, but you don't have to take her shit, Chaniya. You fucked like life was golden, or whatever the Philly native sings about, and got pregnant. It's not the worst thing you could or can do to destroy your life,” Riele rants.

“On top of that, the sin was in your act, not the precious life that came as a result. Tell Vernise's ass to worry more about her wig selections on Temu than who you choose

to bust it wide open for. She gets on my damn nerves,” Isis adds.

“Not too much on my?—”

“I wish you would defend Vernise after spending the last hour sobbing like your new man sent you packing after giving you spine-numbing orgasms.” Riele interjects, and I clamp my mouth shut because she’s got a good point.

While Mom likes to use me as a verbal punching bag, Nana doesn’t play about me. After failing to pry why I entered her house with red eyes, Nana told me to go home and sleep it off. She also told me that Caleb was staying with her to give me an extra day to get myself together.

“I think what’s bothering me the most is that Mom acts like her life has given me a blueprint for changing our family’s narrative.”

“We’ve known since we were kids that Vernise O’Neal is unhappy and thrives on trying to push her energy into your body however she can. At some point, you’ve got to either shit or get off the pot, bestie,” Riele says.

“I just want her to stop holding it against me when I do enough of it myself. I no longer drink heavily and limit myself to one or two drinks if I indulge at all. Being a responsible parent also means I only occasionally partake in edibles. I’m doing what I can so Caleb doesn’t suffer from my decisions, but when will Mom stop nailing me to a cross for them?

It’s exhausting and painful when Mom only focuses on that one mistake.

I’m tired of the constant ridicule,” I say.

A stabbing feeling spreads across my chest, which causes me to rub circles in the area

to relieve the ache. My bottom lip trembles when the urge to cry hits me, and I close my eyes to prevent the water glistening from falling.

“Then do something about it. You don’t have to entertain or engage with her simply because she’s your mother. Roaches give birth, but that doesn’t make them mothers.” Riele interjects.

Laughter escapes my mouth at Riele’s last statement because she doesn’t care what she says.

“You’re stupid, Riele. You didn’t tell a single lie, but you’re still stupid.” Isis co-signs, laughing.

Buzzing in my ear has me pulling my phone away to see Germaine’s name and an incoming text that increases my pulse. Placing the call on speaker, I open my message app to read the text from my man.

Germaine: I just wanted you to know that you’ve been on my mind all day.

“I gotta go,” I say, cutting off whatever Riele was saying because I need to call my man.

“Later,” Isis says.

“Well damn. Bye,” Riele snaps.

Without another word, I disconnect the call, dialing Germaine’s number, desperate to hear his voice.

“I expected a text, but this is much better. Hello, Chaniya.”

“I’m gonna text you my address. Come over. I need to see you,” I say breathlessly.

A low chuckle reverberates through the line, sending an electric jolt straight to my lower region before Germayne replies.

“Nah. We ain’t confusing little man. We’ll be together all weekend. You can?—”

“He’s not here. Please, come over.” The whine in my voice can’t be helped because of my warring emotions and the need to be in my man’s arms.

“Send the address.”

A giddy feeling surges through my body when Germayne disconnects the call without another word, and I quickly send him my address.

“What is your mom like?” I ask, lying against Germayne’s chest.

Germayne and I are in my bed on top of the blankets, fully clothed, talking while I enjoy the calming effects of being in his arms.

“If I had to give an example, I’d say she’s like Dwayne Wayne’s mom in A Different World .” Germayne chuckles, and the heavenly sound vibrates my head, bringing a smile to my lips.

“Oh, is she more nurturing, overbearing, or compassionate?” Dealing with Vernise O’Neal makes me nervous about meeting and mingling with Germayne’s mother for the weekend. “How about your dad? Is he militant, an undercover perv, or someone you admire?”

“Are you scared to meet my people, Chaniya?”

Got damn, Germayne!

The low octave in which Germayne asks his question has me shifting to see his face because I need to stare into his eyes.

“I’m not scared, per se. I just want to prepare myself for what I’m about to encounter. If the roles were reversed, I would have you avoid my mother like the plague.”

If things between Germayne and me develop into something long-term, I must figure out how to integrate him with Mom.

The way she treats me is a level of toxicity I don’t want to bleed over onto anyone else.

Granted, Mom is strategic and syrupy sweet to everyone but the child she birthed.

Yet, I don’t feel the need to chance her interaction with Germayne, especially if it could potentially ruin whatever happiness I’m experiencing.

“Whenever you’re with me, you’ll never have a reason to fear anyone, regardless of who they are.”

My body moves without permission when my mind demands that I seal in his declaration.

Thankfully, Germayne gets the silent request, and a smirk upturns his lips before his head lowers, meeting me halfway.

The awkward position of my body might be painful later, but it’s a pain that I’ll gladly welcome for this moment.

The smile in Germayne's eyes contains a sensuous flame that increases my body temperature.

An irresistibly devastating grin slides in place the closer Germayne's head becomes.

My pulse is racing, and my breaths are coming out in low and slow pants from my desire to connect with this handsome man.

With the speed of light, Germayne gathers me into his arms before holding me snugly seconds before connecting our lips.

When his tongue enters my mouth, shivers of desire race through me, and my pearl thumps with wild abandon.

The guttural sound from Germayne has me desperate for more as my arms claw his shirt like a kitten.

Germayne breaks the kiss only to trail light kisses from my lips to my neck, causing a heady sensation to surge through me.

"Please." I pant, ready to throw caution and risk to the wind.

"I—"

"No, don't reject me. I know it hasn't been very long for us, but I'm sure we've both fucked people for less."

Okay, blame my overheated libido or my lack of toe-curling sex, but I want Germayne in the worst way after feeling his lips on mine. If the truth be told, I can ultimately blame this on Germayne's persuasive lips that spoke to every part of my body.

This man got me ready to beg him for the dick with his young ass.

Tuh, you calling this grown-ass man young while thrusting your hips against him is nasty work.

The statement registers in my mind, and sure as shit, my pelvis is moving slowly without instruction from me.

“Come on, Chaniya. We’ve been doing so—mm.”

No longer in the mood for rebuttal, I suck Germayne’s bottom lip into my mouth while slowly caressing his dick through the joggers he didn’t have sense enough not to wear over here.

Feeling the hardening of his hammer encourages me to keep going, and my tongue begins a voyage of pleasure I don’t want to cut off.

“Mm.” A moan escapes my mouth, and my grip on Germayne’s weighty dick tightens.

Wordlessly, Germayne sweeps me weightlessly into his arms, allowing my pelvis to rest in his lap, and heat settles within my lower region when his dick thumps against me.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE

“M an, stop all this damn crying and tell me what the fuck is going on.” Pacing back and forth, I try to reel in my frustration from Desi calling me.

I had just made the decision to give Chaniya the dick when my phone started ringing back-to-back.

Answering Desi’s call and hearing him crying like somebody was dying had me stopping Chaniya in her tracks.

My dick was hard as parchment paper leaving her crib, only to get here and Desi’s wack ass was doing more crying than talking.

“Here you go.” Chaniya’s soft voice interjects, handing Desi some tissue.

Seeing the panic on my face had Chaniya refusing to let me come alone, which irritates me more to see my woman trying to soothe this nigga. Right about now, I should be pushing Chaniya’s thick thighs toward her ears instead of pacifying Desi.

“Thank you, Ms. Chaniya. I appreciate you.” Desi cries.

Heat fills my ears, and I put my hands behind my back to keep from snatching this nigga up or punching his ass.

“Don’t worry about it,” Chaniya says before returning to my side, rubbing her hand up and down my arm.

“Man, I’m not sure if I’m gonna make the wedding after the shit I walked in on today,” Desi tells me.

“Keep talking,” I urge him so I can have all the information before commenting.

“I have been following Chardonnay’s thot ass all day, and like the ho she’s trying to be, she made three different stops.

Three niggas met her at the car, holding court like they were conducting a drug transaction before each of their asses pulled her out of the car and tongued her down.

Three different niggas had their mouths on my fuck?—”

“Man, I know good and got damn well your punk ass didn’t call me over here for this shit.” Fire surges through my blood at the reason Desi interrupts me and Chaniya getting it in.

“Who’s Char?—”

“I have told your stupid ass to quit following me, Desi Williams. You haven’t learned the consequences of searching for hidden things yet?” Chardonnay enters the house, instantly cutting Chaniya off.

Chaniya’s eyes balloon while looking between Chardonnay and Desi, who’s hurrying to wipe his wet face.

This shit is crazy how bad my man is going out behind my cousin, who I tried to steer him away from.

“Char—baby,” Desi says.

“Hello. I’m Chardonnay, Germaine’s cousin. Excuse the bullshit you’re being subjected to right now. These niggas don’t like it when you show their asses we can play their games better than they ever could.”

Chaniya opens and closes her mouth several times while looking unsure of how to respond to the bullshit coming from Chardonnay’s mouth.

“How are you teaching me a lesson when I haven’t done anything but love your dumb ass, though?” Desi interjects.

“Man. We’re out. If this is the type of time y’all are on, don’t come to the wedding. I ain’t about to let neither of y’all fuck up Essence’s big day.” Grabbing Chaniya’s hand, I head toward the front door, over the entire situation.

“So, Desi is in love with your cousin who’s trying to unjustly humble him?” Chaniya asks, whispering.

“Exactly.”

“Hm. That’s?—”

“Their shit, and I’m sorry you had to witness it.”

“Go ahead and go. I’ll stay here until you get back.” Rubbing her stomach with her right hand, Chaniya shoos me with her left.

I checked us into our room an hour ago, and Chaniya still hasn’t gotten comfortable with leaving to meet my family. Now, she’s complaining of stomach pains or something, leading me to believe she’s genuinely having some discomfort or faking to get out of it altogether.

“Alright. Do you need me to get you anything before I go?”

“No. I’m gonna lay down, and hopefully, my stomach will settle. I should be good and ready for the ceremony tomorrow. I’ll just meet your family at the reception.”

The dinner for the wedding party is about to start, so I have no choice but to leave Chaniya while I handle my groomsman duties. I don’t like leaving her while she’s not feeling good, but my hands are tied.

“Hit my line if anything changes. I’ll be back soon.” Stepping closer, I pull Chaniya’s body into mine before kissing her gently on her soft lips.

Leaving the room, I head to the elevator, and the further away I get from Chaniya, the more my chest pinches and my pulse races. Clenching my jaw, I push the button for the elevator and shake my head when Chardonnay, Desi, and Jarrod come into view.

“Where have you been, G?” Jarrod asks, momentarily distracting me from Desi and Chardonnay booed up.

These confused mothafuckas ain’t about to get on my nerves this weekend with their bipolar asses.

“I had to get my woman settled. What’s up?”

“Why isn’t she with you?” Chardonnay interjects.

“Oh, word? When do I get to meet my new sis-in-law?” Jarrod asks, rubbing his hands together.

“She’s a beauty too, bro. She’s what they call a thick madame,” Desi says, and Chardonnay punches him in the arm, frowning deep. “What, bae? I’m just telling bro

about our new sis. Chill.”

“Don’t make me hurt your ass, Desi.” Chardonnay sassily stares him down.

“Aye, man. Y’all need to chill before I fuck around and call them people to shoot both y’all asses with a tranquilizer,” Jarrod adds before I have a chance to respond.

“Great idea. I had to deal with their shenanigans in front of my lady, which was embarrassing. This nigga was snorting and crying, too, looking like somebody in his family died. Had my woman bringing him tissues and looking like she wanted to give his overgrown ass a hug. I mean down fucking bad with his lovesick ass.” I shake my head, looking at Desi kissing Chardonnay’s neck.

“You know what? I’m about to revoke your privileges. Ain’t no brother of mine about to be out here acting like this.” Jarrod looks Desi up and down before exiting the elevator.

“Finally, you put my love on top. Baby, it’s you.” Chaniya is holding the remote control to her mouth, dancing with her back facing me.

With the music blasting from the TV, it’s no wonder why she hasn’t heard me enter the room. For a minute, I lean against the door with my hands crossed and my right ankle crossing over the left.

“You’re the one I love. You’re the one I—oh shit! Germayne!” Chaniya clutches the remote against her chest when she turns to see me watching her faking ass.

Her chest is rising and falling rapidly, and I lean off the door, heading toward her, causing her eyes to balloon the closer I get.

“Ba-ba—Germayne.” Chaniya pants.

“I’m wondering if you like face down, ass up, or missionary.

You see, I have been barely entertaining my people because I was worried about you lying up here feeling bad and shit.

I had to lie to my mom about your whereabouts because my big-mouth dad told her to expect my plus one.

I haven’t told Adele Malone a lie since she caught me sneaking two of her prized Faygo red when I was sixteen.

Now, you got me lying to my old girl at thirty because your scary ass didn’t want to face the music.

So which do you prefer because fucking sickness into you is my mission for the rest of the night. ”

A smirk forms when Chaniya’s eyes fill with lust and desire, which makes my dick brick instantly. After our last attempt at connecting intimately, I’m more than ready to slide between Chaniya’s thick thighs.

“Ba—”

“Ssh. All I need is an F or M to solidify your answer. I got it from there.” Removing the space between us, I hook my fingers into her belt loops, staring at her intently.

Puffs of air coming from her mouth fill my body with heat that fuels my desire, and I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, causing simultaneous moans.

“However you want it,” Chaniya tells me breathlessly.

“Take all this shit off.”

My demand is low and husky, which causes Chaniya’s body to shake slightly, letting me know I’m not the only one on the verge of falling.

Pressing my lips into Chaniya’s, I relish in the fast tempo of my heart.

Sucking her tongue, I allow my hands to roam freely, and my dick becomes excited, thumping wildly against my dress slacks.

Chaniya breaks our lip-lock before squatting while her hands frantically unbuckle my pants, unzip the zipper, and pull my dick from the confines of my underwear.

“Ch—oh shit!” I grab the back of Chaniya’s head to keep from falling when she sucks me into her warm mouth before I communicate a rebuttal.

Her mouth is wet, jaw strong. Chaniya sucks me so fucking good.

I feel the cum inside me stirring within my balls, creeping up the wall of my shaft, yearning to explode inside her mouth.

My head becomes dizzy from the fast reaction to an activity I’ve had performed countless times.

Chaniya moans around my dick before cupping my ass, causing me to stiffen from the uncomfortable placement of her hands.

Yet, Chaniya’s head bobs like my dick is a sweet candy apple, and the shit feels too amazing to stop her or urge her to shift the placement of her hands.

“Fuck!” Under previous circumstances, I could hold out for at least thirty minutes or

an hour, if I shift my focus, from cumming. Not this time.

My toes start to Bankhead bounce, and my legs, ass, and back tighten before my spine curves.

With determination or an apology as her motivation, Chaniya takes more of my dick into her mouth.

Deep, long, and strong fucking strokes which cause me to close my eyes tight, fighting the urge to moan like a bitch from the warmth of Chaniya's expert mouth.

"Damn, Chaniya!" I pant before grunting while thrusting in and out of Chaniya's mouth.

Stars dance behind my lids when a long stream of cum shoots from my dick into Chaniya's hungry mouth. Stumbling slightly, my dick leaves the warm place it's been in, and my eyes slowly open to see Chaniya licking the residue from her mouth.

"You might as well introduce me to little man because I'm marrying your nasty ass. Come here."

Yanking my shirt over my head, I toss it behind me before coming out of my pants, underwear, and shoes. A sneaky grin forms, and Chaniya stands to her full height, and I wordlessly bend to lift her into my arms, heading to the bedroom.

"I'm too he?—"

"Shut that shit up, Chaniya. I got you."

Call me a fool, but any woman who could make me nut in under thirty minutes deserves my last name.

Hell, I felt my virtue leave me the minute my nut shot from my dick, so I ain't about to play with Chaniya's ass.

Either she can get with the program, or I hog-tie her ass and take her to the Justice of the Peace.

She's marrying me, so I suggest she catch up because I know several judges who wouldn't mind seeing me happy, thanks to my delivering several of their children.

"Turn that ass over," I say after depositing Chaniya on the bed.

"I di?—"

"You lost your selection. Now I need to see that fat ass taking my dick from the back." Without another word, I unceremoniously remove Chaniya's clothing until everything haphazardly lies on the floor.

Unspeakable joy surges through me when Chaniya complies with my request. The arch in her back is perfect, and I walk briskly to the nightstand where I've placed my condoms. Call me presumptuous, but a nigga had to be prepared for whatever.

Quickly covering my dick, I return to Chaniya and enter her warm walls inch by inch.

"Damn, this warm mothafucka is lethal." Once I'm fully in, I hold my position, trying not to nut prematurely from the tight grip Chaniya's wall have on my dick.

"G-Germayne." Chaniya moans, rocking her ass into my pelvis.

"Yeah, I'm marrying your ass for sure."

CHANIYA

“Y ou rocked my world. You know you did. And everything I own, I give,” Germayne sings, standing behind me in the shower, and girlish giggles escape my mouth.

“I’ll take the Bentley,” I say, giggling, as my back shakes from Germayne’s laughter vibrating against me.

“Uh, if I had one, the keys would be yours, Chaniya. Let’s get out of here. I got to do some stuff before this ceremony, and I wouldn’t mind having you for breakfast.” Tingles and chills dance all over my body at the sound of Germayne feasting on my pearl.

“Maybe we should stay here; that way, we don’t have to clean up twice. You know, kill two birds with—mm.” Germayne’s fingers slipping inside my sweet spot ends my attempt at persuasion.

“I see you and my pussy are on the same page. We’re on a limited timeframe, but if you cum quickly, I’ll reward you in great detail tonight.” Germayne’s free arm wraps around my chest, holding me against his body while his other hand thrusts in and out of me.

“Ssh—mm—b—G—” My words are illegible, and I close my eyes, enjoying the pleasure while the water cascades over me, mixing with my juices.

“Knowing I’m the cause of your pleasure and unraveling has my dick harder than

Chinese arithmetic. Soak my fingers, Chaniya.”

“G-G-G—” I moan.

“Mhm. That’s it, mama. Cum for me.” Germayne’s voice is husky and encouraging, causing me to sag against his body as mine convulses.

My energy is nonexistent minutes later when Germayne gently removes his hand from my sweet spot, causing slight aftershocks as he does.

After going multiple rounds last night, Germayne and I slept in, but I could use a nap.

Fatigue hits me, and I’m unable to move or open my eyes as my body comes down from the high Germayne has given me.

“While this is gonna hurt me more than you, we gotta get cleaned up before?—”

brnnng, brnnng, brnnng

The blaring of a cell phone cuts off Germayne’s statement, letting me know that our time has come to an end.

Germayne has responsibilities today that require him to separate from me for multiple hours.

Being his plus one but not having an opportunity to act as such is slightly uncomfortable because I don’t know anyone.

Yet, watching my man walk down the aisle in a tux makes my discomfort manageable.

Hopefully, I'll find some people to chat with until Germaine's duties are over.

"I should have known the quiet from that phone was too good to be true. Come on, we gotta move," Germaine says before grabbing my loofah, adding bodywash, and cleaning me with expert precision that has me swooning.

"Good afternoon. Since you're the only face I don't recognize, I'm assuming you're with Germaine," an unfamiliar feminine tone speaks, causing me to jump from my jittery nerves. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I didn't mean to startle you."

Licking my lips, I lock eyes with a middle-aged black woman whose flawless skin and kind expression instantly calm me. The next thing I notice is her purple dress and how amazing she looks in it. It's a long-sleeved split see-through lace satin that complements her regal face.

"I'm Adele Malone," she informs me with a pleasant smile.

It takes me a minute to react to the reality of meeting Germaine's mother and not registering any malicious intent on her part. In fact, Mrs. Malone's motherly aura is pouring off of her in ways I can't understand due to my history with my own mother.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Malone. My name is Chaniya, and yes, I'm with Germaine."

"Oh no, sweetie. The pleasure is definitely mine. Come on. You're gonna sit up front with the family. Commoners and obligated guests sit back here, and you are neither of those." Taking my hand, Mrs. Malone guides me toward the front, causing stares from some attendees.

Not wanting to miss anything, I made sure to arrive well in advance.

I'm glad I had the foresight to do so after arriving and seeing other like-minded people waiting to enter the space.

The ceremony is being held outdoors, but the area is beautifully decorated with white chairs occupying both sides.

The strategically and artistically placed colors give the area an intimate feel, making me wonder how it looks regularly.

“Ooh, who’s that with Auntie A?”

“That purple dress she’s wearing is the bomb. I wish my big ass was that confident.”

“Damn, she’s finer than a mothafucka.”

Various chatter hits my ears while walking beside Germaine’s mom, but I keep my eyes forward, not wanting to draw any further attention to myself.

“Okay. I’m gonna go check on my daughter, but you’ll be good here. Don’t be afr?—”

“Aye, Ma. I see you introduced yourself and are making sure my precious cargo is taken care of.” Germaine’s voice cuts off whatever Mrs. Adele is saying, causing my eyes to roam his body from top to bottom.

Good God!

Germaine in scrubs is hot. Germaine in joggers is hotter. Germaine in a custom tux with a purple vest is like an overworked boiler.

My Lord, . . . my man, my man, my man.

“I’m gonna give you two some alone time. I’ll be back, Ms. Chaniya.” Mrs. Malone’s voice cuts into my raunchy thoughts.

“See, she’s not bad. You look amazing, Chaniya.” Germaine’s low octave hits me in my lower region, inciting thumping from my pussy.

“Thank you, handsome. You don’t look so bad yourself.” Raking my eyes over his body, I photograph every delicious feature.

The haircut is precise, the beard is glistening without a single hair out of place, bushy eyebrows are tamed and in order . . . Yeah, Germaine is gonna be the only person I see during this ceremony.

“I gotta get in position, but make sure you save every dance for me once this is over.”

“Of course,” I say breathlessly.

Chile, if it wasn’t for my recent period, I might have snuck out to grab a pregnancy test due to all the tears I shed at a wedding where I didn’t know anyone but Germaine.

The flower guy was the highlight of the processional, with his gown behind twirling while throwing flowers down.

What had my eyes glistening was the groom's emotional display while watching the bride come down the aisle.

Now, I am about to scramble to get to the bathroom to inspect my face to determine if I need to return to the room to touch up my makeup.

The last thing I want or need is to show up to the reception looking like I got in a

fight with a raccoon.

“Can you tell Germaine I went to the restroom, Mrs. Malone?”

“Hi, Mom Adele. You look so pretty today. This dress is serving looks.” A woman wearing heavy makeup, a white pantsuit that looks like she pasted it on, and bundles galore walks up, shifting Mrs. Malone’s attention from me to whoever she is.

“Now, I know your parents taught you some manners, chile. Didn’t you see me speaking with someone when you walked up? Don’t be rude.” Mrs. Malone’s frown and chastising tone have me fighting the smirk I want to allow placement on my lips.

“Oh. I didn’t actually see you talking, so I assumed you weren’t engaging with her.”

This bitch.

“Little girl, I’m not about to play these games with you. If you’ll excuse me, I must ensure everything is ready for my daughter and new son.” With that, Mrs. Malone walks away, leaving me alone with the woman now staring daggers into me.

Alright now, Satan. It would be in your best interest to tread lightly. I’m having a good day. Now go ? —

“Who invited you?” The woman’s tone is hostile, and her nose twisting adds to her audacity, forcing me to school my features.

Why didn’t I walk away when Mrs. Malone did?

“I’m with the bride’s side. Chaniya, ple?—”

“Who? I’m a guest of the groom and have been acclimated with the family for years.

I've never seen you before now."

Oh, if it ain't the dodo from Facebook. Take the high road or take it to the gutter . . .
Hm, decisions, dec ? —

"I'm still waiting for you to tell me who you're with at this private ceremony and festivities."

Gutter it is.

"Your fantasy." With that, I walk away while still feeling generous, to ensure my makeup doesn't need to be touched up.

Yea, though I walk through the valley . . . I want to show my natural black ass, but I desperately need to show these people the best side of me.

"Smile, goddess. We never let peasants see us slip or tilt our crown," an older woman whispers while looping her arm in mine.

This woman puts me in the mind of Nana with her salt-and-pepper French roll, white gaucho pants, and purple blouse. The white flats with gems on them let me know that while she's stylish, she's smart by wearing comfortable shoes for this occasion.

"Thank you," I say.

"Don't mention it. I'm Germaine's grandmother, Jolene, and I've been trying my best to not overwhelm you, which is why I didn't make a fuss when you took your seat before the wedding.

Based on the way you handled the trollop a few minutes ago, I knew I needed to make an introduction.

Seeing the goo-goo eyes my grandson has been making while watching you throughout the ceremony, I have a feeling we're gonna need to build a relationship quickly.

I see something in you that I like, and need to bond with you before my daughter, Adele, does. ”

“I'd like that very much, Mrs.—”

“Aht, aht. Call me Grandma Jolene like the rest of my grandchildren.”

“Okay. How's my makeup looking, Grandma Jolene?”

“Baby, why do you think I came to rescue you? We need to get you together before my grandbaby sees you again.”

Laughter bubbles within my belly before escaping my mouth loudly because after loving on me, the last thing I expected my new grandmother to say was that. Grandma Jolene, you're alright with me.

?

You're the only one, only one.

Together till never, together till never, oh

?

“I've missed your beautiful ass, Chaniya. I don't like that this is the first chance we're in each other's space.”

“It’s okay. You’ve had obligations, and I fully understand.

Besides, me and Grandma Jolene have been having a great time.

I didn’t know she could turn up like she is.

I need to introduce her to my nana because they would hit it off.

In a short time, Grandma Jolene don’t play about me, and it’s the best flex I have against the slivering serpent vying for your attention. ”

“Trust me, between you and Sherita . . . you will always emerge victorious, especially after you let me invade your snapping turtle. That mothafucka got me trying to figure out how to worm my way into an exit.”

“Nope. Me and Grandma Jolene have a few more line dances to do.” Patting Germaine’s chest, I step out of his embrace when the slow jam fades, and another trending line dance song starts playing.

“Come on, Chaniya boo. We need to show these folks how grown folks handle these here fans.”

“Wow. Are you throwing me to the curb for my grandmother, Chaniya?”

“Only for a little while longer, bae. No worries. You’ll have me tonight.” Winking, I meet Grandma Jolene in the center of the floor, taking the fan she holds toward me.

“Aye, I’m gonna do this one for the couples in the room.

Men, if you have a special lady, I suggest you make your way to her before someone else does,” the DJ says through the microphone before the record scratches and

Tamia's song begins, while the DJ slows it down to give the men time to reach their women.

Germayne two steps toward me with a sinister smirk that causes me to bob my head slowly. Upon reaching me, he takes my hands and twirls me around before holding me against him while expertly performing the popular steps.

"I'm signing up to have your ass now and later. Grandma Jolene can find her another partner. I've already laid claim to you."

When Germayne spins me so my back rests against his chest, a sinister grin upturns my lips when I see Germayne's ex staring us down.

Thanks to Grandma Jolene, I haven't had to deal with the heffa since our initial encounter.

Seeing her in her feelings about Germayne's attention being on me has me mentally pumping my fist while enjoying this moment with him.

GERMAYNE

“G ood morning.”

“Good morning to you too. How are you feeling?”

Thanks to my grandmother, Chaniya spent most of the night hugging the commode, which had me holding her hair and rubbing her back.

Chaniya let Grandma Jolene talk her into drinking some peach-flavored moonshine that one of my southern relatives brought up for the festivities.

We’re supposed to attend a brunch with both families around noon, but I’m unsure if Chaniya will be up for the challenge.

“Like I need to run every time I see Grandma Jolene. Why the hell didn’t you warn me?” Chaniya grumbles with her arm covering her closed eyes.

A low chuckle escapes my mouth because Chaniya had been with Grandma Jolene since the wedding ended, and I had tried to separate the two upon entering the reception.

However, Chaniya told me she was fine and to handle my groomsman duties, so I simply did what she said.

Seeing her radiant smile and camaraderie with Grandma Jolene had me watching Chaniya with stars in my eyes and butterflies in my stomach.

“My bad, boo. I definitely would have if I knew you were sipping on more than champagne. Hell, I can’t even mess with that moonshine.

Unlike you, one session between Grandma Joelene, me, and that moonshine had me shitting for twenty-four hours straight.

Worst day of my life. I haven’t touched that mess since. ”

“Oh my God! You mean, I’m gonna have to prepare for the shits. Oh no, I gotta go home because there ain’t nothi—oh shit.” Chaniya’s arm shifts quickly to her mouth before she damn near trips exiting the bed and running full speed toward the bathroom.

“Damn. She ain’t ever gonna let me live this down.” Leaving the bed, I make my way to the bathroom, cringing at the violent sounds hitting my ears from Chaniya’s dry heaving.

Chaniya has nothing in her stomach, and the painful sounds coming from the bathroom make my chest pinch because I hate to know she’s suffering like this.

Pushing the semi-closed door open, my footsteps stall upon seeing Chaniya’s stomach pulling tight while her head is deep inside the toilet bowl.

The light sound of her crying shakes me out of my momentary pause, causing me to move quickly toward her.

Squatting beside her, I pull her hair back before kissing her cheek, feeling helpless.

“I’m so sorry. What can I do?” I ask when her head comes up, and she gently rests it on the seat.

Her red and fatigued eyes pull at my heartstrings because this is not how I saw our first overnight weekend going.

“I haven’t been this sick from drinking since the night I created my son. Maybe I need to stop drinking altogether because this ain’t it. Hugging my toilet is one thing, but a toilet that I’m unsure of its cleanliness is low and making this ordeal worse. I think I’m done, but I can’t move. C?—”

“Ssh. Of course, I can.” Cutting off Chaniya’s impending question, I scoop her into my arms before moving to the sink so she can rinse her mouth like last night.

Once she’s done, I exit the bathroom, carrying her back to the bed before gently lying her down.

“I’m gonna grab some things to make you feel better.

I’ll also inform my parents about our skipping brunch and whatever other things they have planned for today.

You and I are gonna stay in bed until time for us to check out.

Then I’m taking you back to my crib so I can nurse you back to health. Who has little man?”

“Nana. I’m not supposed to get him until tomorrow,” Chaniya informs me weakly.

“Okay. Rest. I’m gonna get myself together, and then I’ll be back.”

Moving to the bathroom to shower, foreign feelings course through my body at Chaniya being sick and my not doing anything to prevent it. Allowing her to hang with Grandma Jolene shouldn’t have come with these consequences, and I feel

horrible that it did.

“Thank you, Germaine.”

Running my hand up and down Chaniya’s back, I stare into her eyes, and my heart slows to a crawl the longer I do. Despite resting most of the morning, Chaniya’s pale face, slower countenance, and red yet tired eyes show signs of the aftermath of her indulging in moonshine with my grandmother.

“No thanks needed. I hate that you’re suffering, love.”

I have been hydrating Chaniya with Pedialyte so she can replenish her electrolytes, and about an hour ago, I gave her some wheat toast that she managed to keep down.

After driving from the wedding venue, where Chaniya slept the entire way, we’ve been in my bed, allowing her to rest. Having Chaniya in my bed and in my arms has given me a level of comfort I didn’t anticipate.

I’ve been with many women and have never experienced the peace I feel with Chaniya and myself in this comfortable position.

“I didn’t know this would be the outcome of my introduction to your family.

After this, I might have to skip all future family events the Malones throw.

Grandma Jolene got me hugging numerous toilets while praying that God would have mercy on my weary soul.

I ain’t about this life, but I need to figure out how to pay you back for this weekend.

I mean, you went from making my toes curl and my titties bounce to cradling my

shitty behind. This ain't been a sexy time for me.”

My lips twist while I fight the urge to laugh from the reminder of Chaniya losing her bowels once I lifted her out of my vehicle.

What's crazy is neither of us had a warning other than the loud grumbling from her stomach.

I quickly scooped Chaniya into my arms, thinking she was about to vomit again, only for it to release from her ass.

“Shit happens. I—” The first two words hit my psyche, and a rumble of uncontrollable laughter escapes my mouth at the relevant analogy I didn't think about before speaking.

“Oh my God! Did you really just say that?” Chaniya's tone is elevated, and mortification is on her pretty face.

“I promise I'm not holding it against you, but please let this be a lesson that Grandma Jolene isn't innocent. She probably set your ass up to see if you would be able to handle what comes with?”

Chaniya's face twists, and a deep frown downturns her lips before she leans away from me, causing my dick to twitch upon seeing the flicker of aggression shining in her eyes.

“Ut unh. Don't warn me now, nigga. Your warning was supposed to come before we arrived.

Now you want to say something after having to clean my stanking ass up.

Too late. Hell, you better hope I don't ghost you after this. ”

“I'll make a nice post on Facebook about how you had a blowout all over my hands and arms if you ghost me.”

“Wow. You ain't shit, Germaine Malone.”

“Meanwhile, are you sure you've gotten out all of yours?

I need to clean my backup sheets.” Smirking, I grab Chaniya's hands, before she hit me, then pull her into my chest. “Chill, love. I don't want you dispensing too much energy.

” Kissing her forehead, I stroke her back soothingly, smiling when she settles against me, causing my chest to pound wildly.

“What are your deal-breakers in a relationship?” Chaniya asks, sipping the chicken noodle soup I made, which makes my dick twitch from seeing her lips cover the spoon.

Thankfully, Chaniya is feeling a little better, so I made some homemade chicken noodle soup to slowly reintroduce food into her system.

“Women who come on too strong. As a man, I like to be the aggressor, and I'm turned off by a woman who does too much.”

“What do you mean by does too much?”

“My ex wanted to plan my life and the life she dreamt for us after our third date. In time, it became old, and the appeal I found in her outward appearance lost it's savor.”

“Hm.” Chaniya’s single-word response doesn’t bother me because I’m too mesmerized by her enjoyment of a simple meal I made for her. “Your turn.”

I’m not sure why I let Chaniya talk me into playing twenty-one questions, but I suppose it’s an excellent way for us to learn more about each other, so I’m entertaining it for now.

“What’s a lesson you’ve learned from past relationships?” Pulling my gaze from Chaniya’s actions, I take a bite of the turkey and Swiss panini I made to accompany the soup.

“Not to take a man at his word but to make sure his actions line up with what he’s freely speaking. I have often missed and ignored red flags because I’ve trusted what a man has spoken and not measured those fruitless words against what he showed me.”

“Yeah. Lip service can have you walking around with blinders on. Always measure a person based on what they show you regardless of what gender you’re dealing with.”

“Trust me. I know now.”

“How am I measuring so far?”

A smile forms around the spoon, which causes a sly grin from me while I wait to hear her response.

“Ask me once we’re past the incidents of this crazy weekend. My turn. What’s something you’ve never told anyone but feel comfortable sharing with me?” The twinkling merriment in Chaniya’s eyes has a low chuckle escaping my mouth.

“Oh, since I have to keep your shitty secret, you want to put us on a level playing field.” Smirking, I take another bite of my sandwich, staring at Chaniya, who rolls her

eyes before putting her spoon down and picking up her sandwich for the first time.

“It's not gentleman-like to keep bringing up my uncontrollable actions. I'm also not trying to keep score. I'm just trying to learn more about the man who's seen me cum and sick in a short period.”

“Say less, Cha-Cha. I've never told anyone that I have a thing for a beautiful, voluptuous woman with braids, a single dimple in her left cheek, warm brown eyes that kickstart my morning at the thought of her, who's slaying single motherhood like the boss woman she is.”

“Yeah, you did. Your people already knew my name before I knew theirs. Tell me a real secret, Germaine.” Chaniya's pout has a grin sliding in place before looking around the room and leaning in close, lowering my tone.

“None of them know that you're the first person I think about each morning and the only person filling my dreams most nights,” I whisper.

A glowing beam fills Chaniya's countenance when I sit back in my chair before resuming eating.

“What does your ideal weekend look like when you're in a relationship?” I ask.

“Tuh. Listen, you definitely owe me another weekend after this one. However, I'm a simple woman who doesn't need a man to do grand gestures to get my attention if he already has it.

I've been wined, dined, and the like for years, but now I want something substantial.

With being a mother, an ideal weekend with a man can be as simple as lying around having a Netflix and chill night. ”

“Duly noted.”

A woman like Chaniya is rare, especially in the early phase of a relationship, and while she’s expressing the simplistic things she enjoys, I plan on providing her with both.

As a single mother, or mother in general, Chaniya deserves to have someone alongside her who will not only ease her burdens but nurture her heart.

I’m the man signing up for the task, and I won’t fail, because with Chaniya, I feel forever.

“I think you already have a bonus because a man who can cook is extremely attractive. This meal might be simple, but few can make delicious homemade chicken noodle soup, sir.”

“Appreciate it, love. Adele and Jolene taught me everything I know in the kitchen.”

“Hm. I guess Grandma Jolene has some redeeming qualities after all.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

CHANIYA

Germane: Have a good day, Cha-Cha. *winking emoji*

Me: Cha-Cha??

Germane: I'm testing it out because you need some cute moniker that you women tend to swoon and melt over. You're also too unique to go with one of the standards. While I don't mind calling you love, you need something more organic. So, for now, I'm testing out Cha-Cha.

Me: Interesting. We'll see how it fares when we're in the throes of passion. If you can moan it with enough filling to make me orgasm, then it might be a keeper. It's definitely a name no one has called me before that's for sure.

Germane: Don't nobody be fucking moaning your name and shit, Chaniya. *looks around for bystanders* You weren't supposed to repeat that shit outside of the undefiled bedroom, Cha-Cha.

Laughter shoots from my belly at reading Germane's reply because my poor man had been self-conscious about the act since it happened last week. However, it was the cutest thing ever, and it definitely had my juices running like a faucet before my orgasm hit me like a tidal wave.

"What's so funny, Mommy?" Caleb asks with a curious frown.

"Nothing. Are you ready to go inside?"

Today's first order of business is haircut and then to the mall to shop. My baby has seemed to grow overnight and desperately needs some clothes. It hasn't been long since I bought Caleb new clothes, but he's having another growth spurt.

According to the doctor, my baby is tall for his age, which must be something he gets from his father, because I'm average height and didn't have many growth spurts growing up.

"I'm ready. Mr. Ricardo said he would give me a new design," Caleb happily informs me.

My phone buzzing prevents me from responding to Caleb, and my eyes quickly dart to see an incoming message from Isis.

Since it wasn't another text from Germaine, I place the phone in my purse and exit my vehicle before opening Caleb's door to let him out.

With Caleb's hand in mine, we head to the front entrance and make our way through the building, where people are hard at work in most of the rooms.

"Hi, Mr. Ricardo," Caleb greets when we enter the room for his barber.

Unlike my son, whose focus is on the man who cuts his hair, my eyes rake over the man wearing a cape, who's finishing his grooming.

Germaine Pussy-beating Malone. Damn, it's a small world.

"What's up, C money," Ricardo speaks, pulling me out of the salacious trance while staring at the man on my phone moments ago.

Shit, no wonder he was looking for bystanders.

“Hi, Mister.” Caleb greets Germaine, waving with a broad smile that has my eyes ballooning because Caleb doesn’t generally speak to new folks unless I give him an okay that it's safe to do so.

“How are you doing, little man? You like Spiderman, I see.” Germaine’s deep cords echo around the room like that gadget from Men in Black before hitting me in my lower region.

Clenching my thighs, I watch the exchange between my man and son, with my heart racing in total contradiction to my arousal.

“I’m fine, and Spiderman is my favorite. He throws webs and stuff. He’s cool,” Caleb provides.

“He is cool and was one of my favorites too. You have good taste, little man,” Germaine replies before his eyes meet mine in a penetrating gaze that increases my body temperature.

“Uh, Ri-Ricardo. I’ll be right back. I forgot something in my car.” Looking down at Caleb, I give him instructions for the brief time I’ll be out of his presence. “Be good. I’ll only be gone a second.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Caleb smiles.

Nodding, I turn and exit the loft with my heart racing, my throat drying, and an urge to kiss my man creeping into my mind.

“I’m gonna get out your way too, Cardo. Thanks for squeezing me in today. I appreciate you.” Germaine’s voice pierces my ears, causing me to slow my strides a little.

Of all the salon lofts in the city of Ribax, how did I manage to send my son to the same barber as my man?

“Aye, Cha-Cha, let me holla at you for a second.”

My nipples instantly pebble upon hearing Germaine calling to my retreating back, which causes me to slow to a stop to allow him to catch up with me.

“I didn’t think your rude ass would respond since you ignored my text. What’s up with you?” Isis snaps upon answering the call.

After taking care of Caleb’s hair and clothing needs, I came home, cooked dinner, gave Caleb a bath, read him a story, and am now sitting in my living room with a glass of wine, unwinding.

“Who didn’t love on you today, pooh?” A lopsided grin upturns my lips when Isis sucks her teeth because, clearly, she isn’t up for my mess this evening.

“Where the hell have you been all day that you couldn’t answer me, bitch? I could have been?—”

“Going through dick withdrawals like you so eloquently shared through text. I’m not sure what you thought I could do. I ain’t got a dick to fuck you with, girl.”

“Oh, I know. I’m tired of riding the rubber dick I bought for the times these niggas act like they’re slow or something. Hell, I think my pussy has a rash or rubber doll burn.”

The gulp of wine I just drank spills out of my mouth along with my laughter upon hearing the statements leaving my bestie’s mouth. “Isis.”

“Don’t ‘Isis’ me. You’re getting dick now, so you don’t understand my pain. I’m seconds from needing Monistat or urgent care.”

Boisterous laughter rocks my body, causing water to slip from my eyes from hearing the serious tone in Isis’s words. Now I understand the generic message from Isis that I never responded to.

Isis: Something has to give because taking matters into my own hands is costing me something fierce.

“Why are you laughing so damn hard, Chaniya?” Isis asks.

“Your ass ain’t got a lick of sense, Isis. Why would you think I could do anything to help you with this issue?”

“Friends don’t let friends suffer alone.

The least you could do is sympathize with my pain instead of laughing like a damn hyena.

I thought telling you would give me a more mature response than the one Riele gave me.

Yet, here we are. Damn, I need new day ones because you bitches ain’t shit.

” With that, Isis disconnects the call again, inciting my laughter.

Going to our group thread, I prepare to send a message to Isis and Riele, but my phone rings in my hand, and I lose interest immediately upon seeing the caller.

“Hello, handsome,” I purr.

“We really need to get to a comfortable place in this relationship, because talking to little man earlier has me wanting to hang out with him.”

Seeing the brief interaction between Caleb and Germaine at the barber shop was one reason I needed a minute alone. Caleb seemed to have zero reservations about talking to Germaine, and I didn't know how to process it, primarily when Caleb had no knowledge of our involvement.

“Look, Cha-Cha. I'm not trying to force myself on you or your son. I understand wanting to protect him from temporary niggas. I'm just saying I'll be glad when I've shown you that, with y'all, I ain't on bullshit.”

My heart rate increases, and I close my eyes while processing Germaine's words, which seem to have a more profound effect on me than any man before him has been capable of.

Trying to interact with Germaine without Caleb hasn't been too complicated up till now.

Still, it could be because I need to ensure I'm not neglecting my responsibilities to be in a relationship.

Caleb only has me in terms of parents, so I never want him to feel neglected because I'm dating anyone.

That's partly why I let Dedrick's lame ass in Caleb's presence, but after how things ended, I just want to be smart moving forward.

“I hear you and am taking it into consideration. Let's continue building for now, and we'll see how things progress.”

“No pressure, Cha-Cha. It’s your world, and I’m moving accordingly. How did the rest of today go? Were you able to find what you needed for Caleb?”

My pussy thumps wildly while my juices get to percolating upon hearing Germaine calling Caleb by his name for the first time.

It’s the oddest thing for me to get excited about, but I can’t help myself.

Knowing that Germaine knows my son’s name makes me feel like he genuinely is interested in learning the information he’s asking.

“It’s well, and yes, I got everything he needs for now. Hopefully, my pockets can recover before I buy him more things. He seems to be growing like a weed, which is crazy since he’s only five. Did you give your parents these fits at this age?”

“I don’t have the slightest clue. Blame it on my incessant weed addiction in my early teens and twenties, but I don’t remember too much about my early childhood.

I know some folks can recall their kindergarten teacher and all that, but that’s not me.

” Germaine’s low laughter vibrates in my ear, making me clench my thighs from the heavenly sound.

“Wow. I would have never guessed that the man delivering my best friend’s baby used to chain smoke reefer,” I say, laughing at using the term for what Nana calls marijuana.

“Who I am today has nothing to do with who I hadn’t yet grown up to be. Age definitely brings maturity and a new mindset.”

“I hear you. What made you give it up? While I don’t smoke it, I have been known to

indulge in a gummy or two. Let me have some issues with sleeping, and I'm liable to chew one today. No judgment. It just doesn't seem like something you would engage in."

"Honestly, I stopped getting high and didn't want to wind up going to something stronger to chase the feeling.

Around that time, I also decided it was time to figure out what I wanted my life to look like.

Sitting around getting high is a waste of time that I no longer feel the need to do.

My parents have taught me the importance of being a productive member of society, so I had to get my shit together. So, edibles, huh?"

"Occasionally." I shrug, despite his inability to see me.

"Do they have any other side effect than providing great sleep for you?" Germaine's husky and suggestive question has a smirk upturning my lips from knowing what he's insinuating without asking directly.

Leaning forward, I place the wine glass on the table in front of me, unsure why I've been holding it for so long. Licking my lips, I consider if I want to mess with Germaine or tell him the truth before reaching an answer.

"Actually . . ." I express lowly and seductively while crossing my right leg over my left, swinging my foot back and forth.

"I'm listening."

"Every time I take one, I can only sleep for an hour before the vibrating of my pussy

wakes me up to silence the storm raging within. Then I find myself falling asleep from the fog of masturbation.”

“Have you played in my pussy since we’ve been together, Cha-Cha?” Germaine’s question is low, strong, and vibrates through me deliciously, causing me to subtly bite my bottom lip.

“I didn’t realize my pussy had an owner other than me.”

“Now you do. Answer the question . . . You been playing in my pussy?”

My hand slowly glides to my middle, stopping to mentally calm the pulsing within my core as my breathing becomes labored.

“Cha-Cha.”

A low whine mixed with a moan escapes my mouth at hearing Germaine’s voice, and I move further down to get around the nightshirt I threw on after my shower.

“Ba—”

“Mhm. That’s what I thought. Where are you?”

“Living room,” I say breathlessly.

“Go to your room and then switch to FaceTime. I want to play.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE

Being in a healthy and thriving relationship with a woman who fills my heart with peace is something I didn't realize has been missing from my life.

After experiencing toxicity, it's been great to simply laugh, bond, and date without forcing any of our encounters. With Chaniya, I have found myself smiling more, laughing harder, and more relaxed, which has been noticed by the people around me. The complexity of my job means a change in my schedule, depending on the needs of the hospital. I'm also still working with Dr. Carpenter and have been contemplating requesting permanent placement under her.

Delivering babies has given me more joy than any of the other wings of the hospital.

I didn't anticipate loving the tasks under labor and delivery as much as I have.

Yet, it's been an unmatched reward since my first shift.

"Uh, Germayne, Dr. Speedle needs you to check out the patient in bed twenty," Nurse Sharma says, cutting into my wayward thoughts.

Nodding, I stand and head to do Dr. Speedle's bidding without grumbling the rebuttal hanging on my tongue.

Dr. Speedle is one of the laziest doctors here, and instead of teaching the PAs working under him, he delegates everything to them.

Most of us can't stand working with him because not only is Dr. Speedle a lousy teacher, but he also likes to cut corners to expedite patients off his plate.

Unfortunately for me, the emergency room was busier than laboring mothers, so I had to be reassigned to where I could be most useful.

"Good evening. My name is Germaine Malone, and I'm one of the physicians assistants here. What seems to be troubling you?" I ask after entering the patient's room less than five minutes later.

"Assistant? Does that mean you're not a doctor? I know they didn't send a trainee in here to see about my mama." The pale-faced toddler, whose face is beet red and spotty from the craters he's neglected to address, stands, waving his arms.

While the individual is older than a toddler, his unnecessary tantrum qualifies him to hold the title, which is also why I ignore him and address the person lying in the bed.

"Can you provide me with the details of what led you to the ER this evening, Ms. Donovan?" I ask again.

"Where the hell is the real doctor? Don't say nothing, Mama. You can either get someone else in here, or I'm taking my mother out of here, boy." The doofus rants while stopping his foot.

Not wanting this idiot with zero skincare regime to shift my great mood, I nod and exit the room without another word.

"You might want to call Dr. Speedle because junior doesn't want his mother to be seen or taken care of by a boy trainee," I tell Nurse Sharma, who's approaching me.

"Wait, what? Did he really call you a boy?" Nurse Sharma's face blanches, and a

deep frown erases the smile she had been wearing.

“Does shit stink? Let Dr. Speedle earn his elaborate salary. I’m taking a break.” Shrugging, I turn in the opposite direction toward the bank of elevators.

While this isn’t my first rodeo with a patient releasing the bile festering within them about the color of my skin, it is the first time it has come from someone younger than me. The more things change, the more idiots continue fucking to breed more despicable people like them.

“Hm. Job or no job, I would have cussed his little ass out. I can’t believe he had the audacity to disrespect you like that,” Chaniya rants.

A slow smirk slides into place at the aggression in her tone and the offense in her words at the encounter I had not long ago.

It’s well after 9:30, which is Chaniya’s usual bedtime, so I didn’t anticipate her still being up.

Yet, I needed someone to keep me in the mood I was in, and Chaniya was the only person capable of doing so, which is why I sent a text to test the waters.

When her reply came two minutes later, I called her, and here we are.

“If I react and respond to every hillbilly that enters this hospital, I would be dealing with a blood pressure diagnosis. Unfortunately, stuff like this comes with the territory, and instead of bucking against it, I choose to remove myself from the mess. My only hope is that these people find out their unfounded hate can be reciprocated by someone less tolerant than me.”

“Or that they find an angry bull with a vendetta who will ram its horn in their raggedy

asses. Maybe then they'll be able to shit properly because, clearly, the constipation they're suffering from is affecting their common sense."

"What in the world are you saying, Cha-Cha?" Laughing boisterously, I shake my head at the antics coming from her mouth.

"I'm just saying. Sometimes, the usual remedies don't help, and you have to go to more drastic measures."

"Why in the world are we talking about constipation, woman?"

"It's why I'm up past my bedtime and sleepy as hell. Caleb has been struggling to poop for the last day or so. He's miserable, which means I'm sleep-deprived. I might even be delirious at this point, so you might want to ignore whatever comes out of my mouth right now."

"Awe, poor Cha-Cha. What can I do to make it better for you?"

"Stick your hand in Caleb's butt to release the backup."

"What the hell?" Another round of laughter escapes my mouth from the statement and whine in Chaniya's tone.

"I'm just saying, that's what Nana did when he was a baby dealing with constipation. She would break off a piece of soap and insert it into C?—"

"Got it, Cha-Cha, but I think Caleb is beyond the point of that being an acceptable method of relief. Have you tried apple juice?"

"Mhm. Didn't work and only gave him gas. Funky gas that almost had me throwing up, but yeah, that didn't help at all."

“Try a warm?—”

“Bath, mhm. I did that too, and I tried massaging his tummy too. It only produced more gas, and I promise I thought his little ass would fart me into the living room.”

“Well, it looks like you’re gonna have to just wait it out, love. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but sometimes these things take?—”

“Mommy! Mommy!” Caleb’s squeaky yet alarmed voice cuts me off.

“Shit!” Chaniya shouts before air and the sound of movement distorts what’s happening on her end. I listen intently to make sure everything is okay.

“I pooped! I pooped!” Caleb cheers.

“Thank God, but ooh, you stink. Handle your business, Son,” Chaniya says, sounding like she’s in distress or agony. “Whew, the Lord is kind,” she says to the receiver.

“Yes, He is, and always on time. Looks like this crisis is averted. I hate to run, but I’ve gotta get back on the floor.”

“Damn, just when I was gonna have something else to talk about.”

“No worries. Call me when you go on break or lunch tomorrow.”

“I must be in trouble with you or something because I ain’t heard from your narrow behind since Essence’s wedding. Why do you have a stick up your butt with me, Germaine Kadeem Malone?” Grandma Jolene questions while giving me a death glare.

“You almost had me back in the single streets, but I ain’t mad at you. I’ve just been

busy working and trying to build my relationship. You obviously felt guilty or something because it took you a month to miss me enough to call.”

One of the bad things about frequently working the night shift is that most everyone else works the day shift and doesn’t understand that you need to sleep during the day.

In Grandma Jolene’s retired status, her time is her own, so she never considers what others have going on.

Thankfully, I was able to get roughly five hours of sleep before she called, requesting my presence.

I’m surprised it has taken her this long to reach out to me because it’s the longest we’ve gone without communicating or me visiting.

However, my reasoning isn’t a lie, and I don’t feel bad about nurturing the relationship that’s shaping up to be my best one yet.

“My bad. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble.

I got caught up in Chaniya’s ability to engage with me without any objectives.

That other thang only wanted to bond with me because she was trying to gain brownie points with you.

Chaniya is genuinely attracted to you and doesn’t need watering by being smothered by you.

I got lost in her authenticity, so I apologize if it caused any waves for you.”

“Are you dying? Sick? Been cloned?” Staring intently at Grandma Jolene, I move to

circle her body to inspect anything that appears out of place.

Grandma Jolene doesn't apologize for anything she says or does, making this entire exchange out of place.

"I'm fine, but your daddy chewed me out and told me to fix it because he doesn't want any bad blood between the family and his new daughter."

"Come again?"

"Don't be acting like you didn't spend that entire weekend staring at the poor child like she would disappear if you didn't watch her. You practically threw me out the way to dance with her with your thirsty ass," Grandma Jolene informs me.

"What do you know about somebody being thirsty, old woman?"

"Your mammy is old and smells like twenty-day-old fish," Grandma Jolene sassily states.

"Wow. That's low, even for you. What did Ma do to you?"

"Nothing other than having your daddy sniffing behind her fast-tail ass in high school."

Before I can respond, my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I remove it with a cheesy grin forming upon seeing Chaniya's name flashing on the screen.

"I already know who that is." Grandma Jolene shakes her head before exiting the kitchen.

"What's good, Cha-Cha?"

“It’s been a horrible day. There have been four animals who’ve been put to sleep, and I’m a melting pot of tears.” The dejection in Chaniya’s tone has me pulling a chair and taking a seat, hoping to change her downcast mood.

“How can I help?”

“Cook dinner for Caleb, me, you, and our grandmothers. I think I’m ready for you to meet him officially. I also think our grandmothers would hit it off and help remove the pressure for us with intertwining Caleb into our relationship.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for that step? It hasn’t been long between us, and I don’t want you to have any regrets.”

“What happened to . . . ‘I’m not going anywhere, so whenever you’re ready’?” Chaniya asks in a horrible interpretation of a male voice that’s supposed to be me.

A low chuckle escapes my mouth because my question was more for her benefit than mine, which I relay to her.

“Nothing on my end has changed. I’m here for the long haul. I just want to make sure this is truly what you want because we can’t unwind the clock once we take this step.”

“With you, I feel comforted, secure, cherished, and confident in what we have. For the first time, I don’t feel like I have to keep Caleb from the man I’m with. With you, I feel like Caleb will receive the same things that you provide to me. So I’m sure, unless you’ve changed your mind.”

“Nope. When do you want to do this? I’m at Grandma Jolene’s house now and can get something set up.”

“I’m down for whatever.”

“Me too. Let’s sync calendars once you are off. In the meantime, I’ll put a bug in Grandma’s ear so she’ll be expecting a date soon.”

“Great. I gotta go. I l—will talk to you soon. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“You do the same, Cha-Cha.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

CHANIYA

The O'Neal Chat

Nana: Who's ready to celebrate?

Mom: What are you talking about, Mom?

Aunt Velma: ??

Turquoise: Please stop with the edibles, Nana. *slapping forehead*

Gina: *side eye emoji*

Kenyatta: A real nigga is out and ready to turn up.

Nana: One time for the free nigga. One time for the outta jail nigga. One time for the real nigga.

Me: Nana, what is happening right now? Have you been watching BET?

Nana: Tubi. No, when are we throwing this kickback for my grandson?

Mom: Tuh.

Aunt Velma: Easy on my baby, Vernise. I'm down for whatever, Mama.

Gina: *giggling* Ma stay ready to defend Yatta's ole trifling ass.

Turquoise: Facts. What were you in jail for, brother?

Nana: Stop being nosy, Quoise. The rest of y'all have your narrow asses here later today. Oh, bring that man with you, Chaniya.

“Well, damn, Nana.” Shaking my head, I exit the family group chat so I don't have to see how my family is going to react to the information Nana dropped like a bomb.

The out of the blue information from Nana and Kenyatta's statement also let me know why he's been silent.

It also makes me wonder if his jail stay has anything to do with the woman he's been dealing with lately.

Kenyatta tends to engage in toxic love over stable love, so I wouldn't be surprised.

I'm also grateful that I no longer have to worry about Kenyatta being the primary person handling Caleb's grooming needs.

“What's up, Cha-Cha?” My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth when Germaine reenters his bedroom with a towel around his waist and droplets of water on his toned chest. “Taking another shower after I make us dirty is lightwork. Say the word, Cha-Cha.”

My middle pulsates, my eyes glaze over, and my body temperature elevates when my gaze shifts to Germaine's hungry and lust-filled expression.

In a rare instance, Mom called for Caleb to spend the night with her, allowing me to stay with Germaine.

Thankfully for me and my neglected libido, Germaine had worked the day shift, allowing him to be off overnight to fulfill both our needs.

Like the tormentor he is, Germaine unwraps his towel before stalking toward me with his hard, thick, and veiny dick swinging.

An unapologetic moan slips from my lips as my mouth waters with each step he takes toward me.

“Let me help you out, Cha-Cha.” Kissing my lips, Germaine lays me flat on the bed while spreading my legs apart with his.

“Please,” I whine when he releases my lips.

“I’m right here.”

When Germaine starts sucking on my left nipple, I melt further into the mattress, unsure if my family will have the pleasure of seeing me today.

“Where your nappy-headed ass at, Chaniya?” Nana snaps once I answer her incoming call.

The power of good dick will have you sliding down a shaft one minute and falling into a post-multiple orgasmic sleep coma within the next thirty minutes.

I’m here to testify because that’s exactly what happened to me.

Although I might have decided to shuck my family obligations, clearly, Nana isn’t about to let me slide off into the sunset on Germaine’s dick.

“Chaniya Katia O’Neal, I know good and got damn well you ain’t ignoring me,”

Nana snaps, which causes Germaine to stir from behind me.

Both of us fell asleep after our last round of intense sex, which means we'll have to shower before attempting to get dressed to head to Nana's house.

"Sorry. I was sleeping. It's at your house, right?" I respond finally.

"Climb off that young man's strong arm and get your ass here.

You know it's at my house because Yatta bedhops too much for a residence, Velma's house is no bigger than a mouse trap, and Vernise ain't going for it.

If you're not here in the next hour, I'm having someone track your phone.

"With that threat, Nana disconnects the call.

"So, I guess all that yelling means we have to get up, huh?" Germaine's voice is heavy with sleep as he pulls me into his chest.

"Unless you have a way for us to skip town," I suggest.

"Nah, there's no time like the present."

"I know. I just wanted a small and intimate way for you and Caleb to become acquainted with you being my man." Pouting, I cross my arms, unsure about how this is going to go with all of my family in the same place.

Introducing Germaine to Nana and Caleb seemed like small potatoes, yet doing it this way has my stomach flipping and twisting with uncertainty.

"Chill. I got you, and everything is gonna be cool. The only people who matter in this

thing are you and Caleb. Everyone else's opinion won't shift my mind, nor will they be able to run me off.

You handled the introduction and co-mingling of my family effortlessly, so trust me to do the same.

I ain't worried or scared. Now, let's move on before someone else hits your line."

"See, this is why I'm becoming addicted to you. You always say the right things to calm me down or shift my mood."

"That's one of my purposes in your life. Now, move your ass. I need to make a good impression." Germayne taps my butt, making me giggle before getting out of the bed and heading to the shower while mentally praying for a good outcome.

"Do you think having my grandbaby around another one of your temporary men is a good idea? Whenever I think you're on the right track, you give me another reason to wonder who I raised.

" Mom's voice and her aggressive tone sour my stomach, and I dump the plate I'm about to fill in the neighboring trash can.

Turning to stare into Mom's eyes, I fight the shiver in my spine from the hateful expression shining within her gaze.

My family, including Caleb, have been nothing but welcoming and open to Germayne's presence.

Yet, here comes the devil throwing a monkey wrench in my warm and bubbly feelings.

For the first time since our arrival, I left Germayne alone to go fix me a plate.

I should have known better than to think today would go without a glitch while Vernise O'Neal is around.

“To answer your question, Germayne and I have been dating for some time now, so I don't. Thanks for your opinion, though.”

Providing Mom with the exact timeline of my relationship is something she isn't entitled to know.

Ultimately, I am Caleb's only parent, so I'm the only opinion on this and every other equation my son is concerned about.

Today nor tomorrow will be the day I let Mom guilt me about the mistake she isn't willing to release me from.

With that thought in mind, I prepare to walk away before Mom grips my arm tightly, lowering her tone so only I can hear her words.

“Don't get cute with me because you decided that being a slut was the ultimate way to repay me for my sacrifices.

Like I've said before, don't bring another bastard baby for me to help you raise because that buck stopped with Caleb.

” Snatching away from Mom, I grimace when her nails puncture my skin slightly, yet my feet move quickly to the nearest bathroom without making eye contact with anyone.

I'm sick and tired of taking her fucking verbal abuse. However my existence came to

be between her and whatever pitiful nigga she laid down with, if she felt so strongly against the blessing of my life, she should have chosen to have an abortion.

Pacing the floor of Nana's half bath ten minutes later, I angrily swipe at my tears while my thoughts echo loudly in my mind. I'm thirty-fucking-two. Why am I still letting Mom's hateful ass get me off my square? You have to?—

Knock, knock

"Somebody's in here," I inform whoever is knocking on the bathroom door.

"It's me and Mr. Germayne, Mommy. Are you okay?" Caleb's sweet voice sounds through the closed door, bringing me an instantaneous smile.

"Open the door, Cha-Cha," Germayne probes.

"Why do you call Mommy that?" Caleb laughs.

"You have a unique name to call her, and I needed one so I could be cool like you are," Germayne tells Caleb, melting my heart.

"Give me a second," I say, turning on the water to wet my face in hopes of removing the evidence of my emotional display so I don't worry either of them.

Once I'm semi-satisfied with my appearance, I turn the lock and open the door, and a wide smile bursts upon seeing Caleb and Germayne patiently waiting.

Both of them are displaying concerned expressions and somewhat standing in the same protective posture.

Caleb's little body moves quickly, surrounding my bottom half with his little arms,

hugging me tight.

Patting his head, my bottom lip trembles slightly, causing me to bite it to contain the sob in my throat.

“Come on, Mr. Germayne. I can’t reach Mommy’s top half,” Caleb urges.

“I got you, little man.”

“Can you give me a unique name like Mommy, Mr. Germayne?”

“What if I call you C?”

“I like it. Thank you.”

“Say less, C.”

Tears slip from my eyes when Germayne hugs the top of my body with one arm while locking his other around Caleb and me.

“We got you, Cha-Cha. Fuck anybody trying to destroy your peace,” Germayne whispers so only I can hear.

Seeing how well Germayne was fairing with the rest of my family, I asked Nana if it was okay if I invited his grandmother.

I told her that Germayne’s grandmother and her would get along great and provide her with someone to hang with when she didn’t want to be bothered with us.

Nana happily allowed me to extend the invitation through Germayne, so we await Grandma Jolene’s arrival.

“Are you sure you didn’t need to go pick up Grandma Jolene?”

“Nah. She’s straight. Picking her up would have offended her since she knows I’m already here. She swears that Dad’s trying to prevent her from driving, although she’s only seventy-two,” Germayne informs me, and something in his statement has my eyebrows hiking.

“Wait, she’s not your mom’s mom?”

“Nah. What made you think that?”

Scratching my forehead, I recall what she said about Mrs. Adele the day of the wedding.

“She called your mom her daughter, so I just assumed.”

“Oh. That’s because she and Ma have a close relationship despite Grandma Jolene saying Ma had Dad sniffing her pussy like kitty litter.”

“She’s a mess.” I giggle before lifting my phone to see what time it is due to my anxiousness about her arrival.

“Okay, she’s here. I’m gonna go get her so she doesn’t have to walk through the crowd alone,” Germayne tells me before I can say another word.

Nodding, I rub my moist hands up and down my pants to relieve myself of the nervous energy coursing through my body. My pulse is racing, and my temple vein is thumping wildly, causing my stomach to twist into knots. My eyes roam the backyard in search of Caleb, who’s playing with Turquoise’s kids.

“I know y’all didn’t bring this loose-neck biddy to my house,” Nana says, causing me

to turn to see Germayne and Grandma Jolene coming through the front door.

“What the hell did you say, you cotton-mouth floozy?” Grandma Jolene asks with her lip curling.

Germayne quickly jumps between our grandmothers, taking several steps toward each other.

Wait, how the hell do they know each other?

“What slithering rock did your wrinkled ass come from Jolene loose-legs Malone?” Nana questions with a deep grimace.

“Say another word and watch me slide that wig, you baldheaded, chlamydia-lingering pussy having whore,” Grandma Jolene returns.

“What the hell is going on here?” Germayne asks.

“Of all the houses in Ribax, how the hell did you allow me to pull up to this tramp’s house, Germayne?” Grandma Jolene asks, shifting her gaze to Germayne, who’s giving her the same puzzling expression I’m positive is on my face.

“Well, beat your dick grabbers out of here, ho.” Nana interjects before Germayne, I, or anyone else in the room can utter a word.

“Gladly. The next time won’t be so friendly, bitch.” With that, Grandma Jolene turns on her heels and exits, leaving everyone momentarily speechless.

Thank goodness Mom’s miserable ass is outside, or this would be fodder for more of her bullshit.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE

“H old up. You mean to tell me that your sweet grandmother was throwing words at your woman’s grandmother like a WWE fighter throws haymakers?” Jarrod asks.

“What’s worse is I’m not sure she won the sparring match. That shit probably embarrassed me more than anything. Like, come on, Jolene. That’s how you’re representing the Malones?” I express, hanging my head.

“Damn. Maybe I need to trade Chardonnay’s freewill pussy ass in for a Thundercat. That might be the sexiest thing I’ve heard in a minute. I wonder if sis’ granny is looking for someone to warm her honey,” Desi adds dreamily.

My head pops up like a genie out of a bottle, and a grimace slides into place while I stare at Desi with hard eyes.

“What is wrong with you, nigga? Clearly, because who pissed in your Wheaties this morning?” Jarrod interjects before I’m able to respond to the madness coming from Desi.

My fuse is low from not being able to speak to Chaniya over the last week or so, thanks to the unexpected feud between our grandmothers. Somehow, their bullshit spilled over into our relationship, and Chaniya has been giving me her ass to kiss lately.

“My bad. I’m just getting fed up with playing second fiddle to Chardonnay,” Desi says.

“Second is reaching, my boy.” Jarrod laughs.

Picking up my Corona, I take a healthy drink to drown out the back and forth between Desi and Jarrod. I have bigger fish to fry than Desi not loving himself enough to leave my cousin alone. Setting my empty bottle on the table, I slide my phone from my pocket and send a message to Chaniya.

Me: I don't like the idea of letting what our grandmothers have going on interfere with us, Cha-Cha. Let's squash whatever this is between us. I miss your pretty ass.

“I met someone and am considering giving her a shot,” Jarrod says.

A small smile forms because Jarrod has been single since he found out the woman he was dating was a distant cousin.

The situation between Jarrod and ole girl became messy because they were already having sex.

They only found out when they were having dinner and ran into one of their older relatives.

After that failed relationship, Jarrod swore off dating and women, which I can't say I blame him.

Jarrod's situation is a prime example of why it's essential to know your family members.

“For real? Did you check her out?” Desi questions with his right brow lifting.

“Did. I'm ready to see what this little infatuation between us can become,” Jarrod confirms.

“How much digging did you do?” I ask, entering this portion of the conversation.

“I had Moms pass her picture around the entire family and had a background check done. I ain’t got time for any more surprises and shit. That last situation almost had me cutting my dick off,” Jarrod tells us.

My eyes shift from Jarrod to my phone when it vibrates in my hand, causing my heart rate to accelerate at the possibility of getting a response from Chaniya.

The hardest part of our separation has been her silence.

My eyes only make out a C before my fingers stumble over each other, trying to unlock the phone and open the message.

My Cha-Cha: I miss you too. Let’s plan an outing between Caleb, you, and myself. He’s been asking about you. *side eye emoji*

Me: I’m off tomorrow if that works for you two. Don’t be looking crazy. Caleb knows I’m worth inquiring about, just like you do.

My Cha-Cha: Whatever. We’re free tomorrow.

Me: Bet. I’m gonna call you later to iron out the details.

My Cha-Cha: I suggest you do it soon. I can’t promise I’m gonna be awake much longer.

“Aye, I gotta step outside to make a call right quick. If our waiter comes back, have him bring me another beer.” I stand before moving toward the exit without waiting to hear a response from Desi or Jarrod.

Thanks to it being a weeknight, Club Stew isn't busy, making my trek to the front door seamless and without incident.

Pushing on the metal door that feels like it weighs a ton, I step outside, frowning when the night air hits my face.

Heading to a space on the empty wall near the front entrance, I prop my leg up and dial Chaniya's number.

"Hello." Chaniya's voice is heavy, low, and sultry, letting me know that she wasn't kidding about being on her way to bed.

"Why would your ass answer the phone like this? Your ass is almost sounding like one of those thirst trap operators swindling men out of their hard-earned cash every night."

Between my public surroundings and the air hitting my face, I'm surprisingly able to keep my dick from jumping and hardening in my pants.

"At one point in time, I thought about getting a part-time job in that field. It was that or becoming a foot model on only fans. Being a single mother ain't for the faint."

"Nigga, fuck you and your bitch. I keep telling you that ho ain't loyal to shit but whatever slit she's sucking nut from at the time," some random man says to another man who's had too much to drink based on his swaying body.

"Oh, it's fuck her now, but you weren't saying shit when she was swallowing both our nuts, and your sorry ass was drinking it like milk," the drunk man replies.

"Wow. Uh, where are you?" Chaniya questions lowly, causing me to smirk because no one other than me can hear her.

“Club Stew with Jarrod and Desi, having a couple beers,” I answer.

“Shoot. I’ll let you get back to them then. Let me know what time works for you tomorrow, and we can go from there.”

A frown forms at the rushing tone within Chaniya’s words because nobody is more important than she is, which is what I communicate.

“Fuck them. When we’re done, we’re done. I ain’t rushing our conversation to get back to them, Cha-Cha,” I bark.

“I hear you, and believe me, I understand. However, I’m not sitting on this phone for another minute, so give me a time so you can return to your friends, and I can go to sleep.” Chaniya’s deadpan statement brokers no rebuttal, despite my urge to push back.

“Eight,” I provide with a hard edge from my lack of acceptance with her wanting to end our call like she hasn’t had me in timeout.

“A.m. or p.m.?”

“A.m.”

Giggles flow through the line, warming my weary heart while charging my body like jumper cables. Missing Chaniya hasn’t been easy, but now it feels bearable, knowing I only have a wake-up before our reunion.

“It’s Saturday. Caleb and I like to sl?—”

“Not tomorrow. Come to the house. I’ll make y’all breakfast, and then we can go from there.”

“It’s a date. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

“Looking forward to seeing you, Cha-Cha.”

“Me too, and Germaine?”

“Yeah.”

“Be safe.” Warmth spreads throughout my chest upon hearing the calm and commanding tone of Chaniya before three beeps sound in my ear, letting me know she’s disconnected the call.

Placing my phone in my pocket, I return to the front entrance, feeling lighter than I had the first time I walked through the doors.

“Wow. You know how to make dinosaur-shaped pancakes, Mr. Germaine. You’re so cool,” Caleb says in a singsong voice when I place his plate in front of him the next morning.

“Yep. My dad taught me how to make them when I was your age. He felt like I should know how to add something special to cooking.”

“That’s cool. I wish I had a Daddy to teach me how to do stuff like yours did,” Caleb says, causing me to look from his solemn face to his mother.

Chaniya’s mouth is slightly ajar as her gaze bounces from her son to me, making me wonder if this is something Caleb has said before.

When she mouths her apology, I wave her off because there is no reason for it in my book.

We've previously discussed what led to Caleb being without a father, so there's no need for her to feel bad or apologize about the aftermath with me.

"I'm not your dad, but I can teach you whatever you want to know as long as your mom is good with it," I suggest.

"Yay!" Caleb shouts, dancing in his seat before forking a piece of his pancake and inserting it into his mouth.

Seeing the pride on his little face makes me adamant about securing my place in not only Chaniya's life but Caleb's as well.

From my short time in Caleb's presence, I can see he's a respectful and mild-mannered little boy.

In my opinion, Caleb is also thirsty for male attention, and being the man planning on locking his mother down, I'm committing myself to catering to his needs too.

"Excuse me for a second," Chaniya says, pushing her chair back and speed walking out of the kitchen.

"I'm gonna check on your mom for a minute. We'll be back in a minute, C."

"Okay, Mr. Germaine," Caleb says without lifting his head from his plate.

Setting the plate down that I'm filling for Chaniya, I head in the direction of where she went to see what's up with her.

Reminding Chaniya that her situation doesn't have to be continually regretted is what I need to express.

Caleb is here now, and so am I, so she doesn't have to continue focusing on her past. It's frustrating that men can drop their nuts without shame, and women are the ones people ridicule for the consequences of joint recklessness.

Hearing sniffles coming from the living room, I head there with a frown.

"Dry those eyes, Cha-Cha. This ain't what we're doing on our hangout day." I enter the room, moving toward Chaniya.

"I can't help it. He has never said that before, so I had no idea he was feeling his father's absence. I feel like a failure right now, Germaine. I'm trying my best to provide for Caleb so he doesn't hate me for being careless when he grows up.

Now, I feel like my best isn't good enough because he's feeling the absence anyway.
"

Pulling Chaniya into my arms, I stroke her back when her shoulders bounce from the emotions she's releasing into my chest.

"Listen, I know I'm not his dad, but I promise I'm here for both of y'all. I'm not going anywhere, so Caleb is straight."

"I don't want to get used to you being here and?—"

"I'm committing to being here for Caleb, even in the unlikelihood we don't make it.

Stop crying. Caleb doesn't need to see anything but a smile, especially when y'all are with me.

It's good vibes and positive energy over everything, Cha-Cha.

Now, come on before the food gets cold.” Kissing Chaniya’s forehead, I squeeze her body, hoping that an ounce of my strength will seep into her pores.

Once I’m confident that Chaniya is good, I guide us back to the kitchen after making a quick pitstop to clean her face of any redness so as to not alarm Caleb.

“Mr. Germaine, those pancakes were sooo good. I can’t wait for you to teach me how to make them.” Caleb gushes when we reenter the kitchen.

Warmth stretches across my chest at seeing Caleb’s wide grin and twinkling merriment in his eyes.

“I got you. How about I make your mom and my plate and give you a couple more to tie you over until lunch?”

“Ooh, please.” Caleb dances in his seat, smiling wide, and my heart skips a beat at seeing his jubilation from something so simple.

The first order of business from today forward is showing Caleb that I’m a man of integrity and my word.

CHANIYA

“N ow, I have prided myself on letting you kids make your own decisions, but that was before I knew your man was kin to that witch. You’ve gotta stop seeing him, Chaniya. What I know about Jolene Malone is that she sucks frog toes while sunbathing,” Nana rants while pacing back and forth.

“I keep telling you that I should have gotten her checked out when she popped up pregnant and didn’t know how it happened.” Mom interjects with an indignant expression that I’m itching to knock off her self-righteous face.

“Ain’t nobody talking to your ho ass, Vernise. It’s crazy how you like to condemn your daughter for something you did. While you’re sitting in your seat of judgment, who the fuck is Chaniya’s father?” Nana snaps, halting her steps to give Mom a death glare.

Finally!

My mind echoes the single word dancing in my head from the minute Nana’s rant turned from me to Mom.

“I’m not sure why that’s relevant to this situation. You’re talking about more of Chaniya’s indiscretions, and I’m simply agreeing. If she ? —”

“No matter how many stones you toss in Chaniya’s face, she will never be him.

Either let her out of this one-sided feud or deal with the effects of the ass-whupping

I'm about to deliver to you.

I'm sick of this bullshit from you. Chaniya didn't have a choice in her existence, so either stop punishing her for your mistakes or nurse the continuous black eyes you'll have if I hear any other negatives you spew toward her.

Matter of fact, go the fuck home, Vernise.

I'm tired of looking at your miserable ass. ”

“Fine, but you find someone else to help you with your child,” Mom says to me with enough venom to stop my heart before snatching her purse and leaving.

“Mm.” I moan when Germayne thrusts into me, bringing me out of my inner thoughts.

Contrary to what Germayne might have thought, my silence with him had only been due to dealing with the fact that Mom gave up on me.

I have been battling guilt about our fallout with the excitement and freeing feeling of no longer dealing with her vile attitude or damaging words toward me.

No part of me is sad that she walked out on Caleb and me, because loving my son and despising me is nasty work.

“Stay with me, baby. This is the only thing you need to be thinking about,” Germayne utters before covering my lips with his, growling deep in my throat.

After spending the day with Germayne, the three of us came back to my place, where we watched several movies before Caleb fell asleep.

Germanyne carried Caleb to his bed and tucked him in as I watched with water resting on my eyelids.

No man I've dated or allowed in Caleb's presence has ever been as gentle and caring as Germanyne.

My heart damn near leaped out of my chest when Germanyne kneeled to say a quick prayer over Caleb.

"Deeper," I whisper when Germanyne breaks our kiss.

Germanyne grasps my wide hips while raising and lowering me onto him while thrusting upward with all his strength.

"Fuck! You feel amazing, Cha-Cha."

Lost in nirvana, I'm unable to respond, instead allowing my body to communicate what my lips can't in the moment.

Up, down, up, down, Germanyne and I create a rhythm of harmony unique to our coupling that's delicious, mind-blowing, and soul-tying.

Yet, I'm enjoying every minute of the intimacy within our mating.

This is the perfect way to end what shaped up to be a great day.

"Get your phone, Cha-Cha. Cha-Cha, your phone." Germanyne's sleep-heavy voice penetrates my comfortable and peaceful sleep, causing me to stir awake when I register the tapping on my bare butt.

Scratching my head, I grab my phone from the charger and answer the incoming call.

“Hello.”

“Your mother called me, talking about missing her grandson. I told her ass to ride the short bus straight to the gates of Hell,” Nana says, causing me to giggle lightly.

“Good. Neither of us needs that toxic foolishness anymore. Either she can find a way to get over her hangups and apologize, or she can continue getting updates about me and my baby through you.”

Feeling movement, I see Germayne turning over and raising the blankets over his head, and a smirk forms. We didn’t go to sleep until sometime early morning because Germayne said he needed to remove the backup I caused in his dick and ensure he didn’t become replaceable.

What Germayne doesn’t know yet is that I’m already in love with him.

I’m just waiting for him to meet me over the ledge before I express the sentiments of my heart.

“I don’t know where I went wrong with that girl.

I feel responsible because I’ve heard her utter little digs at you over the years but didn’t pay it any mind.

For that and my part in not speaking up sooner, I’m sorry, Chaniya.

Your mother’s problem is hers alone, but protecting your peace is what’s necessary right now, so let her miserable ass suffer until she gets herself together.

Caleb’s support circle didn’t stop or begin with her,” Nana rants.

My chest pinches, and my eyes mist because I've been living with Mom's mess forever, but at this point, I choose me over her interactions with Caleb. Protecting my mental ultimately means protecting Caleb's outlook on life, which is my only priority in life.

"Thanks, Nana. I hate to rush you off the phone, but it was a late night, and I want to return to the strong arms lying idly in my bed."

"I see hardheadedness didn't end with Vernise and Velma. Unlike Vernise, I won't crucify you for it. Can you make me a promise, though?"

A grin upturns my lips because I have no idea why Nana is whispering like there's someone other than the two of us on the line.

"Depends. Ask, and we'll go from there."

"If you marry that man, limit my interaction with that Jezebel he's related to."

"Deal." I snicker.

"I love you, Chaniya Katia, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Warmth spreads across my chest, jubilation fills my body, and joy fuels my heart, causing it to beat erratically.

"I love you too, Nana." With that, I disconnect the call, preparing to snuggle against Germanne's back until he shifts to face me. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"No worries. You have the secret ingredient to put me back to sleep." His words hit me in my core, causing it to thump enthusiastically at the thought of having Germanne between my legs again.

“Every single one,” I confirm in my best sultry vixen voice.

“Before we get into that, let me make something clear.”

I swallow over the sudden lump in my throat upon hearing his serious tone that matches the fire in his eyes. Nodding, I hold my breath while waiting to see what’s coming next.

“I don’t give a fuck what’s going on between our grandmothers.

I’m not giving you up, and I’m not letting you do it either.

What we can do is keep them out of what we have going on, and that’s it.

Under no circumstances am I sacrificing my happiness for someone else’s misery.

I love you, and I’m letting you know now that I’m locking you down. ”

My mouth opens and closes as Germaine’s words repeat in my mind, and I struggle to process his last sentence.

“Don’t doubt my feelings, Cha-Cha. I didn’t make a mistake in expressing them. Not only do I love you, but I’m in love with you.” Grabbing my hands, he pulls me down until our foreheads are touching, instantly elevating my heart rate.

Needing no further confirmation, I latch onto Germaine’s lips and kiss him with all the passion and sentiments I can muster.

Savoring the moment, I release a low moan at the comfort I feel, along with how right this moment is.

Falling in love with Germayne wasn't something I set out to do, but feeling the leaping in my chest confirms my willingness to surrender anyway.

"I can't believe my baby is about to go to school. It seems like I was changing his diapers just yesterday while dodging his little wee-wee."

Staring at Caleb climbing the jungle gym at the mall, I spoon another serving of butter pecan ice cream into my mouth.

Looking at my calendar and realizing that Caleb's first day of kindergarten was fast approaching led to Germayne, Caleb, and I coming to the mall to shop for his school clothes.

Despite knowing the time was coming and the confirmation of my baby becoming a big boy for real, I'm ready to cry in my bowl of ice cream.

"Yeah, but you're gonna be alright. School is a natural progression of his existence. The great thing is that you won't have to weather the storm of this next phase alone." Germayne interjects.

Turning to look at Germayne sitting beside me, I smile upon seeing his rapt attention on Caleb.

"I love you, Germayne Malone."

Germayne's eyes slowly leave Caleb before settling on me, before a panty-melting grin dances on his lips.

"What's not to love, Cha-Cha. Not to mention . . . I love you so much more." Winking, Germayne's keen focus returns to Caleb, causing my heart to race and butterflies to swarm in my stomach.

“Oh my gosh! Did you see me almost fall, Mr. Germayne? I almost wiped out.” Caleb’s voice shifts my gaze from Germayne’s side profile, and my chest expands at seeing the excitement on Caleb’s face while standing in front of Germayne.

Contrary to what I thought, Caleb’s resilience in entertaining the latest man in my life has come without incident.

With Dedrick, Caleb didn’t say anything more than he had to and didn’t engage with him freely.

From the moment Caleb met Germayne he has been open, free, and forthcoming with communicating with Germayne.

“I saw, and I almost went over there to fight that equipment for being in your way,” Germayne confirms.

“You can’t beat up that thing, because it’s not real.” Caleb laughs.

“If it made you fall and hurt yourself, I would have definitely kicked it a few times,” Germayne adds, shrugging.

“You’re so cool, Mr. Germayne. Can we go get my ice cream now? I’m done playing now,” Caleb asks.

“Of course, we can. I was waiting for you. Come on before your mama asks for more, and we don’t get any.”

Caleb snickers before connecting his hand with Germayne’s outstretched one, leaving me to follow behind them.

My chest feels like it’s about to burst at seeing how the two of them move through the

mall like a unit. Caleb's laughter pierces my ears, letting me know that whatever Germayne is saying tickles him.

When I arrive at the ice cream parlor a second after Caleb and Germayne, I stand back to wait for them to order.

My eyes are burning from the strain of containing the moisture begging for clearance.

"Do you want anything, Cha-Cha?" Germayne asks, breaking me out of my daze.

"No, thank you," I say.

"She already had some," Caleb adds.

"I know, C, but you should always make sure that your lady has whatever she wants. It's your job to take care of her needs," Germayne informs Caleb.

"I didn't know, but okay. You know a lot of stuff, Mr. Germayne," Caleb adds.

My baby seems to be hanging onto Germayne's every word while giving him an inquisitive look, just as the worker hands them the ice cream they ordered.

"You will too, C," Germayne tells Caleb before the two of them walk toward me.

Watching the Cheshire grin on Caleb's lips, the beam in his eyes, and his imitation of Germayne's swag has giggles escaping my mouth.

"Alright, you two. Let's grab a seat so y'all can eat quickly, and then we need to do some school shopping," I say.

"Okay, Mommy," Caleb tells me before shifting his focus back to Germayne. "Will

you take me to school on the first day? I don't want Mommy to be alone in case she cries."

"I got you, C," Germayne declares with authority before turning and winking at me.

I'm gonna suck the lining outta of Germayne's dick before he goes home.

GERMAYNE

“D on’t tell Mommy, but I’m glad you’re taking me to get my haircut, Mr. Germayne.” Caleb smiles and takes my hand when I open the back door to let him out of my SUV.

“It’ll be our secret, C.” My chest is sticking out, and my gait is confident when Caleb and I enter the building, heading toward Ricardo’s suite.

“Oh sh—shoot. What’s up, C money? Germayne,” Ricardo greets when Caleb and I enter his room less than five minutes later.

“Hi, Mr. Ricardo. Me and Mr. Germayne are here for our haircuts. I need to stay fly,” Caleb says, pulling at his shirt and causing Ricardo and I to laugh at his antics.

“For sure, C money. Have a seat, and I’ll get you together,” Ricardo taps the chair, holding a cape to drape over Caleb.

Caleb hops into the chair, swinging his little feet back and forth with his eyes on the mounted TV. Ricardo applies the cape before walking toward me and whispering so Caleb can’t hear.

“You a slick one, I see. How did you pull this off?”

“Pressure and prayers. God favors me, my boy,” I say.

“Big ups to the King of Kings because you definitely got yourself a winner. Much

respect, G,” Ricardo says, dapping me and returning to Caleb to start on his cut.

This moment feels organic and one I’ll treasure forever as a goofy grin upturns my lips at hearing Caleb tell Ricardo about our big boy outing once we finish our haircuts.

“Hey! If it’s not my favorite little person in the world.” Chaniya’s grandmother greets Caleb after opening her front door.

I asked Chaniya if I could be the one to exchange Caleb with her grandmother tonight.

Despite the pulsing within Chaniya’s temple vein, I pushed the offer so I could have a brief word with her grandmother.

Based on my heart's fast tempo, I’m unsure if I’ve made the right decision.

However, I have to try because I want forever with Chaniya and Caleb, so I must iron out whatever weeds may stick up in objection.

“Hi, Nana. I missed you,” Caleb replies, returning my focus to the present.

“Go inside. I want to talk to your mom’s friend. I’ll be in there shortly,” Nana tells Caleb, who turns, waving to me before darting inside the house.

When Nana’s intense gaze returns to me, I fight the urge to show emotion or showcase the shiver sliding down my spine. Never let them see you sweat. You got this. Love is your only agenda here. Purpose over persecution. Mind over ? —

“I hope that whatever this little melee between us right now has nothing to do with the woman you brought to my house not long ago,” Nana says, placing her right hand

on her robust waist.

Mind over matter. Courage over fear.

“Kinda, but not for the reason you might think. I don’t want to shift the dynamics between us, Ms.—

“Calling me by that name instead of the one I gave you in the beginning will certainly fast-track a change in our dynamics.” Nana cuts me off.

“My bad, Nana. While I might not be privileged to know the story behind you and Grandma Jolene’s issue, the irrelevance is the same for me because securing my place in Caleb and Chaniya’s lives is the only thing that matters to me.

I ask that you judge me according to my actions and not the bad blood you have with my grandmother.

The two aren’t created equal, and I desire to have a relationship with you once we join together as a family. ”

Nana steps fully onto the porch and circles around me like I’m about to be auctioned off to whoever has pockets deep enough to obtain me.

“You’re cocky. You’re handsome. Your stature is promising.

You’re bold. Clearly, you don’t have a problem battling a tough opponent.

All the qualities my babies will need in the man trying to solidify his position in their lives.

Keep your grandmother in check, and we’ll be good.

” With that, Nana reenters her home, slamming the door in my face, and a sly smirk upturns my lips.

Say less, Nana.

“You were up there for a while. Why won’t you tell me what y’all talked about?” Chaniya pouts.

Low laughter escapes my mouth, causing me to set my glass down while giving Chaniya my undivided attention.

“Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head about, Cha-Cha. I promise.”

Since Nana called for Caleb, I decided an impromptu date would allow Chaniya and me to enjoy a meal prepared by someone else.

On the nights I’m not working, Chaniya or I cook so she, Caleb, and I can have dinner together.

To not shift Caleb’s routine too much, dinner is at their house.

I had plans for the three of us to spend the evening at my house so Caleb could start getting acquainted with my space, but Nana called, requesting him.

Chaniya said she’s been keeping Caleb home with her since that day at Nana’s when I met her family.

“Did she mention my mother?”

My forehead wrinkles, and my mouth twists at the question because, other than the cold shoulder Chaniya’s mother had given me, her name hasn’t come up.

“Should she have?” I counter.

The faraway and blank expression removing the light and beam in Chaniya’s eyes has me placing my hands on the table while readying myself for what’s coming. Chaniya’s vibrant eyes are now full of shadows and torment, pushing me to probe further.

“What’s the look about? Is there something going on with your mom?”

“How much time do you have?”

“Whatever you need. Or is this something we shouldn’t discuss throughout tonight’s date? I don’t like the look in your eyes.”

“Dinner, then confession. How does that sound?”

A frown downturns my lips, and my stomach sours at the loaded question that causes Chaniya’s eyes to flash with varying yet unreadable expressions.

“Where would you like to talk? I personally think we should do it lying under the stars on my deck.”

Chaniya’s eyes clear, and giggles come from her mouth which loosens the noose around my stomach before she speaks.

“I’ve been to your house several times and didn’t know your back deck holds secrets.”

“I’m capable of secret-keeping. The deck is simply a backdrop because a beautiful night like the one we’re experiencing should be enjoyed. I have a firepit on it and everything, just in case you get chilly.”

“Okay. Dinner, then deck. I can live with that. Now, can we change the subject to something less heavy?”

“For sure. What color panties are you wearing?”

Liquid from the sip of wine Chaniya just drank spills onto the table, along with the sound of her laughter. My heart stretches at the jovial sound and the corresponding glow in her eyes.

“There’s my pretty Cha-Cha. I don’t give a damn what’s going on. Don’t ever let anyone tip your crown.” My voice is heavy yet low to my ears, and I’m helpless to change it due to how I feel and the fast tempo of my heart.

Man, I love the fuck outta this woman.

“I’m okay. Thank you ba—by.” Chaniya stalls when her eyes stare at someone approaching our table.

“What’s good, new booty, Yaya? I didn’t expect to see you when I returned to the city.” Some light-skin man speaks to Chaniya, causing her face to ashen.

“You don’t see me sitting here, my boy? Clearly, somebody in your lineage taught you the importance of manners,” I interject.

The boulder in my stomach at seeing Chaniya’s face and the instant misting in her eyes shifts the temperature within my body.

“Don’t mind me, bro. I’ve had this sweet piece of ass before, and I promise you it ain’t nothing to write home about.” Ole boy speaks with a smug grin while slowly roaming Chaniya’s appearance.

A humorless chuckle leaves my mouth before I lift the napkin from my lap and toss it on the table. Without another word, I stand to my full height, towering over buddy by at least two inches, and size him up.

“Uh—”

“Nah, Cha-Cha. Don’t shift your crown. I got this shit,” I say before shifting my attention and gaze to the buster still standing at our table.

“It’s cute that you’re flexing over a bi?—”

My fists slam into the dude’s mouth before he can finish his statement, causing the other patrons to shout and gasp at the disturbance. Commotion and feet charging toward our direction penetrate my ears. However, my attention is on the man who wrote a check his ass shouldn’t have attempted to cash.

whap, whap

Punching the man twice more, I grit my teeth when he sloppily throws his fists up like he’s about this life.

“You a punk. How the fuck you?—”

whap, whap

Hitting him twice more without breaking a sweat while he’s wasting time talking, all I see is red and the desire to kill him for spewing such hateful words about my woman. Feeling several hands tugging at my arms, I attempt to shrug them off until someone jumps in front of me, shoving me backward.

“Chill, G man. You’re a fucking professional with shit to lose. Go to my office and

cool the fuck off,” Jarrod demands.

Coming down from the red haze I’ve been in for an unknown time, I turn to our table only to find it empty.

“Where the fuck is Cha-Cha?”

“My woman took her to the bathroom to calm down or whatever women need to do after seeing their men beat a nigga’s ass. Now go. I’ll handle this bullshit,” Jarrod informs me in a deadpan tone that doesn’t broker an argument.

Jarrold owns a small restaurant called It’s Good and Moody, and it had been the perfect place for a meal with my lady. Jarrod is a chef, and his dishes are inspired by family members with his flare added.

“Go on, bro. I got you,” Jarrod encourages, snapping me out of my thoughts, and I move after giving the dude one final glance.

“Bitch ass,” I grumble.

“That wasn’t quite what I had in mind when you suggested we enjoy a meal out,” Chaniya speaks, causing me to shift my gaze from the sky to her.

We’ve been at my crib for the last two hours, and things have mostly been quiet between us. The silence has been good for me because I’ve used it to completely release the aggression the fight caused within me.

“I’m sorry, Chaniya. I should have handled the situation better. It?—”

“I didn’t have a problem with you defending me. I only left because I needed a minute to cool down. Nobody has acted so violently about me before. My hormones

were buzzing louder than the stings your hands were causing his face.”

A sinister grin slides into place, and my gaze intensifies along with the twitching of my dick once my brain registers her words.

“Note to self . . . Beat a nigga’s ass every once in a while, to keep things spicy. Bet.”

“He was one of the guys I slept with the night Caleb was created,” Chaniya informs me, breaking our heated stare.

“I figured as much from the bullshit he was spewing.” Heat fills my ears, and my blood simmers with fire at the memory of what had been said without shame.

“Going to that house party not only changed the trajectory of my life but it cemented my mom’s hatred toward me.

What’s worse is Jeff, the jock whose ass you beat tonight, is who invited me.

He and I met when he helped me avoid a second accident when someone hit my car and fled the scene.

I got more than I bargained for by allowing Jeff, Spencer, and Wally to slide between my legs that night. ”

“Spencer? Wally?” My nose twists, and my eyes tighten at the cornball names Chaniya has spoken.

“Mhm. Spencer isn’t black. Wally is mixed, and of course, Jeff is black. Somehow, the three had me thinking I was living out a fantasy I didn’t have.”

An image of Caleb pops into my mind, and I automatically rule out Spencer because

Caleb's features don't lend way for Spencer to be his father.

This leaves the other two, and based on the dude's complexion and the other guy being mixed, it could be a toss-up if I had to guess.

Fuck that. Caleb is my damn son! Neither of those men will ever change that.

"After what happened tonight, I'm perfectly fine with none of them knowing about Caleb. Being in Jeff's presence again made me think about what type of parent he would be, and I'm good on all that. I'll continue being a si?—"

"You're a mother, for sure, but single, you're not." I interject before she can finish the statement that no longer applies to her.

Hell, if I have it my way, Caleb won't be fatherless this time next year.

"Should I have said something about Caleb's existence to Jeff tonight?"

"Before or after he got off the ventilator?"

Shiddd, . . . fuck Jeff and Wally. Caleb already has a dad.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE

“A we, man. Mine don’t look like yours, Mr. Germayne. Look.” Caleb sulks with his bottom lip sticking out.

“They don’t have to be perfect, C. This is your first time making them. I’ve had years of practice.”

“I want mine to be perfect too, though.”

Taking the spatula from Caleb’s hand, I set it on the stove before wiping the lone tear on his cheek.

“You don’t have to be perfect, nor do your pancakes. We’ll keep practicing until you get the hang of it. How does that sound?”

“Okay. I can’t eat these. They look funny. I also wanted to make Mommy feel better, but these will make her sicker,” he whines.

“How about you dump yours and watch me make you and your mom a new batch? Will that make you feel better?”

“Yes, sir. Can I pour the batter in the pan?”

“Of course. You can even help me flip them over when it’s time.”

“Yay. Thank you, Mr. Germayne. I love you.”

Time stands still, my heart freezes in my chest, and I stare unblinking at Caleb while my brain processes the three words I didn't see coming from his lips.

"I-I love you too, C. Let's finish breakfast so you're not late."

Caleb's first day of kindergarten comes at the speed of light, and what should be a happy time isn't because Chaniya is sick.

In fact, Chaniya has been sick for the past two days, much to her displeasure, since she has been looking forward to walking Caleb to his class.

However, Chaniya is battling the flu and isn't strong enough to do anything but bark orders in a hoarse voice from her bed.

"I don't understand why I can't at least ride with you to drop Caleb off." Chaniya pouts with her arms crossed over her breasts.

"You're still running a fever, Cha-Cha. Leaving this bed isn't something you'll be doing unless you need to pee. Going out of the house is out of the question. Now, what else do we need to debate?"

Chaniya wanted to call Nana or one of her family members to take Caleb to school in her absence.

However, I took off work to be the one to do it and have been looking forward to the task.

Caleb and I are slowly building a rapport with each other, and I'm enjoying the time we're getting to establish something significant.

. Based on our interactions and Caleb's easygoing personality, I'm not worried but

understand Chaniya's anxiousness.

We'll be on FaceTime during the ride and drop-off process to ease her mind.

Whatever will help Chaniya adjust to my involvement in this capacity is perfectly fine with me.

"I know. How did you let me get sick the week of Caleb's big day?"

A low chuckle escapes my mouth at the question because I'm only partly to blame for Chaniya's current predicament.

She would be good if she had not been laying up under me last week when I was sick.

With me working in the hospital, catching whatever bug floats through the hallways is not uncommon.

Chaniya insisted that I stay with her and Caleb so they could nurse me back to health.

The memory of Caleb's excitement over me being in the house is what led to me taking today off.

"Mommy said you don't feel good, Mr. Germaine. I'm gonna help take care of you. You're gonna have to rest and eat your vegetables so you can grow strong again," Caleb informs me after entering his mother's bedroom.

"Uh, I'm not sure if I can eat my vegetables right now, C. What else you got for me?" I ask in a deeper tone than usual, thanks to the congestion lining my chest wall.

"Hm. Let me think about it. I'll be back, but you rest, okay?"

“I got you, man.”

“I got you too, Mr. Germaine.” Lifting his little hand up, I reciprocate the gesture, slapping him a weak high-five before he jogs out of the room.

“If I recall correctly, your nursing skills are trash, Cha-Cha. When did nurses start sucking dick as part of patient care?” Smirking, I place my finger on my chin while awaiting her answer.

“Your dick wasn’t sick, though. Besides, if I recall correctly, you enjoyed the nightly blowjobs. A nut a day will keep the pain away.” Chaniya shrugs.

Laughing hysterically, I shake my head at the foolishness coming out of Chaniya’s mouth. I’ll admit that watching her head bob in my lap effortlessly and swallowing my nut like a champ had been one of my favorite highlights of recovery.

“I guess you’re right. Let me go see what C is doing. I’ll be back. Stay in bed.” Giving Chaniya a stern glare, I wait for her subtle nod before heading out of the room.

“Every day I’m hustlin’, hustlin’.” Caleb’s young-ass rapping this particular song has me fighting not to release a full-body laugh.

Knocking on his semi-cracked door, I wait for him to grant me permission to enter, and when he does, I step in immediately, fanning my face from the overwhelming cologne piercing my nostrils.

“Whoa, C. How much cologne did you put on?”

“A little here, a little there . . . Something slight, Mr. Germaine,” Caleb informs me while staring at himself in the mirror on the back of his closet door.

Unbeknownst to me, Chaniya had preplanned Caleb's outfit for today and had already ironed everything before hanging it in the closet.

With her being sick, it's a foresight I can appreciate since I worked last night and wouldn't have time to do so before we had to be out the door.

The crisp white shirt, navy blue pants with a crease down the leg, and all-white tennis shoes complement Caleb nicely.

Chaniya had taken Caleb to get a haircut last week, so that's also something that had been done in preparation for today.

"Alright, it's about that time. Are you ready to go? If you hurry, we can stop by Chick-fil-A for breakfast."

"I'm ready, but I need to let Mommy see me before we go," Caleb says.

"Of course. Grab your bookbag."

"Oh, hello, Ms. O'Neal. I'm sorry to hear that you're sick. Don't worry, Caleb is in great hands," Mrs. McCants tells Chaniya while staring into the camera.

"I have no doubt, Mrs. McCants. I've heard nothing but great things about you. You have all my contact information if you should ever need me," Chaniya returns before coughing, causing me to pull the phone away from Caleb's teacher to look at Chaniya.

"You good, Cha-Cha?" Seeing her eyes redden and her chest pulling tight has my chest pinching and worry flowing through my bloodstream.

"I'll take care of Caleb, Mr. Malone. I'll let you get back to your lady, as I can see

you pulling double duty here.” Mrs. McCants smirks.

“Yeah, yeah. Let me get out of here. Uh, C, I’ll see you after school.” Pulling my eyes from the phone back to Caleb and his teacher is a feat because my heart is on the other side of my phone.

“Okay. Kiss Mommy for me, Mr. Germaine.” With that, Caleb disappears inside the classroom, leaving me alone with his teacher.

“I’m fine,” Chaniya finally whispers.

“I see you’re just like my Lorenzo. Have a good day, Mr. Malone.” Mrs. McCants smiles before entering the classroom.

“I’m on my way, Cha-Cha. What do you need?”

“You,” Chaniya returns in a raspy and wheezy tone.

“Say less.” With Chaniya on my mind, I quickly move through the halls, leaving ShayNae Learning Institute without anyone prolonging my stay.

The time it takes me to drive back to Chaniya’s house from the school is less than it took initially.

Part of that was less traffic going in the opposite direction, the bulk of it being my determination to lay eyes on my woman.

Pulling into Chaniya’s driveway, I quickly exit and jog the path leading to the porch before hopping the steps like I’m on an obstacle course.

Inserting the key Chaniya had given me when she first got sick, I enter the front door,

slipping my shoes off, hanging my keys on the hook, and taking the steps to the second floor two at a time.

Hearing coughing coming from Chaniya, I increase my steps until I walk through her room's threshold.

"Awe. Look at my poor baby," I say upon seeing Chaniya coughing and wiping her nose with a tissue.

"I think you should eat my pussy so I can feel better too," Chaniya whines hoarsely.

"What?"

The wrinkles on her forehead to match the cute pout on her lips have a smirk upturning my lips.

My heart rate accelerates, and my blood pressure spikes the longer I stare at this woman whose sickness is far from a turn-off.

Warmth spreads across my chest, and wedding bells sound in my ears when Chaniya beckons me to come closer.

I didn't give a damn what anybody had to say.

When I met Chaniya O'Neal, love was always what I was after.

"I'm just saying, after the third day of sucking, you started getting a pep in your step. If it worked for you, then it should for me. I think I'm worth the shot, don't you?"

"You're worth everything I have to give, Cha-Cha. Lay back so I can take care of you. You've been sick long enough."

“How was your first day, C? Sorry I was a little late. It won’t happen again.”

Messing around with Chaniya and eating her pussy led to her requesting my dick, and pleasing my woman, even while she’s sick, is something I’ll strive to do.

My only dilemma was sucking Chaniya’s tongue like a lollypop while slowly stroking her so I wouldn’t release too fast. I also didn’t anticipate falling into a sleep coma with Chaniya, which had me late picking Caleb up from school.

Since I can’t blame his mother’s hypnotic pussy for my tardiness, it’s best to focus on what’s more important.

“It was so much fun. I made a couple friends. Lilly is my best friend because she’s so pretty.

I liked how her braids swung whenever she laughed.

She let me sit next to her at lunch and everything.

I almost hit Bob for pushing her down at recess, but Mrs. McCants said that wouldn’t be nice.

He better not touch Lilly tomorrow, or I’m gonna sneak him anyway,” Caleb tells me without pausing.

It didn’t take C long to discover the power of a woman’s wiles. He’s gone about Lilly like I am about his mama.

“I thought you said you made more friends. You’ve only mentioned Lilly,” I say in a singsong voice.

“Stoppp, Mr. Germayne.” Caleb laughs.

“Okay, C. What’s your other new friend's name?”

“Um, Tucker, Jonas, Stacey, although she told me she likes Tucker more than me. I wasn’t mad because I didn’t like her as much as Lilly, anyway.

Stacey wears glasses and is mean. I don’t like mean girls.

Lilly is really nice to me, letting me carry her mat to circle time with Mrs. McCants.

I was mad that I couldn’t nap beside Lilly because Mrs. McCants only lets boys sleep by boys and the girls by the girls,” Caleb rambles.

“That’s okay, C. How do you like the school and your teacher?”

“The school is big,” he exaggerates the last word before continuing.

“I don’t have to be around the big kids, and I like that because they scare me.

My teacher is so fun. She lets us pick the book for story time.

I also saw her husband. He was nice. Did you know she has kids too, Mr. Germayne?

I didn’t know she was a mommy, and she has a son like me.

I met him. His name is Lorenzo, like his dad.

Do you think I’ll have a dad like Lorenzo does?

I want to ask Mommy, but don’t want to hurt her feelings.

Grandma told me Mommy doesn't know who my daddy is and should be ashamed of herself.

I'm not mad at Mommy, though. I just want a dad like the other kids in my class.

Although Jonas doesn't have a dad either, that's why he's my friend. ”

Caleb's rambling and bomb-dropping of information has my chest tight and my fists gripping the steering wheel at the knowledge of his grandmother's actions. Regardless of what she has going on with Chaniya, discussing Caleb's paternity with him is never her place. Grandmother or not.

“You could be my dad, Mr. Germayne. You spend time at our house, and you're nice to me. I also saw you kiss Mommy, and Mommy tells me she kisses me so much because she loves me. Do you love my Mommy, Mr. Germayne?”

“With all my heart, C.” My brain is spinning from everything Caleb said during this ride back to the house.

“Then that settles it. You can be my daddy,” Caleb declares.

Chuckling low, I don't provide an answer for Caleb because, in my heart, I am his daddy, so what's understood doesn't need an explanation.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

CHANIYA

Nana: Don't go over there showing your ass, Chaniya. Vernise ain't about that life and will call twelve on you. I gotta re-up my funds after Yatta's last stint in the slammer. Please calm down.

Reading Nana's text does little to calm the inferno flowing through my bloodstream that has been sizzling since Germayne told me what Caleb said after school yesterday.

I waited for Caleb to be dropped off at school to get moving.

Luck had to be on my side when Germayne got called in to work sooner than his scheduled time, allowing me to throw on something and head this way.

I have sat back and taken every word my mother has spoken, but I draw the line at her speaking out of turn with Caleb.

Before I can exit my vehicle at Mom's house, my phone rings, and I huff upon seeing Germayne's name flashing on the screen.

"Hello."

"Do you know a good seamstress, Cha-Cha?"

My forehead wrinkles, and my eyes pinch together at hearing the outlandish question from Germayne instead of a common greeting.

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you know a good seamstress?”

Hesitating, I blink in bafflement before probing Germayne for more information. “Why are you asking me about a seamstress? Aren’t you at work? I don’t think they’re necessary to your job.”

“I need somebody to hook you up with your custom prison jumpsuit. If Caleb and I are forced to visit Ribax Correctional Prison, you should at least wear something sexy. I’m already researching who the warden is so I can prearrange my conjugal visits and shit.”

“I’m not in prison. What the h?—”

“Somewhere between your initial sickness and last night’s fever, you must have forgotten that you had Nana and I exchange phone numbers in case of an emergency.

Imagine my surprise to get a call from Nana, telling me that the sick and supposed-to-be sick and shut-in is out on ass-kicking missions.

So, I’m just wondering if you know of someone capable of making pea green sexy. ”

Damn, I had forgotten all about sending Nana Germayne’s phone number and vice versa when I first got sick.

The plan had been for them to communicate if Germayne needed Nana to pick Caleb up.

Given Germayne’s position at the hospital, sometimes his schedule fluctuates, or he’s called in to fill in for another physician assistant, so I wanted to be prepared just in

case.

“I’ll take your silence to mean you’re redirecting your car back to your house or you’re scrolling through your contacts to give me your selection,” Germayne expresses in a tone that causes me to roll my eyes.

“I just wanted to talk to Mom and let her know that?—”

“Does it really matter? Do me a favor. Go home. I’ll come over when I get off, and we can discuss this further. Nana is picking up Caleb and plans to keep him for a few hours.”

“Do I get a say in anything?”

“Not at the moment. Go home, get back in bed, and stay there. I’ll see you later.”

“Fine, you big meanie.”

My pussy thumps wildly when Germayne’s low chuckle vibrates through the line, sending tingles all over my body.

“Aye, Cha-Cha?”

“Hm.”

“I love you. Now go home.” With that, Germayne disconnected the line, and I stared at Mom’s house, seeing her front blinds swaying.

“You better be lucky, Vernise O’Neal.” Pulling my seat belt over my chest, I snap it before starting my car and backing out of her driveway.

“I’m glad we could get together. It’s been too long since we hung out. Where are my babies?” Isis asks, looking between Riele and me.

A slow smile upturns my lips at knowing where Caleb is spending his Saturday, but I wait for Riele to answer before I drop my bomb on my best friends.

“With his daddy, where his spoiled ass should be. Mama needs a few drinks to make up for lost time.” Riele rolls her eyes.

“Don’t do my nephew, heffa. I’m sure it’s you that has EJ spoiled anyway.” Isis rolls her eyes at Riele before shifting her attention to me. “Now, where is Caleb today? Your ass is sitting over here grinning like a fool, so this must be good,” Isis probes.

“With my man, doing some manly bonding or whatever Germanne said before they left,” I say, smiling.

“Oh shit!” Riele shouts, putting her hand up for a high-five that I ignore.

“Well, you better come through stepdaddy. Dedrick’s raggedy ass could neva. When do we get to hang with our new brother-in-law? I need to feel him out.” Isis’s Cheshire grin while rubbing her hands together has Riele and me laughing.

“The night and day difference between Dedrick and Germanne is astounding. Where Dedrick treated Caleb like an obstacle course he couldn’t win, Germanne has been strategically forming a relationship with Caleb.

Ironically, Caleb met Germanne at the barber shop and instantly started talking to him even without knowing his mother had been busting it open for that real nigga.

” I swoon when an image of Germanne pops into my mind.

“Listen, a real nigga will have you sliding down a pole on one hand wearing a leotard. I love this for you, bestie.” Riele interjects.

“I wanted to keep Caleb away from Germaine, so he didn’t keep seeing random men in my life, but?—”

“Girl, hush. You aren’t your mother, no matter how much she tries to throw her baggage off on you.” Isis cuts me off before sipping her drink.

I wish I could say Isis didn’t know what she was talking about, but the truth is, she isn’t off base.

While I was growing up, I had seen so many random men in Mom’s life that we both had PTSD when the men walked out on her.

In retrospect, no man other than Dedrick and now Germaine has been in Caleb’s presence.

Whatever men I allowed to sniff between my legs, even in my home, had to be long gone before Caleb awoke the next morning.

Becoming Vernise was something I never wanted for Caleb or myself, despite my reckless behavior in creating him.

“Speaking of not being my mother, let me tell y’all what she told Caleb.” I take a minute or so to catch Riele and Isis up on the nonsense Mom had the audacity to tell my son, with her hypocritical ass.

“So, is she on ice at Eternal Horizons, or does the City of Ribax still have her?” Riele asks nonchalantly, breaking a piece of bread and sticking it in her mouth.

“Okay. Better yet, tell me whether loving me through everything includes beating your mom’s ass on your behalf. I’ve been itching to straighten her lopsided wig with a few two-piece combinations,” Isis adds, holding her newly formed fists up, causing Riele to start choking on her bread.

“Are you okay, Miss?” our waiter rushes over asking with concern in his blue eyes.

“She’s dramatic. Thank you so much, sweet cheeks.” Isis interjects in a syrupy tone that incites my giggles.

Riele nods while grabbing her glass of water, taking large gulps to clear the bread from her throat.

“Your food will be out shortly. Let me know if you need anything,” the waiter tells Isis while caressing her shoulder gently before walking away.

“His ass better leave me alone before I have him singing Black negro spirituals at his family reunion. He ain’t ready for Gertrude and Prudence to disown him after taking this pussy on a merry-go-ride,” Isis declares, staring at the waiter’s retreating back.

“Oh no, bestie. We ain’t about that li—” I attempt to say before Isis cuts me off.

“Tuh. Big dick doesn’t come with any criteria, but—nah, let me quit right here. I’ll be sliding down big black dicks until the good Lord calls me home. You’re right, girl. I ain’t about that life at all.” Isis remarks, returning her gaze to Riele and me.

“I’m glad you came by. I’ve been missing you,” Nana says when I enter her kitchen.

Her small TV is playing what appears to be *House of Paynes*, and several pots and pans are on the stove.

Edna O'Neal is my rock and has never failed to be the person to stand in the gap for me against my most prominent opponent to date, .

. . her daughter and my mother. After leaving Isis and Riele, I had more time to kill since Germaine said he and Caleb wouldn't be back until this evening, so here I am, visiting.

Having Germaine in my life, I didn't think I would get bored with having free time, but I've come to enjoy being with a man who never looks for opportunities of separation.

"I'm sorry. I'll do better about coming over." Kissing her cheek, I sit in the empty chair across from her.

"Mhm. I understand you're over there, under that man, and believe me, I can see why, but don't be neglecting me. I'm not opposed to popping up and messing up y'all little happy bubble and shit."

Smirking, I drop my head when Nana's eyes lift to mine so I don't get her started any more than she already is. Once I'm able to control my actions, I lift my head to see Nana staring intently, instantly removing my humor.

"What?" I ask over the lump in the back of my throat as heat fills my neck.

"No matter who your parents are or aren't, God has never seen you as a mistake.

I love my daughter, but she's wrong for making you believe your life hasn't been worth the hours it took her to bring you into this world.

" The sincerity in Nana's voice has tears slipping from the corners of my eyes without permission.

“I uh?—”

“Don’t have to say anything. I said what I said, and that settles it. Now tell me how my baby is adjusting to his father.” Nana’s brows hike, and a sinister grin slides into place.

“His father is wild, Nana.” Laughing, I shake my head while ignoring the butterflies swarming in my stomach at the thought.

“Oh, he ain’t Caleb’s father, but taking him to school while you were sick? Girl, bye. I’ve been Caleb’s backup for everything for five years. Now your new man on the scene, and suddenly, I’m not needed anymore,” Nana taunts.

“Ooh, Nana. I didn’t know you would ride the petty bus when I came here today.”

“Chile, please. I’m driving the mothafucka today, so buckle up and stop stalling. You know I’m nosy.”

Laughing again, I shake my head before preparing to bring Nana up to speed on Caleb's adjustment to Germaine being in our life.

“In all my years of dating, I have never felt how I feel about this man. I couldn’t tag you in with Caleb’s first week of school because Germaine stepped in without any preempting from me.

Since that day, Caleb has been stuck to him like glue, and it's been the cutest thing to witness. It was Caleb’s idea for him and Germaine to have a boy’s outing today.

I think I’m slowly being replaced, and I can’t even be mad, because Germaine is wowing me too.

” I stop talking when my phone vibrates, causing me to remove it from my purse.

My eyes mist upon reading the text from Germane.

Germane: We wanted to check in to let you know that we’re good. *image attached*

“See, this is what I’m talking about.” I show Nana my phone so she can see the picture of Germane and Caleb. Caleb’s eyes are beaming with happiness, his cheeks are full of delight, and Germane looks like he’s in the highlight of his life, simply next to Caleb.

“Mhm. I’m going out tomorrow to buy my dress for the adoption ceremony,” Nana states, and a bubble of laughter escapes my mouth at the serious expression on her face.

Me too, Nana. Me too .

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 8:35 am

GERMAYNE

Caleb and I have been enjoying our bonding day, making me the happiest man in the world. Today confirms that locking Chaniya down for life means I will inherit two of the best things this side of Heaven.

“Good job, C. Shoot again, big man,” I encourage.

“My arms are getting tired, Papa G. Can you please help me?”

My heart stops and air rushes in my ears while my eyes blink continuously at the new name Caleb has attached to me.

Jesus! This little boy is about to have me out here in this public place, shedding buckets of tears.

What is Cha-Cha gonna say when she hears him call me this?

Lord, please don't let me fuck up with this woman.

I promise I didn't coerce him into this.

How will I get Cha-Cha not to send me packing over this one?

“Papa G, are you okay?” Caleb questions, looking at me.

“Uh-um, yeah, I'm good. Why did you call me that, C?”

“Because you are. Now, can you help me?” Caleb gives me a duh expression while waiting for me to assist him with throwing the ball into the basket.

Shaking off my swirling thoughts and shock, I move to lift Caleb off his feet while running at full speed before giving him instructions again.

“Shoot it, C. We got this!”

Lord, please don’t let his mama kill or leave me over this.

“Ooh, you got a grandma too, Papa G. I knew you were cool. I got two grandmothers,” Caleb says excitedly when I pull into Grandma Jolene’s driveway.

I had no intention of coming by, but Grandma Jolene called, requesting me to change the batteries in her smoke detectors.

“Well, you’re cooler than I am because I only have one grandmother. Unbuckle your seat belt, and I’ll get your door. If we don’t get in here, she’s only gonna call me again, rushing me.”

Caleb giggles at hearing my statement while doing what I asked, and I exit the vehicle before opening the back door to let him out.

Chaniya had been adamant about putting the child lock on whenever Caleb rode with me, which I’m still adjusting to.

Caleb is the first kid I’ve entertained on this level.

I haven’t dated a lot of women with kids and I have never brought them to meet Grandma Jolene, so it’ll be interesting to see how Grandma Jolene responds to Caleb.

However, since she loves Chaniya, I'm sure Caleb will be in like Flynn.

"I hope your grandmother likes me." Caleb runs his hands down his shirt, removing the nonexistent wrinkles once we climb on the porch.

"She will, and if not, I'll put her in a headlock until she changes her mind. How's that sound?"

Caleb's hand covers his mouth, and his giggles cause my heart to skip a beat at the sound that matches the jovial expression in his bright eyes.

"You can't do that. It'll hurt her." Caleb giggles.

"Okay. Fine, but if she's mean, turn your head and leave the room. I got you." Smirking, I insert my key into the front door, allowing Caleb to enter before me.

"Grandma Jolene! I'm here," I shout after closing and securing the front door.

"We're in the recreation room," Grandma Jolene returns, causing my brows to wrinkle because there aren't any other cars in the driveway but mine.

Interlocking Caleb's hand with mine, I lead us back to the room where Grandma Jolene and her mystery guest are frolicking. If Jolene Malone has a man in here, Caleb might see someone get put in a headlock after all.

"Oh. Well, who do we have here?" Ma says with her eyes on Caleb, wearing a weary smile.

"Where is y'all car?" I ask.

Mom, Dad, and Grandma Jolene don't acknowledge me as all of their gazes are on

Caleb, who tightens his grip on my hand.

“It’s cool, C. This is my mom, Mrs. Adele. That’s my dad, Mr. Glynn. Last but not least is my grandma, Jolene,” I introduce with my eyes on Caleb, who looks at my family members before shifting his gaze to me.

“They look nice. Can I go hug them?” Caleb asks.

“Sure you can, pudding. Come on over here and give me some love.” Ma interjects.

“Son?” Dad’s voice adds, and I can hear the question within the unspoken question, which pushes me to provide a necessary response.

“This is Caleb. Chaniya is his mom,” I inform my parents and grandmother.

“Oh. Well, aren’t you just darling,” Grandma Jolene states when Caleb hugs her around the waist after leaving Mom.

A smile upturns my lips at seeing the warm welcome from my senior relatives, especially since I’m planning on making Chaniya and Caleb a part of our family.

“Ooh, you give hugs like my nana. I like you,” Caleb utters while holding onto Grandma Jolene.

Caleb’s statement reminds me of the tension between Nana and Grandma Jolene that has to be resolved before our families unite.

“Hey, little buddy. How’s it going?” Dad greets Caleb, giving him a five instead of a hug, yet the adoration in Dad’s eyes isn’t any less prominent than Ma or Grandma Jolene’s is.

“You’re big like my daddy.” Caleb’s eyes balloon at looking at Dad once he’s standing.

A goofier grin forms at hearing Caleb’s reference despite seeing the wrinkles in Dad’s forehead at the comparison.

“Who’s your dad, C?” I ask, although I already know what he’s going to confirm.

“You are, silly.” Caleb points to me before turning back to look at my dad before wrapping his little arms around Dad’s legs.

“Oh my,” Ma whispers.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Dad utters before bending to lift Caleb into his broad arms while returning the hug.

“Same charm as his mother. I’m in love,” Grandma Jolene utters.

“Why did you pull me out here? I want to finish baking cookies with Caleb,” Grandma Jolene protests.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying this time with Caleb, but you and I have bigger fish to fry. Ma and Dad can spend time with Caleb until we’re done.”

“Boy. What fish are you talking about? I ain’t done nothing to your tail,” Grandma Jolene questions with her hands resting on both sides of her waist. The daggers she’s staring at me to match the tightness around her eyes should be intimidating, yet I’m anything but moved.

“This moment signifies more than cookie baking, and I need to get to the?”

“Germaine Kadeem Malone, . . . get to the point or shut the hell up.” Grandma Jolene interjects.

“What’s the deal between you and Chaniya’s grandmother?”

Grandma Jolene rolls her eyes hard enough for them to get stuck in her head before blowing air and crossing her arms over her chest.

“I don’t want to?—”

“Too bad. Look, Grandma Jolene. Disrespecting you is the last thing I want to do, but allowing you to jeopardize my future isn’t a risk I’m going to take. Tell me what the beef is about, please.”

“You better mind your mann?—”

“I’m sorry, but can you please tell me what the issue is so I understand the situation better?”

“Fine. Back in high school, Edna and I were the best of friends. Everything changed when Car?—”

“Please tell me you and that woman aren’t beefing over a man. Please. If you’re about to?—”

“It is over a man because I didn’t know that Carter had been playing find that lollipop with Edna. I thought he was only interested in me, but she had him first,” Grandma Jolene concludes with a resting bitch face that has me shaking my head at this childish information.

“You mean to tell me that you and Nana are still beefing over a nigga that neither one

of y'all asses are with today?" I chuckle lowly because this is the dumbest shit I've heard in a long time.

"Yep," Grandma Jolene confirms, popping the p to enunciate her meaningless point.

"Not at the risk of my happiness, y'all won't. Hold on." Pulling my phone from my pocket, I dial Nana's number to end this bullshit beef.

Their old asses got me and my future fucked up.

"How's my new grandson doing?" Nana greets when the call connects after the third ring.

"I'll be better soon as we get some things ironed out. Can you come to—" I pause to give Grandma Jolene a pleading look before continuing. "Sorry, can you come to 1068 Usemar Drive? I'll be waiting for you."

"Is everything okay with Chaniya and Caleb?" Nana questions.

"Yes, ma'am. This is important, though," I confirm.

"Alright, I'm on my way," Nana says before disconnecting the call.

"Why the hell did you invite that prude to my house, Germaine?" Grandma Jolene asks.

"What y'all have going on ends before I leave here because I'm marrying Chaniya and adopting Caleb. That means family over everything, so y'all old asses are about to squash this shit." With that, I return to the house to wait for Nana's arrival.

Feeling confident that the meeting will go well, I quickly text Chaniya.

Me: Hey Cha-Cha. Be ready at seven. Caleb and I are gonna pick you up for dinner.

“Okay, don’t forget. We’re going to walk mommy to my car and open the door for her.” I reiterate the instructions I had given Caleb before we got out.

“Okay. I won’t.” Caleb confirms just as the front door opens, and a smiling Chaniya comes into view.

“Well, alright now. When you left here this morning, you were my baby. Now I don’t know who this is. Thank you, sweetie.” Chaniya gushes when Caleb hands her a bouquet of flowers.

“I’m a big boy, Mommy. Papa G said all beautiful ladies should know it.” Caleb smiles.

My heart is hammering in my chest to see if Chaniya is about to be cool or come out of the bag after hearing what Caleb just called me.

“Papa G?” Chaniya’s forehead wrinkles, but her eyes are on Caleb, causing my hands to perspire slightly.

Jesus, please!

“Mhm. He’s cool. He teaches me stuff. He taught me how to make his special pancakes. He buys me stuff. He takes me places. I don’t want to be like my friend Jonas anymore. Can Papa G please be my dad, Mommy?” Caleb pleads.

For the first time since Chaniya opened the front door for us, her eyes moved from Caleb to me. Within her penetrating gaze, I see a mix of emotions and reservations that push me to speak.

“I’ve claimed him, too, if that makes you feel better. I didn’t pressure or provoke him or provide the name he’s been calling me since a few hours ago. We can discuss it in detail after we put him to bed tonight. For now, can me and Caleb continue with our dinner plans?”

Wordlessly and with misty eyes, Chaniya nods, stepping onto the porch. Taking Chaniya’s keys, I quickly lock the front door before Caleb and I each take one of her hands, guiding her off the porch and to my SUV.

“Wait, Mommy. Let me get it,” Caleb tells Chaniya when she’s about to touch the door handle.

“Oh. I’m sorry, baby.”

Smiling wide, I watch Caleb open the passenger door, allowing Chaniya to enter. Chaniya turns toward us after she fastens her seat belt, with her eyes watery, giving us a nod. Stepping forward, I lean in to kiss her cheek before backing up to close her door. Then I high-five Caleb.

“Good job, C. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Alright, Papa G. Let’s go.” Opening his door, Caleb hops into his booster seat, secures his seat belt, and gives the same nod his mother did before I shut the door and walk to my side.

Through deep, satisfying breaths, my lungs expand to their fullest when I enter and see the glowing expression of love shining within Chaniya’s eyes.

“I love you,” Chaniya says lowly.

“Trust me, . . . I love y’all more.”

CHANIYA

“D on’t do it, Miss Celie. Don’t do it,” Isis jokes.

“Tuh. Do it. I’ve been working on your bail money if she wants to show her ass.” Riele interjects.

Laughing, I cover my mouth so I don’t draw attention to myself, messing around with my best friends.

“You know what? I’m tripping, and you’re right again, Riele. Crucify the ho if she loses her mind in that nice establishment. I mean, it won’t be the first time,” Isis adds.

Seeing a familiar face being escorted by the hostess toward my table, I cut off my laughter and address Isis and Riele.

“She’s here. I gotta go,” I tell them.

“Call us afterward,” Isis demands.

“Right. If we don’t hear from your ass in two hours, I’m strapping this baby to my chest and coming that way,” Riele adds.

“Okay. Later.” Disconnecting the call, I plaster on a smile while standing to greet my guest. “Good evening, Mom.”

“Hello, Chaniya,” she returns stiffly.

Oh, here we go. Not wanting to deal with the rejection or bullshit, I had Nana call Mom requesting that she meet me at It's Good and Moody for dinner tonight.

Thanks to Germaine, I didn't need a reservation.

However, his best friend, Jarrod, has Mom and me toward the back of the restaurant, just in case things go left.

Germaine had been the one to suggest the location because of his connection to the owner.

Instead of being at work or home with Caleb, he's in the back, shooting the breeze with Jarrod until I'm done.

Caleb is with Nana for the night so that I can protect him from overhearing anything negative when I share the highlights with Germaine or my friends.

"Did you not want to have dinner with me? It's been a while since we've seen one another, so I didn't think you would have a problem connecting," I inquire, staring intently into the eyes similar to my own.

"I'm wondering why you had to go through Mama to ask me to dinner. My number is the same as it's been in the past two decades. What's the purpose of a third party?"

Placing my palms flat on the table, I sigh before squaring my shoulders to jump into the conversation since she wants to act like I'm in the wrong.

"When did you start sharing your disdain for me with my child? When did your hostility over my conception require you to give me your ass to kiss?"

"Now, hold on, little girl?—"

“I won’t. For as long as I can remember, you’ve had something negative to say about what I do.

Normally, it would be okay for a mother to share her thoughts on your decisions, but it's never okay to tear your child down. It's never okay to make said child the recipient of your mistakes in life.

It's never okay to cause your child to question why you chose to not swallow thirty-two years ago.

” I stop talking when my chest heaves up and down like a raging bull while my hands open and close, suppressing the urge to form fists.

“The funny thing about your spiel is that I did swallow that night. I just should have stayed sucking instead of allowing him to enter my pussy. While you think you have something to get off your chest, I’m fighting the urge to vomit, staring at you.”

“You know what . . .? Get up, Cha-Cha. This meeting is done.” Germayne interjects, appearing out of thin air.

“Oh, I see he’s the protective type. Hopefully, you and that loose pussy can do a better job at keeping him than I ever did,” Mom adds with a sinister grin that pinches my chest because, at this moment, I realize that there will be no reconciliation between us.

I refuse to deal with the vile likes of Vernise O’Neal, regardless of her legal position in my life. I love me more than to allow her bitterness to penetrate my life any further.

“Unlike whatever nigga you’re pissed with, I’ve always been after love with Chaniya,” Germayne continues.

My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, preventing me from doing anything but stare at my mother, who stands with a calmness that contradicts the fire in her eyes.

“We’ll see how long?—”

“Oh no. That’s where you’re mistaken. This is the last day you will breathe the same air as my family. Don’t let the door hit you, but I hope the good Lord splits you.” With that, Germaine takes my hand, helping me to my feet, and we move wordlessly toward Jarrod’s office in the back.

After the pointless and botched conversation with Mom, I find myself wondering if Caleb will one day feel like I should have done more to determine his birth father.

I know he and Germaine are developing their relationship and Caleb has expressed acceptance of Germaine assuming the role.

However, I feel like I should at least attempt to make things right for Caleb’s benefit.

So here I am, putting myself on the chopping block while searching Facebook for the men I slept with.

After getting pregnant, I did the same search, and it was fruitless, but it's been nearly six years, and everybody has Facebook these days.

“Oh shit!” I stop scrolling when I come across Spencer’s profile.

Thanks to his public account, I start going through his page before seeing a recent picture of Spencer, Wally, and Jeff.

“Hm. Well, ain’t this cute. The careless trio are still in contact with one another,” I grumble, rolling my eyes.

All three men are smiling wide while holding beers in what looks like a lavish backyard party or something like it.

A sinking feeling in my stomach has me closing my eyes to gather my bearings because contacting these men is the last thing I want to do.

Yet, I'm willing to become a lamb being led to the slaughter house if it means Caleb won't have any future questions about where he comes from.

Girl, bye. Your man has already stepped up to let Caleb know that real men exist, so you really don't have to do this. Sometimes, it's best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Ignoring the statements in my mind, I pull up my inbox and begin typing a message to Spencer. He seems less likely to respond negatively, despite who his friends are.

Me: Hello Spencer. I'm not sure if you remember the night we shared nearly six years ago, and this probably isn't the best way to handle the situation.

However, it's all I have. Anyway, the night we were together resulted in my getting pregnant.

I would like for you to get a paternity test to determine if you're the father of my child.

Biting my bottom lip, I reread the message after sending it before shrugging and moving to the two other men in question.

My message to Wally and Jeff is identical to what I sent to Spencer.

I'll wait until I receive responses to determine how much information I want to share about Caleb.

Closing out of my inbox, I take a couple cleansing breaths, hoping to erase my limbs' shakiness. For now, being vague is appropriate and protective, just in case this thing blows up in my face. Unlike the three men I slept with, my page is private, and I don't share pictures of Caleb on any of my social media platforms, so I should be okay.

Simultaneous notification alerts hit my phone, causing heat to fill my neck, and my hands tremble slightly.

Fortunately, work has been extremely light today, so I have time to do personal matters on the clock.

My boss thinks I'm tending to our overnight animals, and I did, but now I'm handling my own affairs.

Looking at the recently spayed dog, I smile weakly because her sad eyes somehow give me the courage to open my phone to check the messages waiting for me.

Spencerthegreat: I think you need to keep searching for your baby's father because I ain't it. With your quick acceptance that night, I'm pretty sure I'm one of twenty. Get out of my inbox, whore.

"Wow," I mumble, shaking my head and moving to the next message.

WallyIINice: Who are you? I've never slept with you. I don't even know you. Wrong nigga, sis.

"Oh, this nigga got jokes." A humorless laugh escapes my mouth at the response from Wally outright denying any involvement with me. "Maybe I sh—" My statement ends when a message pops up from Jeff, and it's the one I've been dreading the most, especially after what happened between us not long ago.

JeffNotThatOne: I guess ole boy ain't handling you right despite throwing his weight around not too long ago.

It's cool. I'm a forgiving man. In fact, I can even entertain meeting you for a paternity test, but first, I need you to play a role too.

If I'm offering some of my blood to determine if your bastard kid is mine, you need to serve that pussy up on a silver platter.

My old lady ain't letting me fuck, so you might as well be her stand-in.

I'm thinking you can be my little slut for the next five years.

I mean, it's the least your ho ass can do.

So, what do you say? Are you willing to let me beat that pussy out of the frame again?

Or are you cool with your kid being a bastard? I'm good either way.

"This mothafucka is out of his mind." My fingers trip over themselves to delete all three messages before blocking the men.

At this point, I'll take my chances with Germaine and see how Caleb fares later in life. I ain't subjecting me or Caleb to the nonsense. Matter of fact, what the hell was I thinking? Ugh.

An emergency labor and delivery for a dog has me walking into my front door after eight o'clock.

Thankfully, Germaine worked the morning shift, so I didn't have to worry about

finding someone to take care of Caleb.

I'm not sure how I made it home because I'm tired as hell.

The poor dog wouldn't push out the last three puppies, which meant the vet and I had to assist her.

Seeing the lights on the main level off with a glow coming from the light under the microwave, I head up to the second floor.

I plan to peek in on Caleb, who I know is sleeping, thanks to the picture mail I received from Germaine, and then shower.

Crawling in the bed next to my man after this hellacious day will do my mind and body some good.

My limbs protest with every step I climb, but I make it to the second floor and push Caleb's slightly ajar door open.

A wide smile upturns my weary lips, and I quickly pull my phone from my pocket.

Snapping a picture, my heart sputters and my chest explodes with warmth at seeing Germaine with Caleb's arm draped over him.

They are snoozing peacefully, and I hate to disturb them, but mama also needs some cuddle time with Papa G.

"Go get your shower. I'll be waiting for you when you get out." Germaine's low and husky voice stops my approach toward the bed.

His eyes are still closed, so I had no clue that he wasn't sleeping like Caleb, but I nod

and give him a few parting words. “Hurry, I need some of that sleep aid you gave Caleb to have him unconscious.”

“Say less, Cha-Cha. I got you.”

With a smile the size of Arizona, I turn and exit the room with a little more pep in my step than when I arrived.

Tonight won't be a night where I prolong my shower, because I need to feel Germaine's heart thumping against my ear while I lie on his chest. All worries from earlier are gone simply by seeing Germaine and Caleb.

My baby already has a capable man in his life. Ain't no point in rocking the boat.

Germanyne

A year later . . .

“Why are you sitting here staring at the building? Unlike me, you got to walk our son to his kindergarten and first-grade class.” Cha-Cha’s snappy tone cuts into my thoughts, causing a smirk to upturn my lips.

Pulling my gaze from the school building, I turn to see Chaniya’s fuller than normal face with a pout present. Chuckling, I lean over and kiss her lips to try and soften the aggression she’s feeling right now.

“Mm,” Chaniya moans.

“Mhm. Chill. You know I love your fake mad ass. You’re lucky I let you ride along because you’re supposed to be resting.” Pulling away from the school, I head home to kill time until it's time for pick up.

“Tuh. This isn’t my first rodeo, Germanyne.”

“Yet, it's mine from this stage, so I ain’t trying to hear what you’re talking about.”

Chaniya and I brought a baby into the world two weeks ago, and yes, I’m including myself because I refused to let anyone other than me cut Chaniya open. Thanks to our son’s stubbornness and refusal to come out, Chaniya had to have a cesarean because he didn’t tolerate the Pitocin well.

“Leaving me at home with a screaming baby is sheer nasty work, Germaine Malone. I thought you loved me.” I drop my head when Chaniya’s bottom lip quivers because it’s the precursor to her tears.

Had someone other than myself delivered Geovanni, I would send them the bill for the damage they caused Chaniya’s hormones. Yet, it’s impossible to blame myself unless I start from the beginning, and I’ll never regret a moment of fun that led us to this point.

“Never doubt for a moment that your love has always been my motivation, Chaniya Malone. There will never come a day where your pleasure isn’t my reward. To love you is to always take care of you, even when you don’t like it.”

The moment I found out that Chaniya was pregnant with my baby, I ran to the jewelry store to purchase her engagement ring.

Three weeks later, the two of us were married in front of a judge with Caleb, Nana, Grandma Jolene, Ma, and Dad as our witnesses.

Wasting money on a lavish wedding for everyone but the two of us to enjoy didn’t seem worth it to me.

When I told Chaniya we could have a big reception and begin searching for our forever home, she agreed.

“It’s not fair, though. I missed kindergarten and now first grade. What’s next, his high school graduation?”

“Come on, Cha-Cha. C is only on first grade, day one, and you’re already advancing him. Please calm down. How about I give you a massage when we get home? Then I’ll let you rest all day while I take care of Geovanni. How does that sound?”

“How? He has to eat, and you?—”

“You have milk on reserve for him, so he’ll have to do like his old man and have a forced break from the titty. It’ll give us another reason to bond.”

“You’re crazy.” Chaniya giggles.

“There’s my Cha-Cha. Pretty ass,” I say, causing a blush to fill Chaniya’s cheeks.

“I want to thank you all for coming. Your support is something we’ll never be able to repay,” I swallow to push the lump forming in my throat back into my esophagus.

“It’s okay. Take your time,” Chaniya whispers while rubbing my back lovingly.

This is a monumental moment for me and our little family as a whole, yet I can’t seem to sequester my emotions to speak the words flowing freely in my brain.

“Come on, Dad. You’re embarrassing me and Geo,” Caleb tells me while holding his little brother.

Thanks to Caleb, our entire household and family call Geovanni Geo because Caleb swears it’s fitting and cooler than always calling him by his whole name. At Caleb’s age, we acquiesce without changing his mind or debating his logic.

Giggles come from Chaniya and Ma, who are standing guard to ensure Caleb doesn’t drop Geo or hold him incorrectly.

“Can you hurry, Dad? I want to show Geo the tree house before Grandma Adele takes him back,” Caleb urges.

“My bad, C.” I apologize before returning my gaze to the crowd of family and friends waiting patiently for me to continue.

“I thought my life would be mundane and full of bedhop—never mind. When I met Chaniya, I thought her only role was to keep me away from the claws of she who shall not be named. Yet, the spark in her eyes, the radiance within her smile, and th?—”

“Man, if you say another poetic thing, I’m walking out,” Desi interjects.

A rebuttal is on the tips of my lips before something flashes in Desi’s eyes that causes me to let him off the hook. More than my life changed in a year, but that’s a story for a different day.

“Let me get to the point . . . Meeting and pursuing Chaniya opened me up to an unexpected blessing. It’s amazing how you can pursue love with one person, and God opens a window in Heaven to grant you a two-for-one special.

Falling in love with Chaniya meant opening my heart to loving Caleb.

Loving Caleb meant more than anything I’ve ever imagined.

From our first introduction, before he even knew his mama was mine, I decided to tether my heart to him.

Today is possible because the City of Ribax couldn’t stop what was already in motion.

Let me reintroduce you all to, . . . Caleb Germaine Malone. ”

A thunderous round of applause echoes around the room as our family and friends celebrate Caleb’s official adoption with Chaniya and me.

“Finally! Can we go now, Dad?” Caleb asks.

“Go on, Son. Be careful with your brother, though,” I say, smiling.

“I got you, Dad. Besides, Mommy already threatened to whup me if anything happens to Geo.” With that, Caleb walks away with Ma hot on his heels.

“Was it worth it?” Chaniya whispers when everyone starts conversing amongst themselves.

“Are you saying it wasn’t?” Hiking my brow, I pull her into my arms while staring into her eyes.

“I’m asking you. If you had to do it again, would you change anything?”

“Mhm. I wouldn’t have let you walk away the first time we met. It didn’t take me three times to know that love was what I wanted from you. Nevertheless, it’s an inconvenience I’ll erase from our story before sharing it with our grandchildren.”

“Hm. You are a mess, Germaine.”

“Nah, a mess is what I’ll forever cause to anyone who seeks to disturb your peace. With me, your crown will never shift.”

“I’m heading upstairs. Find a reason to kick our people out.”

“What about the boys?”

“Give Caleb a melatonin and Geo some of that good breast milk. Both remedies are like a charm for them. Don’t keep me waiting too long.”

“Say less, Cha-Cha.”

Wordlessly, I head to the kitchen to heat a bottle for Geo and obtain the sleep aids for

Caleb while pondering fake excuses to get rid of our full house.

I'm sure shouting my dick is on fire wouldn't do the trick, especially given the people in attendance.

However, desperate times might mean desperate actions. Yeah, that's it. Go big or go home!

"Aye, I hate to be this guy, but y'all came, y'all saw. I hope you conquered it because it's time for y'all to go home. I got two kids to put to sleep within twenty minutes, so let's get a move on," I loudly speak after reentering the family room where everyone is.

"Huh?" Essence questions.

"Go one, go all. Home must be in your immediate future because it's time for me to ring my wife's bell."

Chaniya might kill me for the measures taken to get to her, but I'm hoping the dick she'll be getting after six long weeks will keep her from crashing out.

If not, I'll try again until I get it right.

After all, I have lost time to make up for.

Time waits for no one, and at this point, neither will the backup in my dick.

The End!