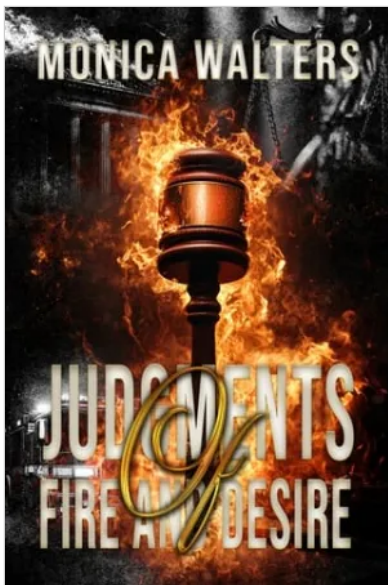




Judgments of Fire and Desire

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Losing her father to the 9/11 terrorist attack at the tender age of three, has Genesis Farris longing for what she feels is missing. Being that her mother never remarried or even introduced another man into their lives, it made her that much more curious about what it was like to be loved by one. She's always wanted to know and experience what was so special or significant about a man's love, but she was far from the point of desperation. Just from the stories she'd heard about her father, she knew that he wanted what was best for her, so she refused to settle for less than that.

While on the job as one of the most decorated firefighters in her city, she comes face to face with who she believes will be the man to school her on all the things she is ignorant about. The situation is extremely dangerous, and she's hoping the attraction isn't simply a trauma bond. She doesn't plan to waste time on something that won't have the potential to be permanent. Judge Patrick isn't a man that easily accepts rejection, but Genesis knows her worth and refuses to accept anything less, regardless of status and prestige.

Kyrie Patrick is an educated man who believes in pulling yourself up by the bootstraps to get the things you want and deserve. He's the youngest judge in the state and the first black judge from his hometown to ever be elected to office. Those facts have Kyrie thinking more highly of himself than he should and that ruffles some people's feathers. He constantly looks over his shoulder, because he doesn't trust people. He's gained plenty of enemies along the way for being a presiding judge for the criminal court of appeals and for not always seeing beyond black and white.

While he would love to have a woman to share his life and all of his successes with, he isn't in a hurry. He didn't have the greatest example of how a man should love a woman growing up, so he is learning on the fly. He believes the love of his life will eventually cross his path if fate has its way. That fateful day comes when he faces a matter of life and death. The angel of mercy pays him a visit in the form of a gorgeous firefighter that leads him to the light in more ways than one.

Although sparks fly between Genesis and Kyrie, they chalk it up to their emotions being high and their traumatic vulnerability due to the

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“I’m sentencing you to thirty years for the assault of a peace officer to be served consecutively and not concurrently with the theft charge.”

The crowd erupted. I pounded my gavel and called for order. This man had so many opportunities to strike a deal. There was video footage of him suplexing a county officer at a convenience store. That move was popular among wrestlers, but it wasn’t intended to be used outside of a WWE ring. That officer sustained a serious spinal injury because of his assault. It didn’t help that the perp had military training.

He fought in Iraq as a marine, and according to his council, he suffered from PTSD. That reason could have allowed for a lesser sentence, but he wouldn’t accept the help provided to him through the government, since he felt like he didn’t have a problem. Unfortunately, because he wouldn’t accept the help provided for the past fifteen plus years that they’d offered it, he would get it involuntarily in the penitentiary.

I stood from the bench as they cuffed him and hauled him out of the courtroom. I didn’t miss the mean mug he’d given me. Slowly shaking my head, I headed back to my chambers. If people just did what they were supposed to do, they wouldn’t have to worry about whether a judge was lenient or not. It wasn’t my problem why or how they landed in my courtroom, and I wasn’t about to allow them to make it my problem.

I took off my robe and hung it on the rack then went to my mahogany desk, preparing to shut everything down to go home. It had been a long day, and I was mentally drained. Listening to the arguments and reviewing evidence, facts, and findings had depleted my energy quicker than normal. Plus, it was raining cats and dogs outside for the majority of the time I was here. My body wanted to slide onto my Tempur-

Pedic mattress and hibernate for the next couple of days. I would do just that when I got home.

Just as I was about to head out, my bailiff appeared in the doorway. He slowly shook his head and said, “Man, those people want your head in there.”

I shrugged. He knew I didn’t concern myself with public opinion when it concerned sentencing. As a judge, I was fair and by the book. Taking it easy on people who broke the law was just as bad as having Saturday school for kids who goofed off during the week and didn’t complete their assignments. The truth was, in life, when you messed up, you had to suffer the consequences, no matter how severe they could be.

“Oh well. They aren’t the first, and I’m pretty sure they won’t be the last. I wonder if they felt the same way about their loved one when he nearly broke that officer’s neck.”

Tyson slowly shook his head. “Well, whatever. You wanna go for drinks tonight?”

“Naw. I have to go check on my mama. Maybe tomorrow. Besides, don’t you have a pregnant girlfriend to tend to?”

“Yeah, but she’s going out with a friend tonight.”

“Ahh, you’re gonna be lonely. That’s why you’re trying to hang out with me.”

He chuckled and rubbed his hand down the top of his head. “Whatever. Call me if you change your mind.”

“Mm hmm. See you Monday if I don’t.”

He nodded and left my office as I turned off the lights to leave as well. I hadn't been to my mom's house all week. I usually checked on her twice a week, but I'd been so busy. This would be my first visit this week, and it was almost over.

As I walked through the courthouse, I caught a few stares. I knew some of them were people from the case that had just adjourned. I ignored them and made my way to my car. When I got to it, a slip of paper on my windshield slowed me down somewhat. Because of the nature of my job, I'd received a few death threats. None of them had panned out to be anything, thankfully. I supposed it didn't help that there was a sign with my name on it, indicating that was my parking spot.

I pulled it from the windshield wiper and read it.

One day, judgment will fall on you, and you will be begging for the mercy you don't give.

I frowned slightly. This one seemed a little more intelligent than all the others, but I refused to dwell on it. I would report it later. I balled it up and threw it to the passenger seat after opening the door. Most likely, nothing would come of it.

When I got to my mother's house, she was sitting on the porch. The weather was pretty nice, since it was no longer raining. Beaumont was known for its hot temperatures and humid climates, but there was a nice breeze blowing, and temperatures had only reached eighty-five degrees, thanks to the downpour earlier. Although it was the beginning of September, it was still normally reaching the mid-nineties.

As I got out of my vehicle, I glanced at the crumpled piece of paper in the passenger seat. Something was telling me to take this seriously. I decided I would head to the police station when I left my mother's house. She had issues with her blood pressure, and the last thing I wanted to do was tell her I had received a death threat. I never

disclosed any of the other ones I had received, so I wouldn't start now.

I walked up the stairs to the porch and said, "Hey, Mama. How are you?"

"Hey, baby. I'm okay. I didn't think I would see you this week. You must have been super busy."

"Yes, ma'am. I guess it was the week for criminal court."

She smiled. "Your dad would be so proud."

I almost rolled my eyes. My dad was an attorney. He died in a plane crash twenty-three years ago. He was on the plane that crashed into the Pentagon during the 9/11 terrorist attack. The problem with that was that he was with his mistress. He was very well-known, and after the incident, his name was brought up in scandal.

So, while my mama was grieving his death, wondering how she would raise her ten-year-old son alone, she was also having to deal with the awful truth of exactly who Kenneth Patrick was. Old photos of him and that woman had surfaced and were plastered all over the place. The entire family was embarrassed at a time when they should have been celebrating his life. It had gotten so bad we ended up leaving Virginia and moving to Texas, where we didn't know a soul.

I hated him for the mess he created and left for my mama to deal with alone. After his parents died, it was like my mom and I no longer existed to his family. He had two sisters and three brothers, whom we never heard from. His mother died two years after him, and then his father died five years after her. It had been just the two of us for the past fifteen years.

Getting my attention, my mama waved her hand. "Earth to Ky. Whenever I mention your dad, you do that. Regardless of what he did, he would have been proud of you,

baby. Kenneth loved you so much. If he knew you were a judge, his chest would be poked out from here to Houston. He loved you with everything in him, son. Reflect on that. Until the mess after he died, you adored him. What he did had nothing to do with you.”

“It may not have had anything to do with me directly, but indirectly, it killed me. I had to watch your hurt, knowing there was nothing I could do to make things better. I had to watch you grieve a man that died while destroying his vows to you. Mama, I love you, and when you hurt, I hurt, even back then. I vowed to make something of myself to make you proud. I refused to let your sacrifices, emotional and financial, be in vain.”

I sat next to her on the swing, and she brought her hand to my cheek. She looked away from me as she lowered her hand. “At some point, baby, you are going to have to forgive him. He wasn’t perfect, but he provided a good life for you. The hatred you have for him is only going to hinder you from completely opening yourself up for love.”

Oh, Lord. “Mama, you know I’m not looking for love. If it happens, great, but it will definitely have to find me.”

She slowly shook her head. “I guess I’ll have grandbabies one day. Hopefully, while I can still enjoy them.”

I rolled my eyes. The woman acted like she was approaching eighty. My mama was only fifty-five years old. She was still going out with friends, dressing like she was twenty-five, and had the audacity to be seeing a couple of men at once. Of course, she called them friends, but I knew better.

She leaned against me. “I just want to see you happy. You can’t be happy if you’re still holding on to the sins of your father.”

I nodded as I allowed the swing to do its job and wrapped my arm around my mama. I kissed her head. “I’m happy, Mama. I promise that I’m open to love. I’m just not trying to chase it down right now. I’m so busy. I need to make sure I’m ready for that and that I have the time to devote to loving someone. When I fall in love, I want to be able to give it my all.”

“Well, son, contrary to what you may believe, love has a way of slowing you down. When it hits you, you won’t have a choice but to slow down and accept that the bug has bitten you.”

I chuckled. “You’re probably right about that.”

“Oh, not probably. I know I’m right about it. Now let’s go inside and eat. I cooked your favorite.”

I frowned slightly. “You cooked surf and turf?”

She frowned as I tried to stifle my smile. “Surf and turf? When did that become your favorite?” After staring at me for a moment, she realized I was doing everything in my power to hold in my smile. “Kyrie Jameel Patrick! Quit playing with me!” she yelled, then swatted me on the arm as I released the laughter I was struggling to contain.

“My favorite is still fried pork chops, French fries, corn on the cob, and two slices of white bread.”

It didn’t matter how old I got. This woman was still going to spoil her only son. I loved her unconditionally for it. She always made sure I was taken care of. Whether she was cooking a meal or offering sound advice, she was always there for me. She provided plenty of swift kicks to the ass, too, when I needed them. It was her love that got me where I was, despite her many attempts to give credit to my father.

Even when he was alive, she was the one who raised me. He was rarely home. He was always traveling the country for this case or that one. It wasn't until he died in that plane crash that I realized it wasn't his love of democracy that motivated all those trips. It was his greed, power, lust, and pure audacity that had him everywhere but home. There was nothing Carolyn Patrick could say to make me think otherwise.

While I knew I inherited his passion for upholding the law, we were two different individuals. When I found love, or it found me, I would be loyal to it. What good was it to confess your love for someone only to lie to them later? Once I fell, I would be all in. I would devote my life to my woman just like I devoted myself to my career. I would breathe, sleep, and eat my love for her. Whoever this woman was, she had better be ready.

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“Let’s go, let’s go!” I yelled as I hopped on the fire truck.

We’d just gotten a call that the courthouse was on fire. Several people were trapped inside. Our station was the furthest from the courthouse, but our help was definitely needed. The courthouse housed hundreds of employees, not to mention the people who were there paying taxes or present for court proceedings.

For every call like this, I found my heart beating erratically. I had to take deep breaths to steady it. As we traveled, I heard them say through the speaker, “Everyone in Judge Patrick’s criminal court is trapped. There are around fifty people, employees and civilians, inside. We need help, quick!”

That did nothing for my nerves as we whipped around the corner. I could see the smoke from where we were. I said a short prayer that God would help us rescue those people and that there wouldn’t be any casualties, then began taking deep breaths again. For some reason, it was taking longer to subdue my nerves this time. It was like my adrenaline was speeding like a rushing river, and it seemed there was nothing I could do to slow it down.

When we got there, we met up with the chief to discuss the game plan for rescuing those people. There were only three in our firehouse, including myself, that were experienced with this sort of rescue. Most of them were fairly new and inexperienced with rescue. After putting on our respirators, the three of us headed inside to meet up with the other firefighters.

When I saw them struggling, I sprang into action, running inside and grabbing the first woman I saw. “Come on! Let’s get you out of here.”

Thankfully, we had up-to-date respirators that allowed speech, although it was slightly distorted and muffled sounding. She nodded as I heard someone yell, “No! Get all of these people out of here first! I’m fine. You’re wasting time by arguing with me.”

I glanced in the direction the voice was coming from and was nearly stunned. The man was gorgeous. He fit the cliché of being tall, dark, and handsome to the tee. God bless it. Our eyes met just as I was looking away. Bringing my attention back to the woman, I helped her out to safety, and the other firefighters helped her out of the building.

We went back and forth until there was nearly no one left. My last trip back into the courtroom, I noticed the man who was speaking a few minutes ago. He was the only one remaining. He’d covered his mouth area with something black. As I got closer, I realized it was a robe. Jesus. He’s the judge. That was why they tried to rescue him first. I found it admirable for him to wait until everyone else was safe.

“Come on, sir. You’re the last one.”

He stood, and I put my arm around his waist, and he put his arm around my shoulder. I could tell he was weak and was probably suffering from smoke inhalation. However, when I stared up at him, his gaze was trained on me. It seemed something happened between us at that moment. I didn’t know if it was lust or just a bond that happened in this moment of trauma. Either way, it didn’t stop me from being totally attracted to him.

“Let’s get out of here, sir.”

He nodded, and we quickly made our way out, hearing the wood cracking all around us. This fire was quickly getting out of control, thanks to all the wood that was probably rotten in spots. This building was extremely old and was probably one

incident away from something like this happening. When we got to the hallway where the other firefighters were, I thought he would have let go of me, but he didn't.

I stared up at him again as he stared at me. Jesus. I didn't offer any words because, frankly, I didn't have any... not any that would have been appropriate. Once we were outside, bystanders began clapping. When I tried to release him for the paramedics to be able to take a look at him, he held me tighter to him.

"Thank you. What's your name?" he asked breathlessly.

I quickly removed my respirator before responding. "You're very welcome, sir. Genesis Farris. And yours?"

"Kyrie Patrick."

"Judge. I've heard your name before. You don't play in that courtroom. Let them check you out, and we can talk when they're done."

He nodded and released me from his grip. They immediately put an oxygen mask on him. As I watched them, a fellow firefighter nudged me. I turned to see Micah standing there. She was another female firefighter at our station. She and I were the only two in the city.

"You seem to be smitten."

I gave her a side-eye and said, "I wouldn't say smitten but definitely intrigued."

"Well, I heard he was a jackass, so be careful."

I glanced at her, taking her words at face value. I would much rather find out for myself. Prejudging people based on someone else's experience with them was

something I tried not to engage in. Just because they didn't have the greatest experience didn't mean I wouldn't. She should have known better than that. People talked badly about her before she joined our station. Had I listened to them, she and I wouldn't have been friends.

As I watched them give the judge oxygen, my chief approached. "Good work, Farris."

I tore my gaze away from the judge and nodded, then followed him to the huddle of firefighters. The fire was just about out, and we had successfully removed everyone from the building safely. There was a slight debriefing for us, then we left the rest to the firefighters that were already there. My shift was about to be over, and I was grateful. I was ready to see the inside of my house for a change.

I was so behind on housework, despite my grandmother doing my laundry. She said it gave her something to do. However, my furniture was dusty, the floors needed mopping, and the refrigerator needed to be rid of leftovers since before my two-day shift started. That food probably had my entire fridge stinking. At least I had four days off. It would only take one day to catch up on housework.

I would use the other days to spend time with my mama, grandma, and my brother. I tried to remain close to my family. Death had visited us when it took my father from us. He was killed in the 9/11 terrorist attack. It was why I was a first responder. My dad was a fireman. We were living in New York, and when the first building collapsed, my father was crushed beneath the rubble. It was my fourth birthday, and my party was supposed to be that weekend. Instead, we were mourning the loss of my dad.

I didn't remember all the details of that day, but I remembered the most painful parts: the phone call saying my father was missing, the search for him, and that night learning of his death. It was the most horrible time of my life. My memories of my

dad seemed to be fading daily, and I hated that. After the one-year anniversary, my mama packed up my brother and me and moved back to her hometown of Beaumont, Texas.

She'd met my dad in college at NYU, and after falling in love and marrying him, she stayed there to start a family. She figured she could teach anywhere. Her mother had assured her that the family she was born into came second to the family she created. Whatever was best for her and my father was what she should do. I loved my grandmother for that, because she didn't make my mom feel guilty about staying away from home.

My mama said she visited twice a year and that had worked for her. So once my dad was killed, after everything was handled, including the sale of our house, it made sense to return home where her family was. Although she'd made a lot of friends, none of them were as important as her family. My dad's family was from Georgia, so she didn't really know them well. They visited them only once a year.

All of that was the reason I wanted to be close to them. I never knew when death would come knocking again. I didn't want to have any regrets. Spending time with them was a joy anyway. My brother, Samuel, was a police officer, trying to make his way to detective. We had the typical big-sister-little-brother bond, but I loved him to pieces. I knew he felt the same way. We fought all the time, and I typically tried to boss him around, even now.

It was really hell if we ended up on the same crime scene or were both first responders to an accident. I pushed him out of my way and engaged in all the bullshit big sisters put little brothers through. Even at my big age of twenty-six, whenever I was around him, it was like we both reverted to our teenage years. He'd just turned twenty-four a couple of months ago, and I was going to be twenty-seven next week, so we were nearly three years apart in age. Our ages of sixteen and thirteen were the absolute worst. That was when he started feeling himself.

Once we got back to the fire station, I packed a few things then made my way to the chief's office. He was on the phone. "Yes, sir. I promise to pass the message along."

The smirk on his lips as he beckoned me inside made a smile appear on my face. It wasn't often that he laughed or even smiled, so this had to be good. I was only here to let him know I was headed out, but I knew he would be sharing whatever that phone call was about just by the way he was biting his bottom lip, trying to restrain his smile.

"Again, great job today, Farris."

"Thanks, Chief. I was just stopping by to let you know I was leaving. I'll see you guys in a few days."

"Okay. Well, that phone call was about you."

"Me?" I asked with a frown of confusion.

"Mm hmm. Judge Patrick was trying to track you down. He wanted your contact information. Calvin told him which station you were at." He chuckled. "So there will be some type of communication from him by the time you get back."

The frown had left my facial expression. I was flattered. I figured once I left, he would forget about contacting me. "I think he's just grateful for me rescuing him. Why is that funny?"

He slowly shook his head. "You can't be that naïve, Farris. From the stories I've heard about that man, he is a total jackass. He barely says thank you, let alone reach out after the fact."

"He told me thank you. His life was being threatened. That's a totally different

beast.”

He lifted his hands in surrender. “Okay. If you say so. Enjoy your time off.”

I playfully rolled my eyes as I turned to leave his office. I knew he was right, but I was afraid this was simply a trauma bond the judge was feeling. He was a very attractive man, but it seemed in my line of work, men never took me seriously. It was like their masculinity was threatened because I was a firefighter. I didn’t understand why they felt threatened by that. It wasn’t like I was a boxer or wrestler.

I fought fires. That required extensive training, and it had nothing to do with gender. That fire could burn a woman the same way it burned a man. It wasn’t totally about strength. It was more about training. While strength came into play sometimes, especially with holding that hose and rescuing people, it wasn’t about that mostly. It was about being smart and extinguishing fires. However, men didn’t tend to see it that way. It was like they thought I was masculine in some way because of my job. Outside of the fire station, I was as feminine as the next woman. I wore dresses, heels, and makeup.

After getting in my car to head home, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for a moment. Today could have been really bad. That building could have collapsed on us, but God spared us. He heard my prayers, and I was thankful. Rescues like that could be scary, but it was my job to save people, even if that meant I couldn’t save myself. As I reflected on today’s events, my phone rang through my Bluetooth.

Opening my eyes, I whispered, “Thank you,” then answered the call from my mother. “Hello?”

“Hey, Gen! I saw the news! I’m so glad God covered you, baby. That was dangerous.”

“It definitely was, Mama. How are you?”

“I’m good, baby. I know you’re probably tired, but I cooked dinner if you want to stop by to get a plate.”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“Mm hmm. I think Judge Patrick feels the same way about you.”

“What do you mean?”

“They showed the two of you walking out of the building. He was holding on to you, and his eyes were locked in on your beautiful face.”

“The man was feeling a sense of gratitude. I saved his life.”

“Mm hmm.”

I chuckled and slowly shook my head. I refused to entertain her silent inquiry. She’d been on the prowl to find me a suitable partner. She said I had to be able to give her a couple of grandbabies before I aged out. I swore, it was like she thought I was practically forty. Whenever I tried to make that a point in my defense, she would go on and on about the timeline to meeting and getting to know someone before marriage could even be discussed.

She was traditional and expected me to get married before I even thought about having children. I wanted that as well. I wanted my child to grow up in a two-parent household, like I would have, had it not been for that senseless attack over twenty years ago. Putting my car in gear, I said, “Whatever, woman. I’m on my way over.”

“Okay. See you in a little bit,” she said after she chuckled.

I ended the call, and my thoughts went right back to Judge Patrick. Only time would tell if he was serious or not. However, I refused to simply be a sexual conquest because he was feeling sensitive toward me. He would simply be attractive from a distance.

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I took a deep breath as I entered the courtroom in Nederland, Texas. This move was because my chambers were burned to a crisp. Every time I thought about it, I released a sigh of relief. Had it not been for the quickness of those firefighters, I would have died. Genesis Farris was leading the rescue. I could clearly see her experience outweighed the others just by how quickly she was moving. She seemed so sure of herself in a moment that could have brought the strongest man to his knees.

That fire didn't care about how strong you were. It would swallow you up whole, consuming you and using you as an accelerant. It had been two days since the incident, and it was my first day back on the job. I had minor smoke inhalation. It wasn't serious enough for me to be hospitalized or to even stay home, although the doctor recommended it. I took my job seriously. If I was able to move around, I could go to work. It wasn't like sitting on the bench was physically taxing.

After getting inside the chambers, I checked my email to confirm my order from the florist. I'd ordered flowers for Genesis Farris. I'd found out which fire station she worked at and also learned that she wouldn't be back to work until Sunday. She was on her four days off. I had to pay extra to get them to deliver the flowers on a Sunday, but I didn't care. She was worth it. That woman was so gorgeous. I could barely function enough to help her save me. Had she not been guiding us through the hallway, I would have walked right into the flames from staring at her.

It was like nothing was important at that moment, not even my life. She was an angel. I could see her light brown complexion and rosy cheeks through the respirator she wore. Once she took it off, I noticed she had thick pink lips, and her gaze was intoxicating. If I wasn't mistaken, my presence had her shook just like her presence had me. I'd never seen a more beautiful woman. What took the cake was that I

searched for her on social media and found her Instagram profile.

When I saw the pictures of her out of her uniform, I nearly found myself drooling. She had an hourglass shape that was mesmerizing. She had long dreadlocks that she somehow hid in that respirator. I wasn't sure how she did it, but she made it work. She seemed to be extremely feminine, judging by what she wore. I liked that. However, when I came across a picture of her in a bikini, I stared at that damn picture for what seemed like hours.

The woman had me in a trance. Had I seen her pictures before actually meeting her, I never would have guessed she was firefighter. She looked like a model. That was just how perfect her body was.

“Good morning, Judge.”

I turned to see Tyson approaching me. I shook his hand as he said, “It has been a week from hell.”

“Who are you telling? After what happened Tuesday, I was done. They could have shut down everything for the rest of the week.”

“Right. Did you ever report that threat?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and brought my hand to my forehead, gripping my temples with my fingers and thumb. “I didn't. I forgot.”

He slowly shook his head. “I asked because I pulled this note off your car on my way inside. You think this has anything to do with the case from last week?”

I grabbed the note from him and huffed loudly. Why couldn't people just mind their business? I was more than sure this threat didn't come from the perp. It came from

someone who considered themselves a friend or a family member. I opened it to read, You actually believe that fire was because the building is old, don't you? This will be easier than we thought if you do.

My eyes lifted to Tyson's, and he took the note from me. Yesterday, the news outlets had reported that the courthouse fire was electrical. This note was saying the opposite. Was there corruption in the system? This note was only taking me back to my days of wanting to be a detective. I ended up going to law school instead. I felt like I could be a better judge than a detective.

"You have got to report this, man, along with the other one."

"Yeah. I will. I can't afford to forget again."

"Forget what?"

We both turned around to see Judge Temmons entering the chambers. She and I were sharing a chamber for now. I glanced at Tyson to see he was staring at me. Out of all the people I worked with, I knew he had my back at all costs. I wasn't sure about her. However, I shared what we were discussing anyway.

"I've gotten two threatening letters in the past week. The one I got today is more disturbing and urgent though. I have to be sure to report it."

Her eyebrows lifted slightly. "Like, threatening to kill you? I would say that's pretty serious."

"Yeah. I get them a lot. It's the nature of the job. I turn them in, and nothing ever really comes of it. These seem more organized. They aren't just someone trying to scare me."

“Well, if you don’t have a case this morning, I would go and take care of that immediately.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t have a case until this afternoon, and I briefed myself on it at home already. I’m gonna head back to Beaumont now.”

They nodded as I grabbed my things and headed back out. As I did, I received a text. Checking it, I saw a message from the DA. I frowned slightly because he rarely texted me. I stopped walking and checked it to see, Have you seen the headlines?

I frowned slightly. I didn’t have the slightest clue what he was referring to. Just the fact that they had me all the way in Nederland had me out of the loop. Nederland was only fifteen to twenty minutes from my end of Beaumont, but it was far enough away from the Beaumont Municipal Courthouse to receive delayed information.

When my phone rang and I saw Tyson’s number, I answered. “Hello?”

“A warrant was issued for Darlene.”

I frowned. “The mayor?”

“Mm hmm. Money laundering. Guess whose court she will most likely see?”

“Shit. This is going to be an entire shit storm.”

“Yep. The district attorney will probably be reaching out.”

“He already did. Let me call you back.”

I got into my car and quickly made my way to Beaumont. I couldn’t believe this. Darlene Doll was extremely kind and likeable by everyone. I didn’t understand how

she could do something like this and ruin her reputation. The love of money was definitely the root of all evil. When attaining money could entice you to commit all sorts of evil acts was when it became a problem. Darlene Doll just didn't seem like the type to be easily influenced that way. There had to be more to that than what we knew.

However, I wasn't her criminal defense attorney. My job would be to sentence her if she was found guilty by a jury of her peers once the facts were all presented. However, if her attorney did his or her job, they would be able to find out if there was more to the situation, especially if Mayor Doll cooperated.

When I got to the police station, things were in an uproar. The media was everywhere and so were police officers. Once I parked, I went in through a back entrance, nearly running into Carl, the district attorney. He gave me a slight smile. "I suppose you got my message."

"Yeah. I was already on my way here. This is insane."

"It is."

I walked past him, doing my best not to interact too much. I didn't want anyone to say I was being swayed one way or the other, especially if this trial would be coming to my court. Although what I had could have been given to him, I chose to go to a detective. When I got to Detective Johnson's desk, she stared up at me for a moment. I wasn't sure what that was about, but she stood and said, "How can I help you, Judge?"

"I needed to turn in these threats that have been left on my vehicle. One was from last week and the other was from today."

She nodded as I pulled them from my pocket. When I handed them to her, she

immediately unfolded them and read what they had to say. Her eyebrows lifted, just as Judge Temmons's had done. "Do you have any idea of who this could be? Any recent run-ins with anyone?"

"I'm a criminal court judge that doesn't take shit off anybody. What that tell you?"

"That it could be anybody. We'll look into it, Judge Patrick. I'll keep you updated."

I nodded and turned to walk away until she called out, "Judge."

I turned back to her, and she said, "I heard this circus is coming to your court. I know you will handle it well. You're by the book, and that's what this trial will need."

I nodded once again. "Thank you."

She gave me a slight smile, and I turned to head back to Nederland.

I took a sip of my drink. Although it was Sunday, I was mentally drained. I'd gone to church with my mother, and so many people were coming to me to talk about the mayor and hoping that I would punish her. She was not only laundering money, but she was embezzling it as well. It seemed the charges were being stacked against her by the hour, and I didn't know how she was going to beat them.

I knew I couldn't go to church again until this case was over, though, because I couldn't talk about it to anyone until it was over. Even then, I didn't discuss case details with anyone outside of my courtroom. It was just safer to keep it that way. There was already a microscope on me because I was so young. That only added to the pressures of being a black man in America.

As I took another sip of my drink, my phone chimed, alerting me of a text message. I didn't get those often, because I didn't really have friends like that. Tyson and my

mother were the only people who texted me. Since I'd already seen and talked to my mother, I figured it had to be Tyson. When I picked it up from the table at my side and noticed an unfamiliar number on the lock screen, I got slightly nervous.

Those letters were truly starting to bother me. I didn't know who to watch out for. I found myself staying home this entire weekend, except for my trip to the Lord's house. I opened the message and read it.

Hello, Judge Patrick. This is Genesis Farris. Thank you so much for the flowers. That was very kind of you. I was simply doing my job. Your thank you wasn't needed. When I took my oath, I took it seriously. These flowers are beautiful though. Lilies are my favorite. Thank you again.

I hurriedly saved her number in my phone. I didn't expect her to reach out, although I'd had them put my number on the card. I figured she would wait until she knew I was at work and leave me a message that way. Her text was a pleasant surprise. I immediately texted back.

You're very welcome. Can I call you? I mean, I know you're at work, but if you aren't busy, I would prefer talking over texting.

I stared at the screen, waiting for what she would say. Instead of texting, she called. I took a deep breath, then answered. "Hello?"

"Hello, Judge Patrick."

"Please, call me Kyrie."

"Umm... okay. How are you?"

"I'm good, considering. How were your days off? I wanted to send the flowers

Friday, but I was told you were on your four days off. I apologize if I was given too much information.”

“No. It’s okay. Now had they given you my home address or my personal number, they would have gone too far. My days off were good.”

She chuckled, and I did too. “I wanted to hear your voice outside of the traumatic experience. I wanted to hear you at peace, without the adrenaline rush.”

“Uhh. Okay. Why?”

“I am extremely grateful for you saving my life, but I feel a connection to you. It doesn’t have a thing to do with the trauma. You’re a beautiful and caring woman. I could tell how caring you were by the way you handled everyone you escorted out. While you had to move quickly, you were tender... even with me.”

“Thank you for the compliment. Why wouldn’t I be tender with you?”

“I know people talk about me. People are usually somewhat standoffish around me because they think I’m a rude jackass. I’m no nonsense in the courtroom. I mean... I’m no nonsense in real life, too, but I’m not as rude as they think.”

“You’re not as straightforward either. If this isn’t a trauma bond, what is it? You said what you thought about me, but what is this conversation really about? Why did you want me to call?”

“Although I think you know already, I’m gonna go ahead and say it. I want to get to know you. I’m extremely attracted to you, Genesis. I thought it was a trauma thing at first too. Then I searched you on social media, and it only proved that I was truly attracted to you. I liked almost all your pictures. It’s embarrassing.”

This woman had my body heating up with desire simply from her voice. It was soft and calming... soothing even. It fit her looks, if that was even a thing. Some people's voices didn't match their looks. Genesis had to be the image of Eve, God's first perfect creation of a woman. Her aura had to represent the beginning of a new journey for me.

"Judge... I mean, Kyrie, I'm flattered, but wouldn't this be umm... I don't know. It seems like there would be a conflict in some way."

"Why? It's not like I work for the city. I'm an elected official for the county. There is nothing wrong or conflicting about us getting to know one another or dating." Softening my tone, I said, "I would really like to see how much we have in common and explore what could develop between us. Do you at least feel an attraction to me?"

She was quiet for a moment, I supposed thinking about how she would word how she felt and how much she wanted to tell me about her feelings. She took in a sharp breath, then said, "I do. I felt it when I stared into your eyes. I thought that I was imagining your attraction to me, confusing it with extreme gratitude. I'm willing to get to know you. I don't judge a person by what everyone else thinks about them. I form my own opinions based off my own experiences."

"Well, I suppose I'm grateful for that. It will make getting to know you less complicated."

She chuckled. "Yes. Well, I have some work to do. If it's okay, I'll call you back in a couple of hours."

"Yes. It's more than okay. I look forward to it."

"Okay. Bye."

I ended the call feeling like I was on top of the world. Feeling so sensitive about this woman came as a surprise. I hadn't felt this way in a long time. My entire body was warm, and I was more aroused than I had been in months. She'd managed to make me forget about everything else that had been on my mind and replaced those thoughts with ones of her aura and appeal. Genesis Farris was going to be the woman to change my life. I didn't know whether that was a good or bad thing just yet, but either way, I was anticipating the journey.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

Work had been uneventful for my two-day shift. Besides talking to Kyrie, I mostly slept. There was literally nothing else to do. Micah and I always had the same schedule to assure neither of us felt alone on our shifts. I appreciated the chief for making that happen. He didn't want either of us feeling uncomfortable in a firehouse full of men. That didn't bother me, since I grew up having more male friends than female ones.

I had a flight to catch to New York tomorrow, and I was nervous as hell. There was a memorial for those killed happening at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. I hadn't been to New York since we'd left because I never wanted to revisit the place where my dad was taken away from me. However, I thought it was important to go this year and possibly feel one with him again. My mother and brother were also going along with me.

I wanted to go out with Kyrie before I left, but he had to go out of town today. We'd talked the past three days for hours at a time. I didn't understand how he could be on the phone with me until one in the morning and still function at work. I had to get at least eight hours, or I would be hell to deal with. My attitude would be on ten thousand, and the people around me would definitely form new opinions of who I was.

I enjoyed our conversations, though, and he promised we would be able to go out Friday evening, before I had to go back to work. I was only spending one night in New York. It wasn't a trip to have fun. It was to pay tribute to my father and those who lost their lives that day. I prayed we never had to endure another attack like that in this country. That day would forever be cemented in history.

As I packed my carry-on, my phone rang. I knew it was probably Kyrie, since we hadn't talked yet today. He'd only sent a good morning text before his six-a.m. flight. I was still in la-la land at that time of morning, especially since we didn't get off the phone until close to eleven. I didn't understand how he did it. He had to leave home by two a.m. to get to Houston for his flight. After our conversation, I still had to shower and settle down. It was after midnight when I finally got in bed.

"Hello?"

"Hey, beautiful," he said, his voice low and soft like he'd just woken up.

"Hey. You sound like you've been asleep."

"I have. I didn't go straight to sleep when I landed. I slept two of three hours on the flight. By the time we landed, I had to find something to eat. I was starving."

I giggled a bit as I heard him moving around. "What time is your flight tomorrow again?"

"It's at six thirty. There's no way I will be up at eleven, like you. I'm going to bed early, since I'll have to wake up at two to be at the airport in a sufficient amount of time. I wish I could have left today now."

"Why couldn't you?"

"My brother couldn't, so I opted to wait for him so we could all be on the same flight. The memorial is at noon, so hopefully, I won't have any flight delays."

"Hopefully, you won't. Your father would be proud that you followed in his footsteps, willing to sacrifice your life for your fellow man."

“I’m sure your father would be proud of you too.”

He remained quiet. We hadn’t really discussed his father, other than the fact that he was deceased. I could sense that was intentional, even through phone conversation. His voice had changed when I asked about his father when he’d asked me what made me want to become a fireman. I didn’t even ask how he’d died. He said that his father died when he was ten years old, then changed the subject.

“He probably would be,” he finally said. “I wish we could have gone out before I left. I’m dying to see you again, especially in normal circumstances.”

“Yeah. I would like to see you again too.”

Unfortunately, he didn’t have an iPhone, so we couldn’t FaceTime each other. He wasn’t on Facebook, so we couldn’t video chat through Messenger either. I huffed as I closed my carry-on. I’d packed everything I would need for the overnight trip, doing my best to only do the bare minimum. I could moisturize my hair and all that foolishness when I got back. I was thinking of cutting it anyway. I wanted to start over. My locs were a mess. I was in desperate need of a retwist, but my stylist had moved. Finding a new stylist could be hell.

I was spoiled and wanted my hair done a certain way, using certain products that I’d grown to love. As I looked in the mirror, I fingered it. Thankfully, I had nice hair to where the locs didn’t look too bad. One little girl actually thought I was The Little Mermaid . I chuckled when she compared me to Halle Bailey. My hair wasn’t red, but it had some red hues when the sun hit it just right.

“So, where will we go Friday night?” I asked.

“Wherever you wanna go, gorgeous, but I do have a place in mind.”

“I don’t know where I want to go. I’m not picky.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll just make reservations and surprise you. I have to go, Genesis. I have a meeting to get to. I’ll call you this evening before you go to bed.”

“Okay. Talk to you later.”

“Okay. Bye.”

I ended the call and took a deep breath. I couldn’t wait to get this trip over with so I could spend time with him when I came back. We would both be back in town on Friday, but he would be arriving before me. He apparently liked early flights. I only took an early flight so I could get to the memorial on time.

After pulling my hair up, I got dressed so I could go and meet my mother for lunch. I couldn’t allow the day to get by me, so I got a move on.

“New York is just as busy as I remember it being. I don’t miss it one bit,” my mother said.

This was a nightmare. Our flight was on time, but the traffic was going to have us late to the memorial. I was nervously bouncing my leg, anxious to get to the memorial site. I needed to see my father’s name amongst the fallen heroes. Glancing at my phone again, I saw it was eleven thirty. We were only two miles away, and I was almost to the point where I wanted to get out of this car and just walk.

“Sis, calm down. We’ll make it on time,” Samuel said.

“You’re right about that. I’m going to be on time, even if I have to walk the rest of the way.”

He rolled his eyes and looked out of the window. I could see the driver peering at me through his rearview mirror, probably wondering if I was bluffing or joking about walking. I knew it wasn't his fault, but I refused to be late. There was nothing for me to bluff for because there wasn't a thing he could do to minimize the amount of time it was going to take for us to get to the memorial.

As traffic moved at a snail's pace, I opened my thread to text Kyrie. Hey. We made it to NYC, but it's taking forever to get to the memorial. I really hope I'm not late arriving.

He responded immediately. Hey, beautiful. Sometimes it's quicker to walk out there. Traffic is horrible. I'm glad you made it safely.

I smiled slightly. Yeah, I'm realizing that.

When I lifted my head from my phone, I noticed my mother staring at me. She smiled, but she didn't say anything. I knew her eavesdropping ass had seen my text and probably read every word of it. Her detective skills were what kept me in line as a kid. She could find out about the least infraction, and I never figured out her ways. I supposed I would figure it out if I ever had kids of my own.

After another twenty minutes, we had made it. I quickly hopped out of the car, practically running to where the ceremony would be. My mother and brother weren't far behind me. Although they were trying to hide it, I knew their adrenaline was pumping just as fast as mine was. They wanted to be here; otherwise, they wouldn't have come along.

When I finally found a seat, the man at the microphone said, "We called him two days ago, and he accepted the offer. I know he's a busy man, but knowing that his father died in this tragedy, literally headed to battle in a courtroom of law, was why I reached out. His death was surrounded by scandal, but the thing people failed to

realize at the time was that he was a husband, father, and he upheld the law with everything in him. His personal issues were none of our business.”

I frowned slightly, trying to figure out who he was talking about. When I researched the attack years ago, there was a scandal that I remembered reading about. A well-known attorney had gotten killed while on a flight with his mistress. I could only imagine the heartache his wife felt, having to grieve a man that had betrayed their love and their vows.

“His son is here, and the fact that he became a judge at such a young age is testament to the example his father set for him. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Judge Kyrie Patrick.”

My eyebrows lifted, and my mouth fell open, like a door with a broken hinge, as I watched him stand from his seat and walk to the mic. He didn’t tell me he would be here! When he turned to the front, he looked angry. There was a frown on his face. He closed his eyes as everyone applauded. I was pretty sure he didn’t know he would be introduced in that manner. Half the people here probably had no clue about the scandal.

My heart went out to him. I now understood why he didn’t want to talk about his father. That was a difficult time for them as a family, especially his mother.

“After twenty-three years, I didn’t think I would have to address the heartache, betrayal, and anger I was feeling at ten years old on this day. My father had died, and all I could focus on was the pain my mother was in. The media was bombarding us at every turn. I came here to try to put this all behind me and be here for other people who had lost someone close to them. Instead, I feel like that ten-year-old boy all over again.”

I closed my eyes briefly as I felt the pain in his words. When I opened my eyes, they

met his. He'd found me in the crowd. I brought my hand to my chest and nodded slowly, trying to encourage him to continue. He gave me a tight smile then lowered his head. I wanted to walk up there and console him right here in front of everyone.

"Is that who you were texting?" my mama asked in a whisper.

I side-eyed her. I knew she was eavesdropping on my conversation. Giving my attention back to Kyrie, I saw he was struggling to continue. His head was still lowered, and he was twiddling his thumbs. Standing from my seat, I crossed over several people and made my way to him. He lifted his head, and his eyes met mine once again. A police officer made his way to me, I assumed to stop me from approaching, but Kyrie held his hand up and said, "It's okay."

I nodded at the police officer and continued my journey to him. Once I got to the podium, he turned to me. I gently rubbed his back in circular motions and said, "You got this."

He gave me a tight smile, then turned back to the mic and addressed the crowd. "I apologize. My job today was to inspire you... to uplift you. I wanted to somehow bring you a sense of joy. I still plan to do that." He glanced at me and said, "My mother is in the audience. She has been a beacon of strength and hope, encouraging me every step of the way through my educational journey and life in general."

Everyone applauded as he extended his hand, gesturing for her to stand. When she did, I saw a beautiful woman with tear-stained cheeks. I was surprised she didn't walk up here to comfort him. Once she sat, he reached for my hand, so I removed it from his back and grabbed it. I couldn't believe his father had died on the same day as mine, changing both our lives forever.

He turned to me and said, "Happy birthday, Fireman Genesis Farris. Losing your father on your fourth birthday couldn't have been easy, even as a small child that

didn't fully understand what was happening and why."

I nodded as he turned back to the crowd. "None of us fully understood what was happening that day. However, those of our loved ones that were first responders, understood one thing. That one thing was that there were a lot of people who needed them. They didn't hesitate to leap into action, showing us that nothing else mattered at the moment. Their only concern was saving lives. The people on the flight that crashed into the open field in Pennsylvania, Flight 93, only cared about saving the lives of others. My father was on that flight."

He squeezed my hand, and I could feel the tremble in it. I lowered my head as I thought about how he'd accepted this task simply because he knew I would be here. I was almost sure he wouldn't have accepted the invitation otherwise. Bringing my other hand to our joined ones, I gently caressed his hand between mine, doing my best to make this moment easier for him. So far, he was doing extremely well.

"We can learn a lesson from their sacrifices today. That day, nothing else mattered. No one cared about the color of anyone's skin, whether someone was born on foreign soil or not, nor whether they were male or female. It was about good and evil... guilt and innocence. We cared for one another that day... all of us. We bonded together as a country. We've lost sight of that. Our fellow Americans died being afraid but brave at the same time... all in the name of saving their fellow man."

I leaned against him, realizing how his words were hitting home for everyone nodding and silently agreeing with him. "I want to inspire you to honor your loved one by caring for your fellow man. We don't want their deaths to be in vain. Those that lost their lives on those planes won't ever be forgotten. They live on through us. Their voices can be heard through ours. What do we want them to be remembered for? If we think about that before we speak, maybe we wouldn't spew so much hatefulness toward our fellow man."

I was extremely proud to be standing here, holding his hand. This man was sexy. His straight-to-the-point and in-your-face demeanor had taken me from feelings of angst and sadness and brought them to feelings of insatiable desire. He was speaking so well until a couple of people had said ‘amen’ while he was talking. I almost chuckled. He was definitely taking us to church.

“So today, let’s make a conscious effort to honor those we lost through the way we treat each other. They died for a reason greater than themselves. Let’s honor them as the heroes that they are and always carry them in our hearts.”

He nodded and walked away from the podium, pulling me with him. When he sat, I sat next to him amidst the standing ovation he was getting. Although it was only my first time being in his presence since the fire, I kissed his cheek. “That was amazing.”

“Thanks. I need a stiff ass drink.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

As I introduced Genesis to my mother, I noticed a woman, who looked a lot like Genesis, and a man approaching us. I had to assume that was her mother and brother. My mama was being extra and had hugged Genesis like she was a long lost relative. I could only roll my eyes at her as she stuck her tongue out at me.

Once she'd released Genesis, I extended my hand to my mother. She came to my side as Genesis turned to see her family standing behind her. "Mama, this is Judge?—"

"I know who he is, Gen. I voted for him. Hello, Judge Patrick. It's nice to meet you. I'm Gabriella Farris."

"It's nice to meet you as well. This is my mother, Carolyn Patrick."

They shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. I glanced over at Genesis to see she was talking to her brother. Once our mothers had quieted down, she introduced him to us. He looked familiar to me, so when he said he was a police officer, I figured that was how I knew him.

"Would y'all be okay with going to get a bite to eat together?" my mother asked.

Everyone agreed, and we took off walking. Today had been a trainwreck. I had no plans of talking about anything concerning my father's infidelity. I'd only accepted the invitation so I could spend time with Genesis. Plus, my mother thought it would be good for me to do this to get some sort of closure. That didn't happen, thanks to the man who introduced me. I wanted to grab him by the neck and choke the life out of him.

Having Genesis by my side after the morning I'd had meant everything to me. I'd gotten a phone call, threatening me about the trial for Darlene Doll. They'd brought her through a colleague's court for arraignment, and everything about that woman said coercion and defeat. She wasn't in this alone. She had help. If the district attorney didn't see it, then the citizens of Jefferson County had done themselves a disservice when they elected him. She bonded out within hours. I would have remanded her.

I watched our mothers talk as they walked like they were best friends already. Genesis was walking next to me, quietly following their lead. I slid my hand to hers and intertwined our fingers. She looked up at me and blushed. I gave her a slight smile as I said, "Thank you for coming to my aid. Your presence produced a calm in me that I've never felt, especially around strangers."

She smiled and leaned into me a bit. I wanted to put my arm around her, but I didn't want our mothers in our business. I could tell that her mother was no better than mine when it came to meddling in business that wasn't theirs. Finally, she looked up at me and said, "You're welcome. I saw you struggling, and I didn't want you to feel like you made this trip for nothing. I had a feeling you were going to leave that podium without saying half of what you said."

"You're right. I wasn't going to say a word. My mama was trying to silently encourage me from her seat, but I was looking right past her. However, even if I wouldn't have spoken, my trip wouldn't have been in vain. Seeing this gorgeous face again is definitely worth it."

She bit her bottom lip as she stared up at me, and I swore I wanted to scoop her up in my arms and take her back to my hotel room. I was grateful that I had the gumption to get separate rooms for my mother and me. She fussed about me wasting money, saying that we could have shared a room. I only rolled my eyes. I was a grown man, and I wouldn't have felt comfortable sharing a room with her.

I liked to walk around in my underwear. Had I been sharing a room with her and messed around and got aroused from my thoughts of Genesis, I would have been extremely embarrassed. The entire moment would have been awkward. I needed my privacy, even if Genesis didn't come to my room later.

Genesis was still blushing as she released my hand and looped her arm around mine. I knew this was the woman I was meant to be with at this very moment. The way she soothed my soul spoke volumes. Had she not been here, my anger would have consumed me, and I could have possibly ruined my reputation. The gentleman apologizing for making me uncomfortable did nothing to smooth things over. If anything, it made them worse.

With Genesis by my side, I was able to at least nod at him without saying a word. He was a liar, and he wanted to shine a light on my father's inability to be faithful to my mother. It was like he knew it would get a rise out of me. I slowly shook my head as I thought about it.

"What are you thinking about?" Genesis asked.

I glanced down at her and smiled, something I didn't do very often. "I'm thinking about how great it is to be spending time with you... finally."

She giggled. "You're making it seem like we've been trying to sync our schedules for months. It's only been a little over a week."

"Closer to two weeks."

She slowly shook her head and rolled her eyes playfully. "It has not been... Well, maybe it has." I bit my bottom lip as I watched her think things over. "It's been two weeks since we first met... a week and a half since our first phone conversation."

It was my turn to roll my eyes. I'd been wanting to see her again since she led me out of that burning building. "Whatever. The point is that it has seemed like forever."

She gave me a smile as our mothers entered a sandwich shop. Samuel followed behind them, but I didn't miss his glance back at us. I didn't know if he was being protective or if there was something he had against me. It definitely seemed like it was personal. We entered right behind them.

After going to the counter and placing our orders, we all sat at a table. Our mothers seemed to have bonded immediately, but I also noticed the shift in their moods. They seemed a lot quieter. I slid my hand to Genesis's as I asked my mom, "Are you okay? You're rather quiet suddenly."

"Yeah. I supposed during our talk about your father and her husband, we retreated within ourselves. Despite what happened, Kyrie, I really miss him."

I nodded as Ms. Farris nodded and hugged my mama. When I saw the tear trickle down her cheek, I couldn't hold my position next to Genesis. I stood and went to her side, pulling her in my arms. Instead of sadness filling me, too, I was starting to feel angry. I really wasn't sure why or who I was even angry with. Like she'd said, whether he was on that plane with his mistress or had been alone, the fact remained that he was no longer here.

She laid her head against me as I glanced over at Genesis. When I saw her tears, I knew I would be in for a long day. It was like my mama's sorrow served as a domino effect, sinking everyone into their feelings. Samuel was comforting his mother and Genesis. I hated that I wasn't the one comforting her.

"I'm so sorry, everyone," my mama said, lifting her head and wiping her tears. "I got everyone in this sunken place. We are supposed to be remembering the life they lived and what they stood for. Kenneth was a loving man. I didn't know the man that the

media portrayed after the attack. The man I knew loved his family. He loved Kyrie with his soul. He was his pride and joy. Genesis and Samuel, I'm sure the same was true for your dad."

Ms. Farris nodded. "Absolutely. He was so proud of his children."

As we talked, the lady from the front counter brought out a cookie with a lit candle in it. She set it in front of Genesis, and we smiled at her. She'd made twenty-seven today. I was so embarrassed that I'd forgotten to get her a gift. Genesis smiled at the cookie and candle and said, "Thanks."

Her mama started singing the birthday song, and we all joined in. Genesis's cheeks had reddened, and the second we stopped singing, she blew out her candle. That had to be hard, losing her father on her birthday. While she talked to my mama about her birthday plans of doing absolutely nothing, my phone vibrated in my pocket.

My heart rate climbed a bit. I didn't even know who was texting me yet. However, when I looked at the text, my heart rate increased even more when I read it. Be careful on your flight back. I would hate for you to go out like your father.

Someone was doing their best to torture me and have me questioning everything and everyone. They were doing a damn good job at making me paranoid. There was no way they would be causing that type of destruction on a plane. We were so far removed from 2001 security. It was because of that attack that our security was what it was today.

However, the mere fact that they were tracking my whereabouts was the problem. The detectives hadn't obtained any evidence to even suggest who this person was, if it was even the same person.

"Kyrie, are you okay?"

I looked up to see everyone staring at me. I gave Genesis a tight smile and nodded. She didn't smile back, so I knew she was analyzing me. Her gaze didn't waver, and neither did mine. Yeah, I need that drink ASAP.

The rest of our late lunch went by in a blur. My mind was far away from here after that text message. I requested an Uber through my app, and when it arrived, Genesis grabbed my hand and said, "Let's go get that drink."

I gave her a one-sided smile, and we bid our mothers and her brother farewell amid their silly grins. Once Samuel closed the door and they took off, she said, "Now maybe you can answer my question truthfully."

I grabbed her hand and walked to a sports bar I'd scoped out since this morning. It was only a block away from where we were. Once we were seated at the bar, she grabbed my hand and just held it. Her warm and gentle touch had my mouth running like a leaky faucet, telling her all my worries. I couldn't even blame it on the alcohol because I hadn't had a drink yet.

"Someone is sending me death threats by text, and I've had two notes placed on my car."

She frowned. "Have you reported it?"

"Yeah, but they can't seem to find anything."

"Have they offered to provide you with protection? They know you're getting these threats."

"One of the detectives did, but I told her I didn't need it."

"Why?"

“Look at me. I’m six feet, three inches tall, and two hundred forty pounds. How would I look having someone to protect me? Just my luck, they would send someone way smaller than me and probably a woman.”

The bartender came and took our drink orders, then Genesis turned to me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What?”

“That they would probably send a woman.”

“I’m a pretty burly guy. Having a woman that’s half my size protect me would look foolish. You don’t think so?”

“No. Training has nothing to do with size. Whomever they would assign to you would have the skill to be able to protect you.”

“I guess you’re right.”

The bartender set our drinks in front of us. I threw that Crown Black back like it was a shot. Genesis stared at me for a moment then did the same. When she held her fingers to her throat and let out the hot air, I couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m a grown man, Genesis, and my taste for alcohol is the same. Don’t try to hang with me, or I’ll have to carry you out of here.”

“So you say. I’ll just have to prove you wrong.”

I chuckled as the bartender set another two glasses in front of us. After informing her that she could create an open tab for us, she smiled and walked away. We threw those two back as well. After the events of the day, I could drink myself into a stupor. I would stop short of that, because if I got too drunk, I became a problem. My filter fell

off, and I didn't hold back my opinion at all, whether it was requested or not.

There was one time I'd gotten drunk, and this lady sat next to me. She smiled, and her teeth were slightly yellow, possibly coffee stains or something. When she spoke, though, her breath smelled like garbage. I didn't hesitate to tell her what I thought. "Please go smile and be friendly somewhere else, because your breath just made me throw up in my mouth a lil bit."

When I thought about how badly I'd hurt her feelings that night, I wished for a do-over. She didn't deserve my rudeness. While I didn't lie, just because I knew the truth didn't mean it always had to be verbalized. I could only hope that she had done something about it and not allowed my hurtful words to destroy her self-esteem.

"So, how ironic is it that we both lost our fathers the same way? I mean, not the same way, but on the same day during one of the most horrific events in American history?"

"That means it was in the cards for us to meet. We both followed in their footsteps as well, although I didn't initially want to. I wanted to be a detective."

"Really? So what made you change your mind?"

I shrugged. "My change had nothing to do with him. I just felt I could benefit the justice system more by being a judge. My father was an attorney... a damn good one. I just..." I inhaled and blew out an exasperated breath. "I hated him for a long time for what he did to us. Sometimes, I still think I hate him. The media was relentless about the scandal. It was like they didn't care that we'd lost the man we loved along with everyone else who had lost someone. He left us here to handle his screw ups alone, which made the grieving process even harder."

She leaned over to me and put her hand to my cheek. "I'm so sorry y'all had to go

through that. Hate is such a powerful thing, but so is love. Try to focus on the good things and memories that make you smile... memories that prove just how great of a father he was and how much you admired him when you were growing up.”

I stared into her eyes, and the liquid courage I’d been downing caused me to lean in and kiss her pretty lips. When she kissed me back, it only propelled me forward. I pulled her bottom lip into my mouth. She slowly pulled away from me, her eyes closed. “Kyrie, that was nice.”

“It was. Can it be nice again?” I asked in a low voice.

“Yes, but not here.”

I pulled away slightly as the bartender set another round of drinks in front of us. She knew we weren’t driving anywhere, especially not here. Hardly anyone drove anywhere in this area. Genesis took a sip of her drink. I could see she was more relaxed by the way she was slumped over. She glanced at me and said, “Shut up. Don’t you say a word.”

She was definitely feeling that liquor. I wouldn’t say she was completely drunk yet, but she was surely on her way. I chuckled then bit my bottom lip as she downed the rest of it. She was going to have me carrying her out of here, and I wouldn’t mind in the least. Being able to slide my arms around her body would be like heaven.

She shot me the finger as she lifted her finger, letting the bartender know she wanted another one. I slowly shook my head. “So you must want me to carry you out of here.”

“You don’t want to?” she asked, taunting me.

I leaned into her. “Oh, I want to.” Sliding my fingers down her cheek, I watched her

cheeks redden and the goosebumps appear on her skin. “I just don’t know if you would be cool with the places that could possibly lead us to.”

“I’m a grown woman, Kyrie. I know how to say no.”

The bartender set another round in front of us, and I said, “Close it out, please.”

I downed my drink, feeling slightly dizzy. My erection was threatening to tear a hole in my pants with the way she was talking. I had tunnel vision right now, and that was getting her to my room ASAP. It was still daytime, but if we were drunk as hell before five, our lustful desires would be quenched before five as well.

While I knew this was only our sadness and hurt acting out loud through our daytime drinking, I was okay with letting it lead the way. For some reason, I felt like being with her would make everything alright in my world. Once I signed the receipt, I watched Genesis down her drink, then requested an Uber.

Genesis placed her hand on my cheek and said, “You are so handsome... too handsome to be so tortured.”

I frowned slightly. “What makes you think I’m tortured?”

“Because you won’t forgive your father. It’s bothering you more than you want to admit.”

“And you’re too beautiful and successful to be longing for a man to take care of you. I can tell that you want the knight in shining armor to rescue you from your own ambition. It’s like, you work so hard because you don’t have anything else to do. That doesn’t have to be that way. You’re looking for your father in a potential partner.”

She looked away, but I grabbed her chin and turned her back to me. “So it seems we

both have daddy issues.”

My phone chimed, letting me know our Uber was a couple of minutes away, so I stood from my stool and helped her from hers. We silently walked outside, my arm across her back, allowing my hand to rest on her hip. As we waited, she leaned into me. Before she could say a word, our car arrived. I was grateful, because that alcohol was really coursing through me, threatening to have me sitting on the cement.

I opened the door and allowed her to get in first. She was so off balance she nearly fell out of the car. She giggled as I gripped her hips, holding her steady. I got in behind her, and the minute I closed the door and put on my seat belt, she asked, “Am I that obvious?”

“What?”

“Is it that obvious that I’m looking for him in a significant other?”

“No. It’s because of where we are that I was able to put two and two together.”

She nodded and leaned against me. I lifted my arm and put it around her shoulders and kissed her forehead. Staring up at me, she licked her lips, sending my body into orbit. My gaze didn’t waver. I wanted her to see what she was doing to me. This feeling was foreign, but with a woman as fine as Genesis, I accepted it. I would be soft and tender all day if it meant I could be with her.

I lowered my head to hers and kissed her lips. When I tried to pull away, she gripped my beard, holding me in place, as she slid her Patrón flavored tongue to mine. My eyes nearly rolled to the back of my head as I fell into the rhythm she’d created and allowed my hand to slide down her back. She moaned softly as my hand went further south, taking the dangerous dip to her ass and squeezing it.

I wanted her, and this car couldn't get us back to my hotel fast enough.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

My back was pressed against the door, and my pants were sliding off me to the floor. My body was weak with desire, not to mention the alcohol that caused me to lose all inhibitions, and I felt like I would collapse to the floor at any minute. Kyrie was moving quickly to get us to the moment we were craving. I kissed him for nearly the entire ride back to his hotel and had even slid my hand over his erection to see what he was working with.

From what I felt, I would be in a world of trouble. Choosing to help him speed this process along, I pulled my shirt over my head and unfastened my bra. When he stood up straight, he backed away from me and stared at my body, allowing his gaze to grace every inch of me. "Damn, Genesis. You're so sexy. I can't believe you were hiding all of this under that uniform."

He came to me again and scooped me in his arms. My body was trembling in anticipation. It had been years, and I couldn't believe I was making such a rash decision. I was more cautious than this. However, I was too far to stop now. I wanted him. I needed to know how he would feel inside me. I liked his personality, despite everyone's warnings, so I needed to make sure we were compatible in this way as well.

He lowered me to the bed, then pulled his clothes off in what seemed like one fluid motion. I was seeing double, so my vision surely couldn't be trusted. When he grabbed his wallet and pulled a condom from it, I instinctively spread my legs open. As if sensing just how much I was anticipating this moment, he slowed down. He licked his lips and stared at my prized possession as she drooled at the sight of everything he had to offer.

His smooth, dark chocolate complexion made me thirsty, and ironically, he was the only one who could hydrate me. I slid my hand down my body, prepared to put myself out of my misery or, hopefully, tease him to take action. I slid my middle digit between my folds and into the tight space no one had occupied in years. I'd promised myself that the next man who occupied it would either be the one that would have my heart or an extremely great actor.

Kyrie was neither. He didn't have my heart yet, although it was definitely soft toward him. I also knew that he wasn't faking anything right now, because we hadn't established exactly what we were doing. Both of us had been in our feelings all day, and our commonality only brought us closer to one another emotionally. I wanted him to soothe my ailing heart and simply be who I needed at this moment. We could work out the other details whenever I felt like being logical.

He slid the condom on, sheathing his erection, then joined me in bed. Sliding his body atop mine, he stared into my eyes. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Without responding to him verbally, I wrapped my legs around him and lifted my hips, causing him to penetrate me. My eyes fluttered shut, and my head dropped back as he pushed more of himself inside me. "Ooh," I said as I whimpered.

It was like I was a born-again virgin, and my hymen needed to be ruptured all over again. He slowed his movements and stared into my eyes. He tucked his bottom lip into his mouth and bit down on it. "Damn, Genesis. You feel amazing."

I closed my eyes, trying my best to adjust to his size. Swallowing hard, I then took a deep breath and exhaled, relaxing in the moment. As I did, he said, "That's it, baby. Relax."

He started to stroke me slowly, and my eyes nearly rolled to the back of my head. The way he took care of me, being sure he wasn't hurting me, was everything to me.

He at least cared to make the experience everything we both desired. I reopened my eyes to find him staring at me. I found myself falling into a trance as he pleased me beyond my wildest dreams.

When my body began trembling, his strokes became a little more powerful as he said, “Talk to me, Genesis. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“Oh my goodness... I caaaan’t... verbalize it.”

“Try for me. I need to know how I’m making you feel. Mmm. You’re making me feel like I can conquer the world. Like all I need is you... fuck!”

I opened my eyes again to stare into his. This moment was so powerful. Although both of us were inebriated, and I knew that somewhat heightened the moment, it still seemed like this was real. We were embarking on something amazing. I wrapped my legs tighter around him as he lowered his mouth to mine and kissed me passionately. The kiss was slow and filled with desire. It caused me to erupt. I couldn’t contain the jerks my body made or the sounds that escaped my lips.

“All I need... is you tooooooo!”

The moment heightened with my words. My entire body had heated, and I released what seemed like a fountain from my depths. Kyrie stroked me harder, lifting my leg until my knee touched my shoulder. His rod of perfection kissed my cervix with every thrust, causing me to be more vocal than I’d ever been during sex. He gripped my neck as he continued to drill into me and released grunts of passion, then the most salacious moan I’d ever heard from a man.

The sound of it caused my eyelids to flutter and my body to contort. He gripped my hips as he released into the condom. Collapsing on top of me, he whispered in my ear, “That was fucking amazing.”

His weapon of mass destruction slid out of me, and he rolled to the bed, pulling me with him. I lay on top of him and stared at him, gently running my fingers through his beard. His small, slanted eyes were even lower. I knew it was the effects of the alcohol, but I hoped that it was also the effects of passion. Never being one to be shy, I asked, “So, umm... what are we doing? Are we just going with the flow?”

He gave me a soft smile and said, “After that shit? You’re mine, Genesis. As your name signifies, I think this will be the beginning... the start of a beautiful journey. I just hope I can be everything you need and live up to your expectations.”

“My only expectations are for you to be loyal, treat me like a queen, and be considerate of whatever I may have going on.”

I looked away for a moment, trying to decide if I wanted to say everything. He turned my face back to him by gently gripping my chin. “What else, beautiful?”

I circled my finger around his dark nipple and watched it harden. He must have had sensitive nipples. “I want to be taken care of... emotionally, spiritually, mentally, and physically. I can provide for myself financially. So, you were somewhat right with what you said earlier. Is there something wrong with craving the love of a man?”

“No. Not unless you’re willing to accept foolishness for the sake of having one. You don’t seem like the type, so I know if the time ever arises that I need to be put in my place, you won’t hesitate.”

“Damn right.”

He chuckled as he gently caressed my back. I continued rubbing circles on his hairless chest, lulling myself into a slumber. However, the ringing of his telephone frightened me awake. When I flinched, he kissed my forehead. “Sorry. Let me get that.”

I rolled off him to the bed and tried to cover myself with the sheet. Once the wetness from our session landed on me, I quickly kicked it off. The smirk that appeared on his face made me chuckle.

“Judge Patrick,” he said when he answered the phone. He was quiet for a few seconds, then he said, “I’ll be back in the morning. I’ll have to assess the damage then... Okay. Thank you.”

He ended the call then slid his hand down his face. I sat up in the bed and asked, “Is everything okay?”

“Someone broke into my house.”

I frowned. My mind was working overtime because I knew he was handling the case with Darlene Doll. He hadn’t said anything about it, and I knew he probably couldn’t, but this was crazy. “Wow. Did they catch the perp?”

“No.”

“Do you think it’s related to the threats you’ve been receiving?”

He glanced at me like he was wondering if he could trust me suddenly. “Possibly,” he said. “I just don’t know. They seem really motivated. I started digging into the case against Darlene. I just don’t feel like she’s working alone. I suppose it’s the detective in me.”

My eyebrows lifted, and as I was about to fire off another question, he said, “I can’t talk about it, Genesis. I’ve already said too much.”

I nodded as he rejoined me in bed. He pulled me back into his arms, and I could feel his heart beating erratically. I rested my hand on his chest and said a silent prayer for

him. “Everything will come to light. Don’t worry.”

He only nodded and kissed my head. I knew he hadn’t accepted my advice. He was only nodding to end the conversation. “I can’t believe we did this already. I mean, I’m not complaining at all. I’m just shocked. I expected you to resist me for a while.”

I shifted against him, trying to sit up so I could look into his eyes. When I did, I said, “Normally, I don’t move this quickly. I’m sure you could tell it’s been a while for me. I promised myself that I wouldn’t give of myself this way unless I felt like a future was inevitable with that person. So today... I don’t know if it was liquid courage to just go for what I really wanted and to stop overthinking or if you will eventually be that person for me.”

He slid his hand over my cheek and caressed it with his thumb while staring into my eyes. “Well, there’s only one way to find out. We will date and continue getting to know one another. I can tell you’re a no-nonsense type of person in your personal life, and I try to be that way as well. However, it seems I have complete stability professionally, but I sometimes struggle personally. I promise to be honest. Please know that my intentions are pure. I want to be with you.”

I nodded as I thought about what he said. That personal instability probably stemmed from the sins of his father and losing him so suddenly. He was older than me when this attack occurred, so I was sure he remembered more than I did. My memories were fleeting. I felt like the only reason I remembered that particular day was because it was so traumatic.

“Let’s just go with how we’re feeling. Just remember... when difficult times arise, we will talk them out as adults. No running from whatever our truths are at that moment. No lashing out unfairly. If we can respect one another, personally and professionally, I think we’ll be fine.”

He pulled me close again and kissed my lips. As his hands traveled over my body, I could feel my libido kicking up a notch. Being with him in this manner felt too right to be a mistake. That had to mean something. How was it I could feel this way about a man I barely knew? It was puzzling the hell out of me, but I was willing to go with it. Just as we were about to dive headfirst into pleasing one another, my phone rang.

He squeezed my ass tighter as I pulled away from him, slightly giggling. “Sorry, I have to get that. It’s my mom. She will keep calling until I answer. There is no way she would expect me to be ‘unavailable’ so soon,” I said, holding up air quotes when I said unavailable.

I quickly went to my phone and answered. “Hello?”

“Hey! What time are you coming back? Are we going to dinner?”

I checked the time to see that it was already six. “Umm... yeah, sure. Did you have somewhere in mind that you wanted to go?”

“Well, Carolyn was telling us about this great place she knew of that sold amazing steak. She said Judge Patrick loved steak.”

“Okay,” I said, glancing over at Kyrie.

He gave me a smirk then got up from the bed and went to start the shower. I smiled slightly then said to my mom, “Give us an hour. Tell Miss Carolyn to send the address to us, and we’ll meet y’all there.”

“Okay, baby. See y’all then.”

I ended the call, wishing we could have enjoyed one another again before we were interrupted. I supposed they did need to eat. Food was the last thing on my mind. It

seemed like we'd just eaten, but it had been nearly five hours. When I joined him in the bathroom, he was getting in the shower. I supposed I would have to use the hotel soap to wash up.

As I stood in front of the sink to take a ho bath, Kyrie said, "Genesis, get in the shower."

His authoritativeness turned me on tremendously. When I slid the curtain back and saw his dick already clad with a condom, I grinned. "I told her we would meet them in an hour."

"Then you better hurry and get in here. I have to have you once more before we have to separate for the night."

I hurriedly joined him in the shower, and he scooped me up, roughly pinning me to the wall, and took what was now his.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

When I stood in front of my house, several expletives left my lips. My neighbor had boarded up my window and door to be sure no one could get in it until I got back. I slowly shook my head as my mama stood there with her mouth wide open.

“Kyrie! What happened to your house?”

“Someone broke in while we were gone. Jeff called me yesterday.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to get into it while we were with Genesis and her family. I just wanted to enjoy time with her and then stay in that frame of mind until we got home. There was no need to stress about it prematurely. I couldn’t do a thing about it from New York. Jeff said the police came, and I called them while we were in transit here to meet us so they could document what was missing.”

She slowly shook her head. “I don’t like this, son. First the fire, now this. It makes me think that fire was them trying to kill you. You must have something they want. Who could it be?”

“I don’t know,” I said as I walked toward the porch.

Jeff must have heard us outside, because he came over before I could call him. He greeted my mother then me. “I’m so sorry about this, Judge. When I heard the commotion, I called the police. Your alarm didn’t go off. Did you forget to set it?”

“No. It was set.”

“Damn. Maybe it malfunctioned. Brinks would get an earful from me. Let me go and get my drill so we can get inside.”

He walked away, and my mama rubbed my back in a soothing manner as I took a deep breath. I had to calm down because I didn’t want anything I saw inside to set me off. I would be on a rampage and become reckless with the words I spoke. Just as I thought about it, the media van pulled up. I rolled my eyes as Jeff returned with his drill.

“Who summoned them?” he asked.

“Good question. I’m more than sure they probably came here yesterday looking for me.”

“They did, but I figured they would let it rest today since you weren’t here.”

I nodded as I watched him use his drill to remove the screws he’d used to put up the wood. My phone vibrated in my pocket, and when I saw Genesis’s number, I smiled slightly. I opened the message to read what she had to say. Good morning, handsome. We’re boarding. I want to see you as soon as I arrive in Beaumont. Is that possible?

Absolutely. Have a safe flight.

She sent back a kissy face emoji. Dinner was somewhat weird. Her brother was staring at me nearly half the time we were at STK Steakhouse. I didn’t know what his deal was. It seemed to catch Genesis off guard too. She kept asking him if he was okay. He’d only nod. Once he finally had a couple of drinks in him, he calmed down. Other than that, dinner had gone well. Our mothers seemed to have become fast friends and had promised to meet up for lunch occasionally. I couldn’t keep my hands to myself the entire time, and our mothers definitely noticed.

I didn't want Genesis out of my sight. When she went to the restroom, I stared in that direction nearly the entire time she was gone. The woman had me losing it already. She'd shown me that I'd been subconsciously craving someone like her too. If I weren't, there was no way I would have attached myself to her so quickly. My mama talked about her the entire flight.

I was too busy scoping out passengers, feeling paranoid because of the text I'd gotten. This ordeal should have made me want to ask to be recused from the case, but instead, it was making me want it even more. I was that much hungrier to uncover the corruption and who was involved. Being a detective would have been so much more beneficial at this point.

"Judge Patrick? Hi. I'm Thomas Schultz from Channel 6 News. Can we have a moment of your time?"

I glanced at Jeff to see he was about to be done taking the board off the door. "Yes, but it has to be quick. I have a lot to assess."

He nodded at the camera man and responded, "Yes, sir."

Once the cameraman was ready, he did his lil spiel about where he was and why, then turned to me. "Judge Patrick, this had to be a shock. You were in NYC speaking on behalf of everyone who'd lost someone in the nine-eleven terrorist attack on our country and paying tribute to those who lost their lives, while someone was here at your residence doing the opposite. They were destroying hope in humanity. Did you know about this before getting back to town?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"I can imagine you felt shocked, but what was your initial response to the news?"

“I was quiet for a moment, because I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.”

“Is there anything you want to say, if the person who did this is watching?”

“Everything that’s done in the dark comes to light. You won’t be able to hide forever.”

I nodded at him, letting him know that was all I had to say as I noticed a couple of cars of cops arriving. He cut the cameraman and said, “Thank you for your time, Judge Patrick. I hope this gets resolved quickly.”

I nodded, indicating my thanks, then made my way to the porch where Jeff had gotten the doorway cleared. I rolled my eyes when I saw the door hanging from the hinges. That irritated me. Most likely, they had gone through the window. Them tearing up the door served no purpose, other than to piss me off. It was so unnecessary. I waited for the police to meet us on the porch before going inside.

They all greeted me with head nods and handshakes then we went inside. I wanted to have a fit the minute we walked in. Shit was strewn all over the house. Papers were everywhere, and most of them looked torn in half. I took a deep breath, trying to contain my anger. My body was trembling because I was just that angry. This wasn’t random. It was extremely personal, and by the looks of it, this person couldn’t stand me for whatever reason.

“Kyrie, this is a mess. You won’t be able to stay here.”

I didn’t respond to my mother because I couldn’t say what I really wanted to say in front of the cops that were here. I walked over to my desk and called one of the cops over to me. “My computer and laptop are both gone.”

He started a report and had me give him details about both items. Once he was done

with that, I had him write down the television. There were two files gone that were on my desk. I wasn't sure if they had been taken or if they were amongst the destroyed papers all over the place. Walking throughout the house, we took note of everything else that was missing. I truly believed that they only took the other things to cover up the specific things they were actually there for.

I felt like the computers and files were what they were after. Everything else was just collateral damage. I just wanted this all to be done so I could move on with my life. If this continued, I would probably have a nervous breakdown simply from trying to contain my outrage. Whoever was doing this was either trying to protect Darlene or to keep others from being implicated in her trial.

After going through the house and making note of everything that was missing, he left. The other cops were simply walking around. I supposed they were looking for clues that they may have missed yesterday. I was doing my own investigation though. This, again, only propelled me forward. There must have been a lot of incriminating evidence that would implicate the involvement of some pretty powerful people for them to be going out of their way to protect themselves.

Once everyone had left, I called my insurance company so they could send an adjuster. They'd smashed my cabinets. It looked like they'd taken a sledgehammer and just went to work. Broken glass was all over the place, and food was poured out on the floor. This was someone acting out their hatred toward me. I hoped whenever they found them, they didn't come through my courtroom.

Who was I kidding? They would never have me presiding over a case that close to home. I wouldn't be able to focus on the trial. I would end up getting arrested for strangling the hell out of them. However, if they were to allow something like that, I'd bury their asses under the jail. By the time they got out, there would be flying cars.

My mama came over to me and asked, “Son, what are you going to do?”

“Once the insurance adjuster lets me know when he can come, I’m gonna pack a bag and stay with you tonight, as you suggested. As you can see, this is personal. I have to meet with the detectives to possibly answer some questions they have. They don’t have any leads yet. I’m also going to call the security company to get cameras put inside the house. They sprayed something on the cameras outside.”

“I don’t like this, son. They are after you, and I feel like it may include people you know and interact with. Keep your eyes open at all times. I cannot lose you. It would kill me.”

I pulled her in my embrace and held her tightly. Hell, I didn’t want her to lose me either. However, I couldn’t let fear keep me from doing what was right. Darlene shouldn’t go down by herself if she had help, and I truly believed someone else was the mastermind. My gut didn’t steer me wrong, and I took an oath that I planned to live by. I would always seek justice, no matter who was involved. I’d sentence my damn mother if she messed up.

“I’m not going anywhere, Mama. I’m going to be careful, and I’m sure the city is going to provide me with protection in light of these occurrences. It’s obviously personal.”

She still had no clue about the blatant death threats. Whenever I spoke to the detectives, I would update them on the messages I received by text while I was gone. She didn’t need to know all that information. My phone buzzed in my pocket as I held her, so I pulled away slightly to see a text message from Genesis. I opened it to see a picture of her and her mom, smiling with the sky as their background.

How are you sending me pictures while you’re flying?

She was one of the rebels that refused to do what they were told. She responded immediately. I took it off airplane mode to send you the picture. We have another hour before we land. Talk to you soon.

I slowly shook my head as my mama smiled at me. “The two of you look good together. I can tell that y’all both thought so, too, since you had to go explore even more at your hotel room.”

My eyebrows lifted slightly as she chuckled. “Umm...”

“Don’t ‘umm’ me. We could all tell. You both had that after-sex glow going on. We aren’t idiots, Kyrie. I’m pretty sure that was why Samuel was mean mugging you when the two of you arrived at the restaurant. Although he’s younger than Genesis, I can tell he’s extremely protective of her.”

I rolled my eyes. “Genesis is a grown woman and very capable of making her own decisions. It was her decision for us to go there. Hold on! I will not discuss my sex life with you, woman!”

She chuckled as I slightly rolled my eyes at how I let her bait me. She knew she would get me. It seemed I was on guard for that type of behavior from everyone else but her. One would think I would have learned my lesson by now. This wasn’t the first time she’d done that to get me to talk, and I was more than sure it wouldn’t be the last.

“Well, do you at least see a future with her, baby?”

I looked away from her for a moment, analyzing my thoughts like I didn’t already know. Turning back to my mother, I said, “I really do, but time will tell. We are still getting to know each other. We will see for sure once the newness wears off.”

“Newness? So you’re a couple?”

“Yes, we are.”

She squealed like a little piglet as she grabbed my arm, leaning into me. I chuckled, knowing she was ready for me to start a family. I just hoped I was as ready as she was.

“My God. This was definitely personal,” Genesis said as she looked around my house.

I had been here for a couple of hours, then went to eat breakfast with my mom. After taking her home, I’d come back to meet the insurance adjuster. As he surveyed the damage, Genesis had asked for my address. She got here a few minutes later.

“It was. I have to meet with the detectives in a little while. They are supposed to be meeting me here. You won’t be able to sit in on that, but you’re welcome to sit out by the pool.”

“Okay. So the police that came earlier?”

“They were just doing preliminary investigating since the detectives have been all over the Darlene Doll case.”

“I wonder why this person is targeting you instead of the DA. It just seems weird.”

“Genesis, I don’t have a lot of friends, but I surely have a lot of enemies. When I was a cop, I testified in a trial that put three officers in prison for murder. I didn’t back the blue. I was about right and wrong. They wrongly killed two young boys in Beaumont’s north end because they ‘fit’ the profile of two black guys that had robbed a convenience store. Those boys didn’t have a weapon. The reason I was able to

testify was because the boys were from a neighborhood I patrolled regularly. I had just left from playing basketball with them. There was no way they could have robbed a store.”

She grabbed my hand and gently caressed it between hers. “My God. Do you remember if anyone was excessively angry with you about it?”

I shook my head, not wanting to have the conversation. I’d spent years in that neighborhood, getting to know the people and the kids, trying to get them to trust the police. With that incident, all my time and hard work had gone down the drain. It didn’t help that those teenagers’ mothers blamed me at first, saying I should have made sure they made it home safely. My mental took a severe hit.

I had to go to therapy sessions weekly for nearly a year. I lost my love for being a cop after that. It felt like I was fighting a losing battle. How could I convince people to trust the police when the police didn’t trust them? After the cops got sentenced, they were only given a couple of years each. That was the main reason I wanted to be a judge. That wasn’t good cop work. Hell, that wasn’t good common sense work.

I pulled Genesis outside to the patio and sat on a lounge, pulling her in my lap. She giggled softly. “You know... if you wanna stay with me until your house is put back together, I won’t mind.”

“Damn. I already told my mother I would stay with her. She’s cooking dinner as we speak. I’m sure she won’t mind if you come over for dinner,” I replied as I wrapped my arms around her.

I rested my chin on her head and soaked up as much of her spirit as I possibly could. She put my soul at ease. I took a deep breath, inhaling peace and doing my best to exhale the turmoil. “How was your flight?”

“It was okay. Samuel was on my last nerve, but other than that, it was fine. After a while, I put my earbuds in and let him talk to himself. When he got close enough to me and heard what was going on in the audiobook I was listening to, he quickly found him some other business to tend to.”

“What was he doing?” I asked, like I didn’t already know.

“He seems to think I’m being used. Somehow, he knows that we had sex. Since I didn’t deny it, he went in on me full throttle. Last time I checked, I’ve been grown for a long time and didn’t need anyone’s input or advice on how I should live my life.”

“That’s good to know, baby. I’m glad he doesn’t get to check you and force you into doing what he wants you to do.”

She twisted her body to look up at me and puckered her lips. I kissed them, then she said, “I’d throw myself in some flames before I let Samuel control me.”

I chuckled slightly as she lay back against me.

“My mama asked if I was sure about what I was doing. She has never seen me so carefree. I had to question myself. It feels so good to not be worried about if I’m doing too much, too early. I just want to live my life for me. If it blows up in my face, then that’s on me. You know what I mean?”

“I do. I’m just glad you chose me to be carefree with. I usually don’t move this quickly with someone I’m trying to pursue something meaningful with either. I couldn’t tell you no. There is something about you that won’t allow me to let you go,” I said.

I wrapped my arms tighter around her, causing her to release air. She faked a cough and squirmed, trying to get me to release my hold on her. When I started to tickle her,

that was it. She was flailing her arms and contorting her body like a person in water that couldn't swim. When I finally released her, she was gasping for air.

I couldn't help but laugh as she tried to compose herself. However, she surprised me when she straddled me and started tickling me. Her ass had distracted me from what she had planned, because when she straddled me, my mind was in one place and one place only. I left my body wide open for her to take advantage.

I quickly grabbed her arms and held them at her sides while she struggled to get loose. "Fine! I give up!" she said as she laughed.

I lifted my eyebrows as if questioning her statement.

"I promise," she whined. "You can trust me."

"Mm hmm. If I let you go, you're gonna chill out?"

"Well, what do you mean by chill out?" she asked as she began rolling her hips against me.

"You don't play fair, Genesis. I can feel the heat coming from that thang."

She gave me a smirk as I loosened my grip and slid my hands to her ass. I loved squeezing it. It was so thick. Everything about it screamed my name. It was the part of her body I loved the most besides her face. Genesis was the complete package, and like I'd told her, I couldn't let go. I had to see where we would end up. Hopefully, we would end up married and eventually starting a family. This issue with this trial couldn't be over soon enough.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

“If I didn’t know any better, I would think you were in love,” Micah said as I reclined in my chair.

It was my second day back at work, and Kyrie had sent flowers to the firehouse. I lay in my bunk and exhaled with a smile on my face. “I’m not in love, but I am smitten. The man is sweet, strong, and fine as hell!”

She giggled. “I’m just glad you look happy. You’re glowing. He’s made a liar out of me. I never saw him as being sweet. I mean like toothache sweet?”

I laughed loudly. “Girl, no! Like that smooth chocolate on chocolate cake that soothes your sweet tooth.”

“I hear you, sis! Well, I wish you well.” She lay back in her bunk and asked, “Did you hear that the chief may be retiring?”

“Really? When did he say that?”

“He only said it to the crew the day you got back from New York. We were so busy yesterday I forgot to say anything about it.”

“Wow. I suppose he’s tired. I mean, he’s worked as a firefighter for forty years. I plan to retire as soon as I’m eligible. I love my job, but when the time comes, I’m out of here. I plan to live my best life!”

“Period!” Micah said and laughed.

It was so funny how the way I talked had rubbed off on her. When people talked to her on the phone, they thought they were speaking to a black woman. I supposed us being around one another at least three days a week for the past couple of years could do that. Sometimes we were around one another on our off days as well.

She turned on the TV, and I turned on my side to text Kyrie. I was missing him like crazy. Dinner at his mom's house was really cool. She seemed so genuinely excited to see me. That alone had me smiling the entire time I was there. She complimented me at every turn. My chest was so puffed out by the time we left, Kyrie said he had to deflate me a little to get me in the car.

Unfortunately, I didn't linger around. I knew he had to get up early and that he had barely slept the night before. He needed rest. He'd gotten another text while at his mother's house. I hated that for him. It had to be hard for him to function, knowing people were trying to kill him simply for doing his job. Whenever I tried to talk about it, he would change the subject. I didn't know if that was because he couldn't talk about it or if it was because he didn't want to talk about it. Honestly, I'd understand either way.

Me: Hey, Kyrie. I hope you had a great day. I know you've been extremely busy. The flowers are beautiful.

Him: Hey, gorgeous. My day was my day. I hope you had a great one as well. Can you talk, or is texting what's best?

I smiled slightly and got up to go to the common area. I didn't want to disturb Micah. When I did, she said, "Go talk to your man. I'll probably be asleep when you come back."

"Okay, girl. Good night."

“Good night.”

As soon as I left our room, I placed the call as I walked down the hallway to the couch. He answered on the first ring. “Hello?”

“Hey.”

We were quiet for a moment, soaking up the silence. It didn’t feel the least bit awkward. He said my spirit calmed him, so it was like he was channeling my energy. After a minute or so, he said, “Hey, baby.”

“You sound drained.”

“I am. I had lots of paperwork to go over. Plus, I had two case logs to read over. I’m beyond drained. I literally just got done. My entire Sunday was going over what I missed this week.”

“Wow. You had a late day. I wish I could rub your shoulders.”

“Me too. I’m sure they will still need rubbing day after tomorrow when you’re off.”

I chuckled. “Bet. I’ll take care of you. When do you plan to go home and start cleaning up?”

“Probably tomorrow. I’m so tapped out. I haven’t seen my house since I left it Friday. The only thing I even attempted to clean up was leftover food they’d thrown on the floor. I’m honestly thinking about paying someone else to do it.”

“That might be best. However, you know I’m off Tuesday, right? I don’t mind cleaning up for you.”

“No, ma’am. You’re my woman, not my maid. There’s glass everywhere. If you cut your beautiful self anywhere, I’d never forgive myself. We can’t have you bruising up that gorgeous body.”

I slightly rolled my eyes. “I would be careful. I truly don’t mind, Kyrie.”

“No, so stop pushing. My decision is final. I would love to have lunch with you on Tuesday though.”

My cheeks heated slightly. No matter how forceful or aggressive this man was, he still had the same effect on me... heated cheeks, along with other body parts, and heart palpitations. No one had ever made me feel this way, and I could barely handle it. “I would love to have lunch with you also. Where will we go?”

“Don’t worry about all that right now. I have it under control. I’ll make reservations.”

The thought of reservations made my eyelids flutter. A man that just took initiative and made plans was just my type. “Mm.”

He was quiet for a moment, then he asked, “Was that a good ‘mm’ or a bad one?”

I chuckled. “It was a good one. I like a man that makes reservations. Of course, reservations that coincide with my work schedule.”

It was his turn to chuckle. “Yeah, I would have you calling off on some of those weekends. I can be too aggressive at times. Let me know when I slightly cross the line. I’m going to try to consider your opinions on things, but the only child syndrome sometimes rears its ugly head.”

“Well, I have a little bit of that since I’m the only girl. I got whatever I wanted within reason.”

“So you’re spoiled. I don’t have a problem with that. I want to spoil you so much you won’t be good for anyone else... just me.”

“Make sure you can back up those words, Judge Patrick.”

“Mm. I don’t have a problem backing up anything I say, beautiful. Damn, I wish I could see you right now.”

“What would we be doing?” I asked, knowing exactly what we would be doing.

“You really have to ask? I would be turning that body every which way but loose, taking you to ecstasy with every stroke. Even with as tired as I am, I’m craving you, girl. You must have cocaine between your legs.”

I hollered with laughter then quickly covered my mouth. He laughed loudly, most likely at my outburst, then said, “I must be right. You got me all strung out, girl.”

When I finally composed myself, I said, “You are hilarious. You must be delirious too. Get some rest and call me tomorrow.”

“Mm hmm. Talk to you later, gorgeous.”

I ended the call and held the phone to my chest.

“Who got you in here screaming like that?”

I looked up to see fellow firefighter Bransford standing over me. He irritated my soul at times. The man always thought he was over somebody. We were ranked the same, but he was always trying to tell me what to do. “Sounds like you’re all in my business.”

He lifted his hands in a surrendering motion, although I knew he was doing everything but that.

“I’m just saying. Brother betta be careful. You may have more testosterone than him.”

I rolled my eyes as I shot him the finger. I stood from the couch to head to my bunk.

“You heard about the chief?” he asked.

I turned back to him. “Yeah, I heard. He’s done a remarkable job, especially at this station. So I’m sure we’ll be planning a retirement party once he makes it official.”

“Mm hmm. I’m gunning for that position though. I think I can take this precinct to the next level.”

I frowned, and I didn’t have the slightest idea how he thought he would do that. “I’m going for it too,” I said, shocking myself.

His eyebrows lifted. “Even after I told you I was going for it, you’re still gonna try to get it?”

“Yeah. I don’t owe you anything. You’re a chauvinistic asshole, Bransford. I have your back in the field because it’s my job. That’s the only reason.”

He brought his hand to his chest and dropped his head. “Damn. That hurt, Farris.”

I rolled my eyes again as he chuckled. “Well, I hope you ready for battle. I’m a marine, and I’m a winner. I fight dirty too.”

“Well, since the mayor is under fire right now, I suppose the mayor pro tem will be

appointing who he deems best. Good luck.”

With that, I walked off. He was pretending to be playful with me, but I knew he was just as serious as I was. If I didn’t get the appointment, then I would pray that the city council wouldn’t confirm him. He wasn’t fit to lead. He had too many prejudices. Besides thinking women were inferior, he also felt that way about minorities and people younger than him. He was just an arrogant asshole, kind of what people described Kyrie to be.

I smiled as I thought of him. When I entered our bunk space, I noticed Micah wasn’t in bed. When I heard her coughing and something hitting the toilet water, I turned my lip up. While I could handle some of the most gruesome injuries, there was something about vomit that turned my stomach inside out.

When the toilet flushed and the water came on, I relaxed a bit, hoping she was done. I wondered what caused her to regurgitate that way. My mind quickly switched gears though. I knew the mayor pro tem. We went to the same church. While I didn’t see him to be biased, it couldn’t hurt to mention it once the chief formally announced his retirement. There was no way I would reveal that to Bransford though. He would be sure to make it seem like I got the appointment unfairly.

I deserved that position, and I didn’t come to that realization until he said he wanted it. If he thought he was qualified to lead, I knew I was qualified. I actually cared about the citizens I took an oath to protect. He was all about seeing his name in lights. He was a firefighter for all the wrong reasons, and I could only hope AJ Williams saw that when he was considering someone for the appointment.

Micah came out of the restroom, looking completely drained. “Girl, you okay?” I asked, standing from my bed to help her to hers.

“Yeah. I think that Chinese messed me up. That Kung Pao Chicken is doing just what

its name suggests.”

I bit my bottom lip to keep from laughing. She was really feeling bad. Hopefully, we didn’t get called out. I would pick up her slack tomorrow, cleaning equipment, if she still felt bad. After lying down, she said, “Thanks, Genesis. Hopefully, I can sleep this off and that chicken can stop practicing its kung fu skills.”

I slowly shook my head as I covered her with the blanket. Going back to my bunk, I saw my screen lighting up. When I saw Kyrie’s name, I smiled. He was supposed to be asleep. Opening the message, I smiled bigger. It was a picture of him lying on a pillow, covered with a gray pillowcase. His eyes were low, as if he were about to fall asleep at any moment, and his lips looked moist as hell.

I took a deep breath, then lay in bed, still staring at his picture. Exiting out of the message, I pulled up the camera app and took a picture of myself in the same position as he was in, then sent it to him. I then sent kissy face emojis and plugged my phone up to the charger. After setting it on the nightstand, I closed my eyes with visions of Kyrie’s face lulling me into a sweet rest.

“How did you know I like seafood?” I asked Kyrie after kissing his lips.

He shrugged. “I had no clue. I just figured you could appreciate good food.”

I met him here at Pappadeaux Seafood Kitchen, and my stomach was so happy. I could barely contain my excitement. This was actually my favorite seafood spot in Beaumont. There were other places that I enjoyed, but this place was top-tier. The food was always delicious.

Kyrie grabbed my hand as the hostess led us to our table. Once we were seated, I could see a few eyes on us. Kyrie stretched his hands across the table, and I slid my hands to them with a smile on my face. He smiled in return, but I could tell that smile

didn't reach his eyes.

"How have things really been since I last saw you?" I asked.

He cleared his throat and released my hands. "A little tough, but I can handle it. I've been updating the detectives when there are new developments."

"They still don't have any leads?"

"No."

I found that extremely skeptical, and I could tell that Kyrie did, too, simply by his tight lips and inability to look into my eyes while he was speaking. He was a very intelligent man, and I knew that he probably felt like he was probably working with the enemy.

Changing the subject, he looked up at me and said, "You look so beautiful. I know I've said it already, but this burnt orange against your skin is gorgeous."

I smiled as I said, "Thank you."

I really wished he could be open with me, talk about his fears, and what he needed help with, but I knew Kyrie was a "manly" man. What I meant by that was he was traditional in a sense. When it came to expressing what he felt was weakness... he didn't. I was only trying to get him to state the obvious. Who wouldn't be scared half to death, knowing people were trying to kill them? It was a normal reaction to a not so normal situation.

I knew it was still very soon in our relationship, but I wanted him to trust me to be able to handle his fears with care. I would never belittle him or judge him. As his woman, I was here to uplift him. I was already expecting him to behave like we'd

been together for years. Ugh. Slow down, Genesis. I supposed I was just worried about him.

The waitress appeared, introduced herself, got our drink orders and our appetizer of fried alligator, then left to go fulfill those requests. As if reading my mind, Kyrie said, “I can see you’re worried. Everything is going to be okay. They will eventually find who’s behind these threats. They have cops around me at all times. Look at the door.”

I glanced around him and saw the cop standing near the hostess podium. That made me feel a little more comfortable. At least they were being proactive. Bringing my attention back to him, I asked, “Aren’t you a little worried though? I mean...” I shook my head. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to seem pushy. Forgive me.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to ask for forgiveness. You’ve done nothing wrong.” Closing his eyes for a moment, he said, “I am worried... somewhat afraid. I have too much to live for. However, their threats are not going to stop me from doing what I know is right. I’m sorry I’ve seemed closed off concerning that, but I don’t like talking about it. It reminds me that there are people out there who are really evil and don’t give a damn about what’s right or anyone besides themselves.”

“I understand. I just want to make sure you’re okay. If there is ever anything I can do to be of assistance to you, please let me know.”

“Well, I can think of at least one thing. I mean... my house is getting cleaned as we speak and should be done by the time I leave work today.”

The waitress set our drinks and a small loaf of bread on the table and said she would be back with our appetizer soon. After taking a sip of my water, I asked, “Will there be food?”

He released a hearty laugh then slowly shook his head. “I’m not enough?” he asked.

“Well, I need to know if I should eat before I come over.”

“Mm hmm. I like how you cleaned that up. I’ll have food, Genesis. Should I surprise you again, or would you like to suggest something?”

I intertwined my fingers and lifted them to rest my head on them, putting my elbows on the table. “Surprise me, please.”

He chuckled. “Seems I’ve found the way to your heart.”

I giggled as she set the alligator in front of us. All talking had to cease. I immediately grabbed one, dipped it in ketchup, and brought it to my mouth as Kyrie watched me, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Well, I thought we would bless the food. You do believe in God, right?”

I brought my hand to my mouth because I nearly choked. My eyebrows lifted as he laughed. When he stretched his hand across the table, I slapped it, causing him to laugh more. After swallowing what was in my mouth, I said, “Sorry, Lord. I’m super hungry.”

The smirk that appeared on Kyrie’s face caused my eyes to narrow. I put my hand in his, bowed my head, and closed my eyes.

“Lord... thank you... so much for... this day... and every day.”

I opened my eyes, and a frown graced my face. He was talking extremely slow. I jerked my hand away from his and said, “Jesus wept. Thank you, Lord.”

I popped another bite of alligator in my mouth while he laughed hard. I didn’t play about my food, and he was gonna fuck around and find out. Finally, I was able to join in on the laughter. “You make me sick.”

He smiled at me. “We are going to get along just fine. I can’t wait to spend more time with you later.”

“I can’t wait either.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

“For the crime of money laundering, the defendant will serve twenty years in a state facility and pay a fine of one million dollars.”

The courtroom went into an uproar. Darlene Doll had laundered hundreds of thousands of dollars through the city for years. How no one caught it until now was still a mystery to me. After I banged my gavel and they’d calmed down, I continued. “For the embezzlement charge, the defendant will serve five years in a state facility. The sentences are to be carried out consecutively and not concurrently. We are adjourned.”

I walked out of the courtroom, angry about what had just gone down. Darlene had refused to implicate anyone else. I didn’t understand how she could leave the other criminals out in the free world to do that shit again. To me, it said she didn’t care, and hopefully, I showed her I didn’t care either. She got the maximum sentence for the money laundering charge, as she should. Evidence proved that she’d cleaned nearly a million dollars through the city of Beaumont. So, technically, I could have charged a fine double the amount of money she laundered.

When I got to my chambers, I came out of my robe and practically threw it to the coat rack. I was so damn frustrated. Darlene was funding a criminal organization right here in Beaumont. Regardless of what anyone said, someone else knew what was going on and was benefitting from it as well. The evidence presented was damning, to say the least. There was video footage, questionable documents, and changes to documents with her signature on them.

The banking information proved all the money she circulated. It was crazy. Everything she owned would be seized: houses, cars, and any other valuables. Her

husband looked like he was going to fall apart at any moment, but I did notice he was wearing a damn Rolex. He may as well get ready to part with it. People couldn't just do what was right. Darlene's punishment was also stiff because of who she was. She was the leader of the city.

If the damn mayor was corrupt and didn't suffer the consequences of her crimes, what would that say to the citizens of Beaumont? She deserved the maximum sentence, and had that max sentence been longer, she would have gotten more. There was no reason good enough to justify what she had been doing for years to the city of Beaumont. This type of corruption was unacceptable, and I planned to eventually expose all of it.

I'd been spending a tremendous amount of time with Genesis, and because of that, I hadn't had time to investigate a thing. It seemed that whoever was sending the threats knew that, because I hadn't been receiving them. It had been two months since the 9/11 memorial, and she was preparing for the turkey giveaway and Thanksgiving meal to feed the homeless. I told her I would gladly be a contributing part of their efforts.

I always tried to volunteer my time when I could. Even with being swamped at work, it was important to establish a presence in the community. I wanted people to know that I actually cared. I had a reputation for being a hard judge, but I wanted that to be preceded by how much I helped my community. I donated money to different initiatives, but I wanted to do more. Throwing money at a situation was helpful, but it didn't show concern. It could just be a tax write-off. My goal was to make the place we lived better, and that didn't always happen by just throwing money around.

As I sat in my chair, Tyson walked through the door and said, "That was rough. I just knew you were going to adjourn earlier and pick up tomorrow."

"Man, we've been dealing with this all week. I was ready to be done with it. It

seemed with each piece of evidence they presented, my anger escalated. What angered me the most was her protecting the bastards that were helping and covering for her.”

“I know. I could see it all over you through your demeanor. When you leaned back in your chair and leaned to the side, I knew you were close to snapping. I thought you were going to recess at that point, even though we’d only been back for thirty minutes.”

“I was just outdone when one transaction was for over a hundred grand to pour eight feet of cement. Where in the hell did anyone pay that much money for cement? Surely not Beaumont!” I slid my hand down my face, trying to calm down. Changing the subject, I asked, “The baby ought to be making his or her way into the world by now, right?”

“Yeah. Three more weeks, actually, if she makes it. Man, her feet look like pillows. I kid you not. I don’t know how she’s walking on them.”

I chuckled. “Women are the strongest creatures on Earth, especially black women. I don’t know how they deal with the constant ridicule from society, take care of kids, have a career, and take care of men like us. They balance it all with grace. Sometimes they barely have time for themselves. I watched my mother do it for years, and now I see Genesis handling it all. Whenever I need her, she’s there before I can even call.”

“You’re falling for her. It looks good on you. I never thought I would be able to say that. I mean... you’re still the same jackass in the courtroom. Just behind the scenes, I can see a change in you. You’re more relaxed.”

“Yeah, she’s had that effect on me,” I said in a somewhat reflective manner, thinking about how I’d evolved. I glanced at Tyson and said, “You’re right. I’m falling for her. I haven’t told her yet though. Maybe I’ll tell her after the feed the homeless event

they're having tomorrow."

"Damn. That's cool, man. Well, I'm gonna need you to be at our nuptials soon. We are going to be in Judge Raymond's courtroom in a couple of weeks."

"Congratulations! You didn't tell me you were going to pop the question."

"Honestly, I always wanted to. She was still legally married when we met though. I wanted to give her time."

"I get it."

I stood and shook his hand then sat back at my desk. My phone began vibrating all over the table, and I knew it was Genesis. When I picked it up, a smile played on my lips. Tyson said, "Well, that's my cue to go." He chuckled. "See you Monday, man."

I chuckled as well and chunked him the deuce. I went back to my message to see what she had to say. Hey, baby. I have a wonderful evening planned for you. Show up at my place with an overnight bag.

I smiled at my phone, and when I looked up, the DA was standing in my doorway. He smiled big. "We got her. Thanks, man."

I frowned slightly. "What are you thanking me for?"

"Not being easy on her, since she was the mayor. This is the second time Beaumont has had problems with their mayor. A statement needed to be made. The first got off easy, only getting a couple of years. This was why I personally requested you to try this case. You don't play about the law, nor do you care what other people have to say. The law is the law."

“Well, everyone should be that way. I go with what’s right. Being that she was the mayor, a hard lesson needed to be taught. Position nor status matter to me. Wrong is wrong, and it should be punished.”

I grabbed my phone and keys from the desk, indicating I was about to leave so he could get out of my chambers. He glanced at my desk, then said, “I’m sorry. It’s already late. I’ll let you go. Have a great weekend.”

I nodded. “You too.”

As I made my way to my car, my phone started ringing again. I refused to answer though. I needed to be aware of my surroundings. I couldn’t allow a phone call to get me killed. It was probably my mama or Genesis. I realized I’d never responded to her text. Once I was in the car, had locked the doors, and cranked the engine, I pulled it from my pocket to see it was a call from my mother. I called her back while leaving the parking lot.

“Kyrie! Oh my God. You gave that woman thirty years?”

I frowned, which seemed to be a normal occurrence these days. “Twenty-five years, and yes, I did. If I could have given her more, I would have. She’s the mayor. She’s the person the people trusted to lead this city. She needs to pay for letting them down as well.”

“My God, baby. I’m just worried about you.”

“I’m fine, Mama. I’m on my way home to pack an overnight bag to go be with Genesis.”

“Okay. Just stay alert, son. Kiss my girl for me.”

“I will, Mama. I love you.”

“I love you more.”

I ended the call and shook my head. That woman was going to worry herself into an early grave. I was just as worried. Now that Darlene had been sentenced, I had a feeling that the moment I started investigating more, the threats would pick up again. Right now, they thought they were off scot-free. They had better think again because I wouldn't stop until I found out who they were or until I died. Get justice or die trying.

When I arrived at Genesis's home, I could smell the aroma outside the door. It smelled divine. I rang the doorbell as my stomach growled, begging me to get inside as quickly as possible. When she opened the door, her short, black, silk robe quickly deterred my thinking. Food was the last thing on my mind. “Damn, baby. You look amazing,” I said as a bright smile made its way to her face.

I scanned her body from head to toe and back up. When my eyes met hers again, she said, “Thank you. You look amazing yourself.”

I twisted my lips as she stepped to the side, welcoming me inside. I only wore a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Being that it was still somewhat warm outside, and we were staying indoors, I figured I'd better wear my shorts while I still could. It was rare I wore them, since I was always in a suit.

“Kyrie, you look amazing in whatever you wear,” she said while closing the door.

“If you say so,” I responded while wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her close.

I laid my lips on hers, grateful to be able to soak up her peaceful aura. When she

separated our kiss, she grabbed my hand and led me to the kitchen. The way her backside bounced as she walked had me in a trance until I smelled what I thought was a fried pork chop. My head snapped up, and sure enough, that was what was on the stove.

An uncontrollable smile broke out on my face. “You’ve been talking to my mama, haven’t you?”

She giggled as I pulled her close again. This woman was everything I desired. She always took my wants, likes, and dislikes into consideration. I was pretty sure she would cook seafood since that was what she liked most, but she catered to me, doing whatever she knew would put a smile on my face after a long day.

“Thank you, baby. I appreciate this so much.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s eat.”

She knew I wouldn’t be able to turn down that fried pork chop. As badly as I wanted to strip that robe off her, I would eat my pork chop first. When I grabbed a plate to fix my food, she turned to me with a frown on her beautiful face. “What are you doing?”

“I’m about to fix my plate.”

“No. Go sit.”

I watched her pour a glass of tea for me and set it on the table. She came back and took the plate from me. “I always fix your food, Kyrie. It’s my way of catering to you. Now, go sit.”

She pecked my lips and began fixing my food. I slowly shook my head and sat at the table. It was apparent to me now. I loved her. I took a sip of my tea and savored the

flavor. It was mixed with lemonade. I loved a good Arnold Palmer. I closed my eyes as I did my best to evaluate my emotions. I was feeling overwhelmed with love, and I didn't know how to respond.

“You okay, baby?”

I opened my eyes to see her setting a plate of cabbage, fried pork chop, cornbread, and garlic mashed potatoes in front of me. I looked up at her with a tight smile on my face and nodded. The truth was, I was emotional, more emotional than I'd ever been, and I was doing my best to hold it in. I didn't really know how to be sensitive. I wanted to be because she deserved to see that part of me, but I didn't know how to reveal it without looking weak.

She walked away and got her plate then sat across from me. She stretched her hands across the table and said, “I'm going to thank the Lord before I get carried away.”

I chuckled. “You probably ate some of it while you were cooking already.”

She frowned and said, “I had to taste it. How else would I know if it was seasoned good enough?”

I laughed, and she joined me. As I slowly shook my head, she began praying. “Thank you, Lord, for allowing us to come together to partake of this food you've blessed us with. Thank you for leading me to Kyrie. I say it every time I pray, but I can't thank you enough. Please allow me to be a source of peace for him after a long day. Help me to understand what he needs from me, since most times he won't say. Let him know that it's okay to be himself around me... all aspects of who he is. I want to know every part of him, even the parts he doesn't like.”

I swore I was going to cry any minute. This was too much for me. Just as I thought I couldn't take any more, she said, “And help me to know when I'm doing too much

and making him uncomfortable.”

Her eyes opened and met mine. “In your son’s name. Amen.”

I nodded repeatedly. “Give me just a minute, baby.”

She gave me a tight smile as I stood and made a beeline to her bathroom. I didn’t understand how I was given everything I wanted and not able to handle it. We were so in tune with one another that she could read my demeanor and mannerisms. As I stood at the sink, staring at myself in the mirror, there was a light tap on the door. I closed my eyes, saying a silent prayer, then opened it.

She stood there staring at me, as if trying to read me, then suddenly dropped her robe. I bit my bottom lip as I stared at her gorgeous body. It was like she was trying to get me to express anything, and she knew I wouldn’t run from this form of expression. I pulled the condom from my pocket and immediately unbuttoned my shorts. She grabbed my shirt and pulled it over my head.

After taking off my underwear, I quickly strapped up and pulled her to me. Our lips collided, and my tongue sought out hers upon first contact. Stooping slightly, I lifted her by gripping her thighs and pressed her back against the nearest wall. When I pushed inside of her, my eyes rolled to the back of my head. This had to be what Shannon Sharpe felt like in his few minutes of pornographic fame. I was about to growl any minute.

“Kyrie... yes, baby.”

“That’s it, Genesis. Give it to me. Don’t hold back, baby.”

I stroked her and watched her slide up and down the wall, taking all of me like I was made for her. At this point, it felt like I was. I wanted to be the man she needed me to

be, just like she wanted to be the woman I needed her to be. The words I wanted to say to her just wouldn't come out. It was like they were stuck in my throat, threatening to choke the hell out of me.

She placed her hands on my face as she wrapped her legs tighter around me. My eyes went to hers, and it was like she was coaxing the words right out of me. "I love you, Genesis."

I closed my eyes tightly and increased my pace until I heard her say, "I love you too, Kyrie... so much already."

I reopened my eyes as she orgasmed all over me. Her walls put a death grip on me and forced me to orgasm right along with her. I was panting hard, but I knew it had more to do with my emotions than physical exhaustion. I stared at her as I continued to hold her against the wall. As I opened my mouth to speak, she put her fingers to my lips, silencing me.

"I think we better go eat before it gets too cold to enjoy."

I smiled at her, thankful that she knew what I needed and how I needed it. My only qualm was wondering why I didn't meet her sooner. She was the woman I was meant to spend the rest of my life with. While I was confused as to why I couldn't seem to express that to her verbally, she didn't seem to be confused at all. I wasn't surprised that she said she loved me, too, because I'd been feeling her love for a while. I knew she was protecting her feelings like I had been by not saying it first.

When I stared into her eyes during our moment of passion, the words fell from me. I didn't even have time to truly think about them or what her reaction to my words would be. It felt right. It felt like a weight lifted off my chest when I said it, and I was able to relax completely when she said it back. I could only pray that it would always be this way between us.

I finally lowered her and allowed myself to slide from her depths. She gave me a slight smile as she got a towel from the cabinet so we could clean up. Finding my voice, I said, “You know this is for nothing, right? I’m going to go diving into your waters as soon as we’re done eating.”

“I figured as much. I can’t be messing up my dining room chairs though.”

I chuckled and pulled her to me. After kissing her lips, I released her and pulled off the condom, throwing it in her waste basket, then took the wet towel from her and cleaned up. Once I’d put my clothes back on and she’d put her robe back on, she grabbed my hand. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to just eat dinner first. I should have put on my moo-moo.”

I chuckled. “Girl, that wouldn’t have stopped a thing. I can disrespect a moo-moo just as easily. What’s underneath it won’t change.” I stopped walking, halting her in the process. When she turned to me, I swept a dreadlock over her shoulder that had fallen from the bun she had them in. “I love you, Miss Farris.”

She smiled, dazzling me with her pearly whites. “I love you too, Judge Patrick.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

When my eyes popped open, and I felt Kyrie's arms around me, my body heated up. Finally hearing him express his love for me was a high I couldn't come down from. I knew his soul was uneasy. I'd seen the news, and people were outraged with how much time he'd sentenced Darlene Doll to. In my opinion, he was right. She was supposed to be a leader, ultimately an example for the people of Beaumont. She didn't just fall from one poor decision. She deceived and betrayed the people for years.

I wanted to show Kyrie that I knew what he needed. After we ate, we took a shower together. I washed his body, refusing to allow him to do the same for me. I told him that the rest of the night was his. While he protested initially, he gave in with a smirk on his lips. After the shower, I massaged his entire body, focusing on his shoulders, neck, and head. He held a lot of tension in those places. I'd learned in the past couple of months that he wasn't as expressive as I thought he was in the beginning.

We'd bonded over the loss of our fathers... our trauma. Then we'd had drinks, so that probably had made his lips looser. Simply being around him had taught me so much about him. He didn't like to be pushed. I felt like telling him how much I loved him would have made him feel pressured to say it back. I withheld my feelings for the sake of his. I knew that was what love was all about. I took care of myself, but I also wanted to take care of him too. Sometimes, I would have to prioritize our needs differently.

This weekend had to be about him. He had a rough week with this trial. We'd barely seen each other. I didn't know if he was still receiving death threats or not, because he didn't talk about it. Most times, I didn't want to ask because I didn't want to put him in a bad head space. I felt like if he really wanted or needed to talk about it, he

would. Hopefully, I was right about that.

I slowly turned to him, trying not to wake him. He tightened his grip on me and mumbled, “Please don’t leave. I love you.”

I stared at him, realizing he was dreaming. He then said, “Take me, she has nothing to do with this.”

His grip on me got tighter. I didn’t want to scare him awake, so I slid my hand from his lower back to the middle of it and began whispering a prayer for him. “Lord, soothe his mind. Caress it in Your love. Heal his heart and soul of the torment he’s feeling. Don’t allow fear and stress to overtake him. Let him know that You are his protector and that he didn’t do anything wrong. Strengthen him where he’s weak. Let him know it’s okay to be weak sometimes. Otherwise, there wouldn’t be a need for You. In Your son’s name, amen.”

I brought my hand to his face and gently caressed his cheek. This case had him retreating within himself. It was like sex made him a little more sensitive, and I played on that last night. During sex, his real feelings always came shining through. If he could be that way without sex, he would be making real progress.

I kissed his lips and whispered, “I love you, Kyrie.”

Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, I saw that we had an hour to get ready and get out of here so we could be to the soup kitchen on time. Feeding the homeless was a huge event we put on every year around the holidays. We had a ton of volunteers that came to help us, and I was glad Kyrie had decided to join us this year.

Just as I was about to pull away from him to get out of bed, he said, “I love you too, Genesis. Thank you for praying for me, baby.”

His eyes opened slowly, and the torment I saw in them caused me to pull his head to mine. “I will always pray for you. That’s one way I show my love. I care about your soul, baby.”

“That’s the ultimate love. I love the way it feels.”

He kissed my forehead, then the tip of my nose, then finally, my lips. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he pulled away. “Nope. Don’t get carried away. You were about to get up. That means the time is getting close for us to leave.”

“We have time,” I said softly.

“No, we don’t. This morning wood will need more than a quickie. I don’t think I would ever be okay with a quickie when it comes to you. So our best bet is to not start anything until we have time.”

I poked my bottom lip out, and he pulled it between his teeth then began sucking it. He was all talk. There was no way he would be able to stare at my naked body in the shower and not want more. I pulled away from him and said, “Come on. Let’s go shower.”

He slowly shook his head as I got up, but he didn’t say a word. His eyes raked over my naked body. I bit my bottom lip and turned to walk away, giving him the view of me he loved so much: my ass. He told me he loved how soft it was and how it moved when I walked. I could only chuckle. I used to hate that. I did squats and all the exercises I could think of to tone it up, but they only made it bigger. I gave up and just had to accept that this was the way my body was made. I only had two options: accept it or have surgery. Surgery wasn’t an option for me.

When I got to the bathroom, I could hear him approaching me. It was like he was on the hunt, and I was his prey. I could see his steps, and they were slow and calculated.

Before I could acknowledge him, he'd wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close, then bent me over by placing his hand on my back and gently pushing me forward. Once he entered my sanctuary, my eyes rolled to the back of my head.

A soft moan left my lips as he took me to ecstasy with every stroke. The waves he was creating in just a short amount of time had me falling more in love with him. The man had learned my body and knew how to get me there in record speeds. My body began trembling, but instead of going harder, he pulled out of me and started the shower. I could barely concentrate enough to stand. My head was spinning, and my body was weak with desire.

Kyrie came back to me and picked me up, lowering me to the vanity, and reentered me. My head dropped back, and my mouth opened. He placed his hand on my chest and slid it to my neck, lightly choking me. His thrusts gained energy and had my head hitting the mirror. That wasn't reason enough to stop though. My orgasm was about to render me speechless in just a moment. Kyrie had to be feeling the same way. The frown that graced his face and the veins that exposed themselves in his neck said he was about to blow.

"Genesis... I love you. Shit!"

"I love you too, Kyrie!"

We crashed and burned at the same time, marinating in one another's love. Once I caught my breath, I said sarcastically, "And you don't do quickies."

When I hopped off the vanity, he smacked my ass. I felt the ripples from it in my lower back.

"Mm," he said. "You thought I would be able to resist all that?"

“Not in the least.”

He laughed. “So I was set up, huh?”

“Absolutely.”

He pulled me to him and kissed the side of my head. I went to the shower, and he went to the sink to brush his teeth. “Genesis, your fluids are on the countertop.”

I giggled. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“Slurp it up for breakfast.”

My knees buckled and nearly dropped me to the floor of the shower. A man that could do that with his words was worth keeping. I moaned softly, unable to keep it inside.

“You okay in there?”

He chuckled. I shook my head slowly and said, “I better see your tongue on the sink when I open this curtain.”

He laughed again, and I flung it open to see him licking that sink so passionately. My eyes rolled to the back of my head, and my nipples hardened even more. I literally had to sit in the tub before I fell. My body was jerking uncontrollably. This man had caused me to orgasm without even touching me.

He slid his hands under me and scooped my wet body from the tub. Before I could count to five, he’d flipped me upright, and he was back inside of me. My screams of pleasure had shocked even me. My nails dug into his back, causing him to go even harder. His growls and the way his fingertips dug into my thighs had me feeling like I

wanted to climb the walls. I was enjoying it and wanting to get away from him at the same time. “Kyriiieee!”

“Yeah, baby. Give it here,” he said in a low, deep voice.

My orgasm obeyed his command and flooded the area. I wasn’t fit for a thing now. All I wanted to do was go back to sleep.

“Uh-huh. See what you started? Now wash up and get dressed. Quit messing with me, or we will be here all day, Genesis. They won’t be able to start without the beginning, so hurry up.”

I slowly shook my head. He always made jokes about my name Genesis meaning the beginning. I quickly got back in the shower and washed up so he could get in, because both of us being in the shower at the same time wouldn’t have been a good thing. He chuckled as he got in, and I went to the sink to brush my teeth. When I felt the gushiness between my legs, I could only shake my head. I’d just taken a shower, but it was for naught. Grabbing my wet towel, I cleaned up again, then went to get dressed.

I would have to wear my uniform when the event started, just so people could differentiate us from everyone else. We only had to wear the pants, suspenders, and boots, thankfully. I only wore a white graphic T-shirt I had made for this occasion and red jeggings. The shirt had a design of a pumpkin with fall-colored leaves all around it. I’d been wearing it for this event for the past couple of years.

When Kyrie came out of the bathroom in his drawers, I wanted to undress all over again. His body was well moisturized, and his beard was shining. Jesus. When I felt the moisture at the corners of my mouth, I realized I was one step away from drooling at the sight of him. I quickly closed my mouth as he moved around the room like he didn’t see me standing here stuck in wet cement.

Once he finally covered his tatted chest, chiseled to perfection, I was able to snap out of it. I cleared my throat and was about to leave the room. He reached out and grabbed my hand with a serious expression on his face. He licked his slips slowly. “Genesis, your presence does the exact same thing to me. You’re my angel... a somewhat devilish one at times.”

I giggled as he kissed my forehead. He released me and finished getting dressed while I went to spray oil on my locs and pull them up. When I came out of the bathroom, he was fully dressed in a long-sleeved, button-down shirt and slacks. I smiled. He looked amazing, but I wondered if he would be serving food in that.

“Baby, you look amazing as always, but umm... you know you’ll probably get dirty.”

“I know. That’s what they make dry cleaners for. Let’s get out of here before you’re late.”

I gave him a soft smile as he grabbed his wallet from the nightstand. We headed for the kitchen for me to grab my keys. I never brought my purse to this event because I didn’t want to have to keep up with it. I just slid my driver’s license and debit card in the back pocket of my jeggings. I turned to him after locking the door and asked, “Are we riding together?”

“No. I need to go check on my mama. I’ll be back at your place tonight, if that’s okay.”

I went to his arms and kissed his lips. “Of course it’s okay. You’re always welcomed to be wherever I am.”

He smiled. “That’s good to know, baby. I’ll follow you there.”

I nodded and kissed his lips again. When I got to my car and was backing out of the

driveway, I blew a kiss to him as he waited for me. He smiled slightly. I could tell in that short amount of time, something had happened. When I saw the cop car at the road, I knew he must have gotten a threat. I took a deep breath, praying that he would be able to handle whatever came his way, especially mentally.

I found that since we'd been together, I'd been praying a lot more. I supposed that was a good thing. There was nothing wrong with having a closer relationship with God. My phone rang, so I answered it through the Bluetooth. "Hey, Mama. I'm on my way."

"Hey, baby. I just got here and didn't see your car."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm about five minutes away."

"Okay. See you soon. Your brother just pulled up."

"Okay."

I slightly rolled my eyes. For some reason, Samuel still wasn't sold on the authenticity of our relationship. Thankfully, his opinion didn't weigh heavily on the decisions I made for my life. It was like he was hell-bent on trying to persuade me to stay away from Kyrie. He'd only been around us once or twice at my mama's house when we'd gone to visit and for dinner. My mama loved the mess out of him, so I didn't understand Samuel's issue.

When we got to Some Other Place Soup Kitchen, I smiled. Serving people made me happy. Most of the people that were homeless were looked down upon, and I hated that. Most of us were a couple paychecks away from being homeless ourselves. With the way the economy was these days, I barely had enough money to save. Most of it went to bills. I thought I was losing it when the price of eggs and milk skyrocketed.

I killed my engine and got out of my car to see the police officer had followed us here. My brother approached him as Kyrie got out of his SUV. Frowning slightly, I made my way to Kyrie. He looked worried, and I knew that wasn't a good thing. "Baby, what's going on?"

I grabbed his hand. He turned to me. "A new threat. Backlash from yesterday's sentencing."

"Oh. Are you okay?"

He nodded. Placing my hands to his cheeks, I pulled his face to mine and kissed his lips just as my chief drove up. He still hadn't formally announced his retirement, and I almost hoped he didn't. I wasn't ready to fight for the position. I needed to be available for whatever Kyrie needed from me.

The chief approached us with a smile. "So there's been a development between the two of you that I wasn't aware of. Congratulations, sir. You have a good woman."

He extended his hand to Kyrie, and he shook it. "Thank you. I'm well aware of that fact."

Kyrie put his arm around my shoulders as the chief went inside. Kyrie looked over to where the officer that followed us was. He seemed interested in what he and Samuel could possibly be talking about. I grabbed his hand and said, "Everything's going to be fine, baby."

He nodded and allowed me to grab his hand to lead him inside. However, shots rang out just as my grandmother was driving up. I quickly pulled Kyrie to the ground and covered him with my body. He practically flung me to the ground and got on top of me. I realized what I'd done, but that was second nature to me. I was a firefighter. My natural instincts wanted me to protect him.

When the shots stopped, he looked around, then stood. After helping me from the ground, he asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. What about you?”

“Yeah.”

He walked away from me and went to Samuel and the officer. They were both on the ground, and I realized the officer had been hit. My mama ran up to me with my grandmother in tow. “Mama, y’all need to leave. Please go home. I’m safe, and so is Samuel. If anything happens, I promise to communicate.”

She nodded and grabbed my grandmother’s hand. Grandma pulled away from her and made her way back to me. She hugged me tightly, and said, “Be careful, baby. I’m praying for everyone’s protection.”

“Yes, ma’am. I love you.”

“I love you more.”

They left the scene as I made my way to Samuel and Kyrie. When I placed my hand on Kyrie’s back, he flinched. After seeing it was me, he pulled me close. “Don’t ever do no shit like that again, Genesis. I don’t need you protecting me. It’s my job to protect you. Had you been hit, I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s my job. It’s engrained into me.”

He nodded and released me from his grasp then knelt where the officer who had been hit was laying. It looked like he was hit in the thigh. As I was about to kneel with them, Samuel said, “Get inside, Genesis. We got this. There’s no fire, so you need to be inside.”

Before I could say anything in rebuttal, I heard the sirens. Kyrie nodded as I looked back at them. “He’s right. You need to get inside.”

Samuel frowned at him, but he didn’t say a word. I took a deep breath and walked away from them toward the entry. When I got under the awning, I turned back to look at them, seeing Kyrie staring at me. He looked away without any visible emotion. I knew he had to be scared, but it seemed like he was irritated with me.

A burning sensation made its way to my elbow as I watched them. I turned my arm to see the scrape. Making my way to the fire engine, I got inside and sat in the seat to take out the first aid kit. I swallowed hard, trying to swallow my emotions in the process as I nursed my wounds. This was dangerous. People were doing more than making threats now. They were trying to kill him. I couldn’t lose him, and despite what he said, I would always be there to protect him.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

“She hung herself, man,” Tyson said as soon as he entered my chambers.

“What? Who?”

“Darlene. She killed herself in the middle of the night.”

I slid my hand down my face. It had been a week since the incident at the firefighters’ initiative, and I was still somewhat rattled. I didn’t go back to Genesis’s house, because I was obviously being followed. I refused to put her in danger by leading them to where she rested her head. She would be in danger any time she was around me.

“This isn’t good.”

“I know. I hate this shit, but whoever is after you, they may come harder. The guard found her hanging there. They think she had been there for two hours.”

“So let me guess, the masses are blaming me.”

“They’re saying that the sentencing played a big part in her demise.”

“Yeah. Blame the black man. They fail to remember that her actions are what contributed to her being there.”

“Yeah. So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to really dig into this shit so I can solve it myself. I feel like she was the

fall guy. There are more people involved in this, and no one seems to be concerned about it.”

There was a knock on my door, so Tyson turned to me, and I nodded. He went to it and opened it, then left out of the door. The DA stood there with a folded piece of paper in his hand. “Good morning. This had your name on it. They found it in Darlene’s cell.”

My eyebrows lifted. Why would she leave a note for me? I took the note from him and stared at my name on the outside of it. When I looked up at Carl, I asked, “Did you read it?”

He shook his head. “I wanted to, but at the same time, it was addressed to you. I figured if it was something I needed to know, you would tell me.”

I nodded, but I felt like his nosy ass was lying. I opened the letter and read.

Judge Patrick,

You did your job, sir. I could tell during the proceedings you were irritated by my silence. I got myself into the foolishness I was involved in because my husband and I were in a bad spot financially. He doesn’t know what all I was doing. I just told him I’d gotten a significant raise and that I was doing other jobs that allotted me another paycheck. He is gullible when it comes to me.

I’m writing this letter to let you know that I wasn’t working alone. There are other high profile people that were involved in this. Watch your back, because they will be coming for you, doing their best to destroy evidence. I heard you wanted to be a detective at one time. Well, it’s time you put those skills to use.

This ring goes deep. I could tell by your demeanor in the courtroom that you were

seeing right through the charade. I was the fall guy to protect them, but I lost the most. I lost my family. I won't get to see my kids graduate from college. I won't get to see them start families and give me grandkids to spoil. Now, I'll never be able to see them. This isn't on you, Judge. However, if you want to know who all is involved, you'll have to solve it yourself. Good luck.

My final words,

Darlene Doll

P.S.- No one needs to see this letter but you. You never know who you could be talking to.

I folded the letter as I repeatedly nodded my head. She confirmed what I already knew, but I wished she would have included names. Now everyone would be a suspect. I brought my gaze to Carl's and said, "She only wanted me to know that I wasn't at fault for this. That she deserved the sentence she got. I was doing my job."

"That's it?" Carl asked.

"Yes. She knew people would be blaming me. She took responsibility for her actions that led to the sentencing. That's it."

"Okay. I guess she didn't know that you wouldn't think it was your fault anyway."

I gave him a one-sided smile. "Apparently not, because I don't feel an ounce of guilt about what she did. It was her crimes that got her in the predicament she was in. I hate that she chose to end her life, and my condolences go out to her family, but I know this isn't on me."

Carl nodded and shook my hand. "Well, enjoy the rest of your day, sir. The detectives

may want to take a look at that letter, if need be.”

“If the time comes that they do, I’ll have it.”

He nodded and left the room. I didn’t know how I would keep this letter private. She had to know that I wouldn’t be the first person to see it. I was more than sure several people read it before it got to me. Just my luck, the main person I needed to watch out for had read it already as well. I closed my eyes, searching within myself for the courage and determination I would need to begin my private investigation. I would need help though... someone on the inside.

My mind immediately went to Detective Johnson. She wasn’t that impressed with me, but she also seemed to want justice. I would need her to get the inside information that I needed. It would be obvious that I knew something if I was the one making all the moves. I could do the behind the scenes investigating, but Johnson would have to handle the other stuff.

I checked the time as Tyson walked back inside. It was nearly nine, and my first case was at ten. I’d already read over the case notes and files, so I was familiar with the details. Grabbing my phone, I told Tyson, “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay. What did the DA want?”

“To give me a letter Darlene left, saying that this wasn’t my fault. She was basically accepting responsibility for everything that happened.”

“Oh, okay. Don’t forget, we have an hour.”

“I haven’t.”

I made the ten-minute walk to the police station. Thankfully, it was connected from

the inside, because it was raining cats and dogs, and the temperature had dropped some. When I got inside the station, I looked toward her desk to see her head down like she was writing. As I made my way to her amid the greetings, she turned to me and frowned slightly.

“Judge. What are you doing here?”

“I need to speak with you privately.”

Her frown deepened. “Did I do something? I haven’t been investigating your threats because they assigned them to someone else. I was told that I was needed on the street, since crime has risen in the north end of Beaumont.”

That was interesting. Someone was dirty at the police department. For them to take her off my case, that told me she would have possibly gotten to the bottom of it and uncovered the corruption. My gut hadn’t steered me wrong.

“It’s not about that, Johnson. Can you meet me somewhere after your shift?”

“Umm... sure. I would have to let my husband know. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, of course. He can be in the vicinity, but he won’t be able to hear what I need to talk to you about.”

“Okay. I leave at six. Is it okay if we meet right after?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

She pulled a card from the holder on her desk and handed it to me. “If anything changes, just text me.”

“Is this your personal number or the phone the city issued?”

She took the card from me and wrote her personal cell number on the back. “I have to admit, this has me nervous.”

“I’m slightly nervous, too, but we’ll get to the bottom of everything. I’m sure about that.”

She nodded, and I turned to walk away as I noticed her captain watching me. He looked suspect. I wanted to go ask him why he passed my case over to people who weren’t producing results, but I held my tongue and got out of there, heading back to my chambers. Apparently, I was moving like I was on a mission, because I was getting plenty of attention. I slowed my pace as my cell phone vibrated.

I pulled it from my pocket to see a message from Genesis. I’d been kind of distant with her since last week. When she dove on top of me, it drove my masculinity to heights unknown to me. What I looked like having my woman protect me from gunshots? That was crazy as hell to me. I didn’t care what her career was.

I opened her message to see, Hey. Can you call me when you have time?

I slowed my pace even more. She deserved an explanation. I called her as I walked, and she answered on the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Hey, baby. What’s up?”

“Hey. I umm...” She remained silent for a moment, and I did too. I didn’t want to assume she would say what I was thinking she would. “Kyrie, I miss you. I haven’t seen you since last Saturday. I mean... I know I worked this past weekend, but I feel

like you're pulling away from me. Am I right?"

I stopped walking for a moment and closed my eyes. Is that what I'm doing? "I've been in my head a lot lately. I feel like I'm putting you in danger, and you diving on me to protect me did something to me. I understand your training and all what you were saying. As your man, though, I never want you putting your life on the line for me. Never. I love you. My love for you is making me pull away, because I don't want you to get hurt. Your brother is right."

That pained me to admit. He'd told me that I was no good for her, especially with all that I had going on. If his sister got hurt or worse, he said he would do serious time after he got at me. Not that I was afraid of his threat, because I wasn't intimidated in the least, but Genesis didn't deserve to be put in the situation she would be in if she stayed tied to me.

"Kyrie, really? I apologized for that. Being a protector is my natural instinct as a firefighter. Being that we were at a work function, I was in firefighter mode. And what exactly did my brother say that you agree with?"

"That I'm not good for you. I have too much going on, and you didn't deserve to be caught up in the crossfire. Please, Genesis. Don't make this harder than it already is."

"Oh, I won't. I love you, but I'm not going to allow you to play with my heart. I'm not going to beg you to do something that you clearly don't want to do. So, good luck with everything, and I'll continue praying for you, asking God to protect you, since you have such a problem with me doing so. Bye, Kyrie."

"Genesis..."

She ended the call. When she said, 'Bye, Kyrie,' I could hear the tremble in her voice. I broke her, and that only made me feel worse. I wanted to call her back and

try to get her to understand, but I didn't. She was strong in her position, while I wasn't. I wanted her in my life. I was a better man when she was around. I'd become a better man around everyone else as well, simply because she was in my life.

Even my mother had noticed the change in me. She said I was a little softer and more playful. I found that I had become more playful with people I loved. My mother had admired the change in me and had attributed it to me finally opening my heart to someone. She said that Genesis would be her daughter-in-law if I didn't screw it up. Well, I screwed it up. I fumbled her heart big time, although I felt like I was only protecting her.

She was done with me. Her last line sounded like she wouldn't talk to me anymore. I didn't know how I would handle not being able to hear her voice. My days would be a lot longer, and my soul would be darker... like it was before I met her.

I walked into Sertinos Café and found a seat to wait for Detective Johnson to arrive. After dropping my briefcase onto the chair, I went up front to order a latte. I really didn't need to drink that so late in the evening, but the temperature had changed tremendously. It was in the eighties when I arrived at work this morning, and it was now in the fifties. I needed to heat up my core.

After getting my drink, I went back to my seat and moved my briefcase to the bench next to me. Once I took a couple of sips, I saw her walking inside alone. She noticed me immediately. When she got to the table, she said, "I think I'm going to need one of those too."

"Have a seat, and I'll get it for you."

"Okay. Thank you."

I went back up front and noticed a man sitting in a car outside, staring inside the café.

That must have been her husband, but I would ask. It didn't hurt to be sure. Once they finished her latte, I made my way back to the table. I handed her the latte and asked, "Is that your husband in the Chevy?"

"Yes. Was he watching you?"

"Okay. Yeah. You know I'm having issues with that. What I have to tell you and ask for your help with is along those lines."

Opening my briefcase, I pulled the letter from it and handed it to her to read. Her eyebrows lifted higher and higher the more of it she read. When she was done, she stared at me, her eyes wide. "Wow. Umm... I don't know what to say. This isn't good."

"Right. What you told me earlier about them assigning my case to someone other than you only confirmed my gut."

"What is your gut saying?"

"That you are one of the best and would find out more than they wanted you to know. My gut says I can trust you, Johnson. I need your help. There is no way I would be able to dig efficiently without access to the information you have access to. Please. I feel like it's a matter of life and death that I figure this out, mainly my life."

She took a deep breath and lowered her head for a second. She then looked outside toward where her husband was parked. Her gaze went back to the letter as she handed it back to me. "Since we'll be working together, you can call me Stephanie. I'll be calling you by your first name as well."

"Fine by me. Thank you for agreeing to help me with this."

“Of course. I seek justice. I thought it was strange that they took your case from me too. I figured since you’re a judge, it would be of utmost importance to get it handled right away. They gave it to Montez, one of the new guys. He doesn’t have a clue.”

I slowly shook my head. They wanted me dead. What they wanted more than that was for evidence of their involvement to disappear. If I had my way, that wouldn’t happen. Stephanie and I would find out who each one of them were and hang their asses. She took a sip of her latte, then looked back up at me. “So who are we looking into first?”

“Well, I want to start by going through the files from Darlene’s case. I think the evidence will lead the way. We will have to analyze every bit of it, like who would have had to sign off on things with her, which departments would be involved in each transaction. We will have to use every bit of training we learned to think analytically about all this evidence that only points to her. I figured more people were involved and was trying to look into it myself, but...”

My mind went to Genesis. I closed my eyes briefly. I missed her too. My heart was aching, and I didn’t know what to do about it. I couldn’t have her in harm’s way. I didn’t give a damn about her training. She was my woman. It was my job to make sure she was safe. It was like I kept repeating my reasoning to convince myself I made the right decision by pushing her away. I lost the love of my life over this shit. We had to get it solved as quickly as possible.

“But what?” Stephanie asked.

“I had other obligations that caused me to put it on the back burner. Now that I’ve gotten this letter, I know I need to seriously dig into it. She killed herself, and I don’t want her death to be in vain.”

“It won’t be. We will get to the bottom of this... discreetly, of course.”

“Yes. I know your husband will want to know details, but just let him know it has to do with the mayor, and it’s extremely confidential. We don’t know who all is involved, although I have question marks by different people in my head.”

“Well, let’s see if they are the same people I’m thinking about.”

“Your boss... the sergeant.”

“That’s a thought, since he reassigned me. I also thought about his boss, the deputy chief.”

“You think it goes that high?” I asked.

“Yes. The mayor was the little fish. That was why she had to take the fall.”

“Smart. I’m questioning the DA. For him to not try to investigate further makes me pause concerning him.”

“I agree. He should have been the main one requesting we look into other folks. I also believe some people on the council may be involved as well, but they are small fish too. However, if we go after them, it may lead to the big fish.”

“Or we can leave them out there to bait the big fish.”

“Okay, Judge. Let me find out you have aspirations of being a detective.”

I chuckled. “I used to. I thought I could serve the people better by being a judge due to some stuff that happened within the police department some years back. There was blatant police misconduct that led to the deaths of two teenaged boys. They only got a couple of years in jail, while the boys’ families were left to grieve the deaths of their loved ones due to ‘mistaken identity’ that was clearly profiling.”

“Oh, man. That’s sad.”

“I was so disgusted. I knew those boys, played basketball with them, and had established a trusting relationship with them. That incident knocked us back to square one with the community, and unfortunately, I didn’t blame them. They had a reason to not trust the police.”

I couldn’t believe how easily I told her those details. Doing so only caused me to think about Genesis and how patient she had been with me. The woman made me better in every aspect.

“Well, we’re going to get to the bottom of this, and when it’s all said and done, you will get to be the one to make sure they get the sentence they deserve.”

“Hell yeah. Thank you for meeting me.”

“Of course. Thank you for trusting me. I try to do my job to the best of my abilities, and there is no one that can scope foolishness out like a black woman.”

I laughed. She was right about that shit. I downed the rest of my latte since it had cooled off, and I watched her do the same. I reached across the table and shook her hand and said, “I’ll be in touch.”

“Yes. Same.”

She walked toward the door with me following right behind her. I opened the door, allowing her to walk through it first. Her husband was watching closely, so I gave him a head nod. He did the same.

Making my way to my vehicle, my mind went right back to Genesis. It didn’t help that I was only about five minutes away from her house. I wanted to go there and just

hold her in my arms, but I knew I couldn't do that. My heart was extremely heavy, and the best place to go when I felt this way was to my mama's house. She was gonna kill me for losing her daughter-in-law.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

I trudged to the Keurig and brewed a cup of coffee. I wasn't even a coffee drinker, but I found myself drinking a cup every morning since the last time I spoke to Kyrie. My heart was torn to pieces. When he stopped calling as much, I felt like I was reaching the end of a beautiful journey, finding out it was only a dream. I hadn't texted him, and he hadn't messaged me either. It had been two weeks since he'd broken things off with me.

I hadn't even told my brother, because him celebrating my agony would cause me to punch him in his damn throat. Micah could tell something was going on the day I went back to work and had pieced it together. I lay in her arms nearly that entire night, crying my eyes out. Although I could feel it coming, I didn't expect Kyrie to completely pull away from me. After we had the most amazing night, he left me drowning in my feelings because I tried to protect him.

I refused to be strung along though. Hanging around until he made up his mind was a no-go for me. While I knew that was exactly what I would be doing, he didn't need to know that. There was no man alive that would make me feel the things Kyrie did. My emotions were all over the place, and the longer I went without hearing from him, the more I felt like a fool.

Maybe I did get used, just like my brother had said Kyrie would do. Ugh! Everything about him seemed sincere to me, and I was usually a good judge of character. It was extremely hard not to reach out to him, but I had to stick to my guns. I meant what I said. I wasn't going to stick around only for him to continue dragging my heart through the mud. Here it was, Thanksgiving week, and I was spending it at work. I volunteered to work someone else's shift so they could go out of town.

I would be working six days this week, right through the holiday. My mama was upset that I wouldn't be there for Thanksgiving but promised to bring me a couple of plates. I stirred my coffee after adding sugar and creamer to it, then made my way to the table.

"Good morning, sis."

I turned to see Micah joining me. "Good morning."

"You sound like you're getting sick. You feel okay?"

"I'm a little congested. I'll be fine though."

I grabbed the back of my neck and rolled my head in circles to loosen me up. I'd been working out nearly every day, and my bones were stiff. I hadn't been soaking like I normally did, so that was probably why. Plus, I'd been lifting heavier weights.

"You still pining over the judge?"

"I miss him, Micah. I mean... I never thought this was how we would end up. I know I have to move on, but it's hard."

"I know it is. Well, I have news to share with you."

I frowned slightly as she sat across from me. "What's up?"

"I'm pregnant."

"Heifer!" I screamed then covered my mouth. "Are you going to continue to work?"

"Yes... until I can't."

“So umm...”

“Yeah, it’s Kevin’s baby. I gotta pay for that joyride to hell.”

I laughed loudly as Bransford walked in on our party. Micah huffed loudly, and I rolled my eyes as he turned on the TV. The chief was on the news, announcing his retirement at the end of the year. What the hell? He could have given us a heads up that he was going to announce it. I was more than sure Bransford knew. That was how he knew to turn on the TV. I was going to have to have that talk with AJ sooner than later.

I couldn’t believe the chief was cosigning with Bransford to be our new chief. He had to be smoking something if he thought Bransford was anywhere close to leadership material. There was no way in hell I would work for him. I’d transfer out of here quicker than they could blink. Leadership was important to me, and I refused to be led by someone with a skewed vision. Just as I finished my coffee, the horn blared.

“There’s a wreck on Gladys and the freeway.”

That was definitely close to us... maybe only a mile away. We quickly put on our gear and loaded up. Micah hopped in the driver’s seat, and I got in back. It took us all of thirty seconds to get there. However, when I saw the SUV, my heart started beating fast. It looked like Kyrie’s Escalade. I hopped out, quickly running to the SUV. There was no other car involved. He’d hit a telephone pole. The wires were down, and this could become deadly.

When I looked inside the SUV, I saw he was alert. There was a little blood trickling down his face, but he seemed to be okay otherwise. He turned to me and winced. Maybe he wasn’t okay. “My brakes went out. I figured it was better to hit the pole than another car.”

I nodded and went to his side of the vehicle to see if I could open the door. Bransford and Micah joined me when I couldn't open it with the jaws of life. His vehicle was smoking a lot. I went to get a straight board to make sure we didn't injure him even more than what he already was. When I rejoined them, Bransford smirked at me. I assumed he knew about Kyrie's and my past involvement. I rolled my eyes and asked Kyrie, "How fast were you going?"

"Only about thirty miles per hour. I wasn't in a hurry."

"Why wasn't a cop with you?"

He dropped his head back to the seat and shrugged his shoulders. I was pretty sure he knew why. He just didn't want to tell me. Once they got the door open, we carefully pulled him out. "What hurts, Judge Patrick?" Micah asked.

"Just my head and neck right now. When I hit the pole, my head hit the window."

I thought he'd just put his window down, but his head had hit it and broken it. He probably had a concussion. He could have also injured his neck. We were sure to be gentle with him. I really hadn't spoken to him, other than to ask how fast he was going and why he didn't have a cop with him, but my heart was bleeding. I wanted to kiss him and tell him everything would be okay, instead of treating him like a stranger.

The ambulance finally joined us and came to him to strap him down. When they lifted him to the gurney, Micah and I backed away. His eyes met mine, and I could still see the love he had for me in them. That only made me hurt more. After a wrecker came and towed his vehicle, I started thinking about the accident. He said his brakes went out. Someone had clearly done that to his vehicle. His Escalade was probably only a couple of years old. There was no way the brakes had gone out.

I got back in the truck as I watched the police take a report. Thankfully, the wires that were down were no longer live. All was handled, and it was time for us to get back to the station.

“Are you leaving to go be with your man?”

My eyes narrowed as Bransford chuckled. I wanted to take a piece of metal and hit him across the back of his head. With as emotional as I had been, I knew he knew we were no longer together. I hadn’t received flowers nor food in over two weeks. I refused to answer his question. When he turned in his seat to look back at me, I averted my gaze to the passing scenery, like I had never seen it before.

Surprisingly, he didn’t say anything else. That was best, because I didn’t know how long I would be able to restrain my words of malice. I just wanted to know if Kyrie would be okay. My mama had his mother’s number, and as far as I knew, they talked occasionally. Our breakup had more than likely been a topic of discussion.

When we got back to the firehouse, I hopped out and went to take off my gear. Micah was right behind me. She lightly rubbed my back. “I know that had to be hard.”

I nodded. “The hardest.”

“Well, I’m here if you need me.”

I nodded again. Once I took off my gear, I went to our bunk. I didn’t feel like being social, especially not with Bransford. Lying in bed, I curled up in the fetal position and allowed the tears I had in a chokehold to fall down my cheeks. This was so hard, and I couldn’t wait until I was in a better position to handle it. I knew that would come with time... hopefully.

I pulled into the parking lot of Texas Roadhouse and just sat there. My mama invited

me to dinner with her and Samuel, and I just wasn't feeling it. A week had passed since Kyrie's accident, and I hadn't heard a word from him. I'd texted him, saying that I hoped he was okay, and nothing. That only made me feel worse. I felt so rejected. Maybe I'd imagined what I thought I saw in his eyes.

The past week seemed to be even harder than the previous two weeks, but I knew I had to get myself together. This wasn't healthy. I could end up in a severe state of depression, and that was the last place I wanted to be. I had a reputation for being bubbly and always happy. I couldn't let Kyrie's rejection drag me to mentally dangerous places.

After applying lipstick and huffing loudly, preparing myself to deal with Samuel's bullshit, I got out of my car and headed inside. My mama and Samuel were standing there, about to be escorted to a table. I hugged my mother then Samuel and followed them to a booth. I sat next to my mama, because I needed to be able to see Samuel's face if he started with his foolishness. I was off today, but I'd been in the house with my grandmother, talking about things and doing laundry. I wasn't sure what it was about laundry, but she enjoyed doing it.

"Mama, why didn't you invite Grandma?" I asked her.

"I did, but she said she was going home and eat leftovers. She didn't want to have to throw them away and today was the last day she felt it would be safe to eat it."

She chuckled, and I did too. "She must still have some of that shrimp étouffée in her fridge. It has to be, what, three days old?"

"Girl, four. She's pushing it for sure."

We laughed as Samuel shook his head with a smile. Although he was quiet, he didn't seem to be in a bad mood. He was just listening to us talk. Mama turned her attention

to him and asked, “How’s work been, son?”

“It’s been somewhat busy, but nothing we aren’t used to. Seems like crime is on a steady incline in Beaumont. It’s discouraging.”

“I know it is. To say the city is much smaller than places like Houston and Dallas, it seems like the crime rate is comparable percentage wise.”

“Maybe with Dallas, but definitely not Houston.”

He chuckled, and we did too as the waitress came and took our drink orders. Once she left, Samuel asked, “So how have things been for you, sis?”

“They’ve been okay. I’m maintaining.”

“Has Kyrie reached out to you yet?”

I frowned slightly. “Why would he be reaching out?”

“Didn’t you help him when he got in that wreck? Knowing where it was, I was pretty sure y’all were first on the scene.”

“I did, and we were. I helped him, and he went on his way with the ambulance.”

“Come on, Genesis. I know you. You’re telling me you didn’t reach out to make sure he was okay?”

“I did, but I didn’t get a response. Now can we drop it?”

He lifted his hands in surrender and things got quiet. The waitress came back with our drinks and set them on the table, then took our orders. When she left, Samuel said, “I

didn't mean to upset you, sis. I apologize. You do know that I just want what's best for you, right?"

I took a deep breath. "I know that, but only one person knows what's best for me, Samuel, and that person is me. Well... and the Lord. So, I think He and I have everything under control."

"Okay. Enough of that, you two. Samuel, what are you going to do for your twenty-fifth birthday? We're two months away."

"Probably nothing. We've been working quite a bit of overtime lately. After working, the only thing I want to do is go home and sleep. Like, when we leave from here, I'm going home and hop in the bed. I'm gon' slide to my pillow like it's home plate."

Mama and I laughed. "I feel you, brother. I was like that last week. Although we only had two call outs, we stayed busy with classes and cleaning equipment. The bunks are comfortable but not as comfortable as my bed at home. When I got home yesterday morning, I slept nearly the whole day away."

He chuckled and nodded. "I suppose that's the life of a first responder."

I nodded as my mama smiled. "I'm proud of both of you."

The waitress came back with our food as Samuel's dispatch thingy went off. He rolled his eyes and dropped his head back to the booth. "I gotta go, y'all. Mama, can you box this food up for me, and I'll pick it up from your house later?"

"Of course."

He pulled out his wallet and dropped a hundred-dollar bill on the table. "Dinner is on me. Love y'all."

“Love you too,” we said in unison.

When he walked off, my mama said, “I’m glad he didn’t go further in about Kyrie. He said people are really after him for the death of Darlene Doll. It’s to the point where the family is even trying to file a civil suit.”

I frowned. “Are you serious? They are wasting their time and money. That’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah. That’s what a lot of people are saying.”

“Hey, y’all.”

I looked up to see Ms. Carolyn, Kyrie’s mother, as she sat across from us, where Samuel had once sat.

“Hey, girl!” my mama said excitedly as she glanced over at me.

I hated that she didn’t tell me she was coming. I hated being blindsided like this.

“Samuel had to leave?”

“Yeah, he got a call.”

“Hey, Genesis. How are you, baby?”

I glanced up at her, and all I could see was Kyrie. “I’m okay.”

I wasn’t okay. I felt like I was about to suffocate. My mama really should have told me. Dragging my fork across my plate, I picked over my food I had planned to fully devour mere minutes ago. My appetite was gone without a trace, and I suddenly felt

nauseous. Standing, I excused myself from the table and practically ran to the restroom. As soon as I closed the door to the stall, the nausea stopped. I was just standing here, looking like a fool now.

I went ahead and urinated while I was in there, then went out and washed my hands. I wet a paper towel with cold water and put it to my face to calm me down. My reflection spoke volumes. It reeked of sadness, despair, and loneliness. Today was the day I would make some major changes. If I was going to be the fire chief one day, I had to be a pillar of strength, one that people could look to for leadership. If I was going through my own personal crisis, how would I lead them through crises at work?

Going back out to our booth, I smiled politely and sat. “You okay?” my mama asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” Turning my attention to Ms. Caroline, I asked, “How have you been?”

“I’ve been okay, considering.”

I nodded and stared at my plate, noticing the looks the two of them were giving each other. Choosing to pretend that I didn’t see them, I started eating my food and felt my appetite somewhat coming back until Ms. Carolyn said, “He misses you, and he’s just as miserable as you are.”

I lost it. “Well, he’s the one that pushed me away. I wanted to be there for him. I wanted to help him through what he was feeling, but he couldn’t see a woman protecting him. Oh, excuse me, his woman protecting him. Was that a reason to leave me like I meant nothing to him? I gave everything I had to our relationship. I fell in love with a man that chose his pride and ego over me. So, at this point, I don’t care to know that he misses me. He can do something to change it.”

I dropped my fork and grabbed my purse then left the table. I could hear my mother

calling my name, but I refused to turn back. Apparently, Kyrie was doing fine, physically. When I got to my car, I couldn't even release any tears. I was so angry. I just wanted to get away from them before I got disrespectful. Instead of going home, I went to the gym. Surely, that would help me work off some aggression.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

As I sat at my desk, going over a case, the lieutenant of the police department came inside. He stood there until I was done with what I was doing, then said, “Hello, Judge. In light of the recent threat, we think it would be best if we relocated you.”

“Relocated me where?”

“It will be another place in the city. We will change your car, and you will have to take a leave of absence. We think it’s the best thing to do to protect you until we catch the perp.”

“Perps, Lieutenant. Perps. There are more than one.”

“Yes, Your Honor, we’re aware. The camera footage we got of someone messing with your vehicle doesn’t match the body type of the person that broke into your home.”

My eyebrows lifted. “So they had video footage of the person that broke into my home?”

“Yes, sir. No one told you that?” he asked, somewhat nervously.

“No.”

“It was two of them. Their faces were covered.”

He was stumbling all over himself now. First, he said it was a person that broke into my home; now he was saying it was two. I slowly shook my head, then asked, “Do

you have a place in mind to locate me to?”

“Yes. It’s an older woman’s house in the Pear Orchard area of town.”

“When you say older, how much older?”

“Around seventy. Nearly old enough to be your grandmother.”

“Okay. Give me some time to think about it.”

“Don’t take too long, sir. This last threat has made me nervous. I feel like they are going to make good on it this time. The other times were risky but didn’t necessarily mean you would die from whatever they did. The threat to bomb your house while you sleep... that’s too serious and too dangerous to doddle about.”

“I understand. Let’s do it.”

“Okay. I’ll drive you home, and one of the officers will meet us at Grandma Jean’s house.”

My eyebrows lifted slightly. They were that friendly with her that they called her grandma? This was getting more and more complicated. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to listen to my gut and what my heart was saying. I reopened them and nodded. He did the same and left my office.

Taking a leave of absence, although paid, was the last thing I wanted to do. I wouldn’t be able to access my work computer. My new laptop didn’t have all the programs on it that I needed yet. Were they just trying to get me away from the office? That was possible. However, they didn’t know about my secret weapon: Detective Johnson.

She'd already tracked down some paperwork purposely left out of the evidence submitted. I didn't know how she found it, but she said it could possibly lead to something more that could help us track down a name. She was diligent. We'd been at this for nearly two months now. The day of my accident was when she tracked the information down. That was good news after what I'd suffered. I thought I was going to die that day.

When I hit the telephone pole, my SUV almost flipped over. That was when my head hit the window. They tracked me going thirty-five miles per hour, which was under the speed limit. I'd just left the gym and was headed to Kroger to get a few things for my mama. I hadn't had to use my brakes because all the traffic lights were green until I got to Gladys. When I realized my brakes were gone, the only thing I could think of was keeping the people around me safe.

Then my angel appeared minutes later. When I saw Genesis, I could tell she had been miserable. It had only been two weeks since I'd seen her, but the moment I laid eyes on her, it felt like it had been forever. Her eyes were somewhat puffy like she'd been crying a lot. Mine had been somewhat the same because I hadn't been sleeping well.

The threats had been coming nonstop, wearing my nerves thin. If it wasn't text messages, there were notes on my vehicle. I was at the gym early, hoping that I would tire myself out enough to sleep. If I wasn't thinking about the threats, my mind was on Genesis. I couldn't have her putting her life on the line to protect mine. Did I have issues with a woman protecting me? Absolutely. I had more of an issue with my woman protecting me. The only way I felt I could keep her from trying to do that was to distance myself from her.

I'd only suffered a mild concussion and just had a small laceration on my temple. I stayed home a couple of days from work, allowing my mother to see to things around the house and baby the hell out of me. After a couple of days, I went back to work to escape her nurturing. She fussed the entire time I got dressed, but I tuned her out and

left. Besides the couple of visits from Tyson, I had nothing to shield me from her dramatics.

When I'd finally seen Genesis's text message, asking about how I was doing, I couldn't force myself to respond. Seeing her had knocked me a step backward. Just when I thought I was making progress of living without her, I had to see her beautiful face. Had I responded to her, I wouldn't have stopped talking to her. I didn't want her to become a target either. Surely, whoever was after me would try to get at her as well. That was why I wasn't spending much time around my mother either.

I couldn't have either of them caught up in the crossfire. This elderly woman I would be staying with would be putting her life on the line as well. Surely, whoever was after me would easily find where I was. All they had to do was follow me. I wasn't sure how the police planned to hide me, but hopefully, what they did would make more sense than what it was currently making in my mind.

As the hours passed, I was able to get some documents sent to my email that I needed to go over and reallocate cases for the rest of the week. The other cases that were further out would be reassigned later. Once I cleared out all the paperwork on my desk and signed a couple of search warrants, I packed up for the day and made my way to the police station.

When I got there, Detective Johnson met me at the door. "Don't push back. What they are about to do was my recommendation. You need to get away from here because this is where you're being tracked from. The lieutenant pulled me back in on your case."

She winked, and I nodded repeatedly. She had my back, and I was grateful I made a connection with her. The lieutenant approached me with a black pullover to put on. I did as he requested and put the hood over my head. They then cuffed me and led me out to one of the blacked-out SUVs that they transported criminals in. After they

helped me inside, Johnson said, “You’ll be safe. We’ve got you covered.”

I nodded, then she closed the door. Once the lieutenant got in the driver’s seat, he said, “I’m going to take you straight to Grandma Jean’s house. Then I’ll escort your mother to your house to get the things you need. If you can spin around a bit, I’ll uncuff you.”

“Will my mama be able to know where I am?”

“No, sir. We can’t even risk you using that phone. I’m going to provide you with another phone that you will be able to talk to her on. You’ll leave that phone with me. Detective Johnson and I have the new number. I wouldn’t suggest giving that number to anyone else.”

He proceeded to uncuff me, and I sat back in the seat and put on my seat belt. This life was about to get really lonely. There was only so much talking to Mama I could handle. After reaching that threshold, she would start wearing on my nerves. Genesis crossed my mind, and I knew I needed to get her out of my system.

When he turned into the driveway of the quaint little house, I smiled slightly. It looked like I would imagine a grandparent’s house looking. My mom’s parents were deceased and so were my dad’s. Even before he died, I didn’t spend much time with them. After he died, they were both deceased within seven years. So I didn’t know what it was like to grow up around grandparents.

Lieutenant Gamble came around the car and opened my door then led me to her back porch. I could smell food cooking, and my stomach verbalized its excitement. Gamble chuckled as he knocked. Shortly after, a short gray-haired lady answered the door. She was gorgeous. I knew she had to be a firecracker in her day and time and was probably still a firecracker to a man her age.

Her eyes widened slightly as she said, “Come on in. I’m cooking some oxtails. I hope you like that.”

“Yes, ma’am. I like food... period.”

She chuckled. “We’ll get along just fine then.”

She and Gamble talked for a minute or so, then he said, “I’ll be back with your things.”

I nodded as he left. She closed the door and turned back to me and said, “Well, my grandkids call me grandma, and most people that aren’t related to me call me Grandma Jean. You’re welcome to call me either of those, or my government name, Genevieve Adams.”

She smiled big, and it was like I saw Genesis. I smiled and said, “I’ll stick to Grandma Jean like everyone else.”

I slowly shook my head, wondering if things would continue to linger like this. If so, I would never get over losing Genesis Farris. I missed that woman something serious... had to be if I was seeing her in Grandma Jean.

“My name is Kyrie Patrick. I’m a judge for the criminal district court.”

“I know, baby. I voted for you, and I see you on TV from time to time. That’s a shame what they are trying to do to you for simply doing your job. That mayor has been dirty for a long time. It’s about time they caught up with her ass.”

My eyebrows lifted. “How do you know that?”

“Old people intuition. I don’t have proof, but I could see it about her. It’s like I could

see her soul, and it was black as hell.”

I nodded. “I understand. I can’t wait to have that intuition. I’m not looking forward to the age that will come along with it though.”

She laughed. “Well, are you ready to eat?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She stood from the table and began fixing food for me. “I have dominoes and wouldn’t mind dusting off my skills if you wanna get spanked.”

I frowned slightly. “Oh, and you talk noise too? I won’t be as lonely as I thought. Come with it, Grandma Jean. I’m gon’ bury them lil skills you got.”

She laughed. “Listen, I know you’re stressed. I’m here to provide a safe space for you, but I wanna take it a step further and offer peace in your solitude.”

“I appreciate that so much. My mama is probably pulling her hair out right now.”

“Are you her only child?”

“Yes, ma’am. Just me and her for the past twenty-three years. I’m gonna miss her while I’m here too.”

“I know you will, baby. You will get through this and come out better than you were. Do you believe that?”

“I want to believe that.”

She turned around with a plate of rice, smothered oxtails, what looked like mustard

greens, and a piece of cornbread. My stomach was thanking her before I could even open my mouth. After she set the plate in front of me, I noticed the cornbread had an orangey color to it. I frowned slightly. “What type of cornbread is this?”

“It’s candied yam cornbread. Try it, baby.”

“Oh my Lord. I’m gonna wait for you, but I already know I’m gonna inhale it.”

She chuckled and sat down with her plate. “Baby, I’m old school and like sweets. I don’t have tea, but I have a whole pitcher of grape lemonade Kool-Aid in the fridge. You want some?”

“Do I want some? Just set the pitcher on the table, Grandma.”

She blushed. This woman was godsent. She had me feeling more comfortable here than I’d felt in my own house. When she returned with two glasses and the pitcher of Kool-Aid, she said, “We not gon’ be able to breathe when we eat and drink all of this.”

“Speak for yourself. My stomach is like a bottomless pit at times. This looks and smells so good. Thank you for making this transition seamless. I haven’t been here thirty minutes yet, and I feel like I’ve known you forever.”

She chuckled. “I’m so glad you’re comfortable.”

She extended her hand, so I placed my hand in hers. She began blessing the food. It sounded pretty traditional until she said, “And Lord, please restore what he’s missing.”

I frowned as I said, “Amen.”

She glanced at me as she began eating. When she swallowed her first bite of food, she said, “You really don’t remember me, huh? We met briefly a couple months ago. Well... technically, we didn’t actually meet. We made eye contact though.”

I frowned harder, trying to rack my brain on who this woman was. “I’m sorry, Grandma Jean. I don’t remember.”

“Genesis Farris is my granddaughter. Don’t worry. She doesn’t know you’re here. The police department trusts me with things of this nature. Samuel doesn’t even know half the stuff I do for them, and he works there.”

I swallowed hard and felt like I was about to panic. My gaze was everywhere but on her. I didn’t feel so comfortable anymore. Closing my eyes briefly, I asked, “How is she?”

“She’s okay. Going through a little turmoil with a coworker, but she’s okay other than that.”

“I miss her,” I said quietly.

“I know. She misses you too.”

“You aren’t going to ask why I broke up with her?”

“Nope. That’s your business. She didn’t tell me that you were the one who broke things off. She just said the two of you weren’t together anymore. I never press her for answers. She comes around in her time. I can tell she misses you though. That natural glow she used to have is gone. She’s literally thrown herself in her career. I go to her house on Wednesdays to wash clothes. She rarely comes here.”

I nodded and started eating. The cornbread claimed my attention first. When I tried to

pick it up, it broke apart. Sweet Jesus. I looked up at her, and she giggled. Using my fork, I scooped up a piece, and my taste buds felt like they'd entered heaven's gates. "Oh my God. This tastes even better than I imagined it would. Wow."

I scooped up more, along with the greens, and wanted to stand up and dance. It was that good. Once I swallowed, I immediately had to sample the oxtails. They tasted like they'd been smothered in butter and the holy spirit. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as Grandma Jean laughed.

"I'm not going to want to leave... especially since I'll be able to check on Genesis." I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "This is really good."

"Thank you, baby. I hate to see the two of you so miserable."

"I just..." I slowly shook my head. "She doesn't need to be involved in all this. She wants to protect me. I can't allow that."

"She needs to let a man be a man. I try to tell her that when she's all in hero mode. A man that you love won't want you putting your life in danger to protect him. He wants you to stay safe and out of the way of bullshit. I get it, baby."

I took a deep breath as she continued. "But I'm also old school. Things have changed. There weren't women firefighters when I was growing up, at least not around here. People are so sensitive these days. They don't want to be called females because they say it dehumanizes them."

She rolled her eyes. "Humans are an animal species. Male and female. It is not that serious."

I bit my bottom lip, keeping my thoughts on the subject to myself. Going back to my plate, I cleaned up almost half of it before I decided to pour a glass of Kool-Aid.

Grandma Jean smirked at me as she side-eyed me. When I took my first sip, I frowned and smiled at the same time. It was so sweet and tart... every kid's dream drink. "Whew! That's good right there!"

She laughed. "You don't have to gas me up. If it's too sweet for you, I have water in the fridge."

"How do I even go from that to water? That would be a shock to my system now. I got this."

"Mm hmm. You gon' mess around and christen that bathroom in there too."

I chuckled but continued eating like she hadn't said a word. Once I'd finished off the oxtails, rice, and gravy, I went back to the greens. Her plate of food was a lot smaller than mine. When I looked over at it, she was already done and sipping on Kool-Aid.

"Are you going to have room for dessert?"

"Dessert? Please tell me you don't cook like this every day."

She giggled. "No, child. This was your welcome to the hood dinner."

I nearly choked. "Okay, okay. So what kind of dessert did you make?"

"Lemon crumble."

I frowned. "I love lemon, so it gotta be good. Slide it to me, Grandma."

She slowly shook her head. When she stood to fix our dessert, I lowered my head as I thought about Genesis. I couldn't believe fate would land me here at her grandmother's house. I still couldn't be with her though. Not right now. As much as I

missed her, I wouldn't change my stance on the subject. I needed to be sure she was safe.

"Here you go, baby."

She slid it on the table, causing me to chuckle. "Thanks, Grandma."

"You're welcome, sweetheart. You know things will eventually work out with her too."

I gave her a tight smile. From your mouth to God's ears.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

“AJ, there is no way I can work under Bransford’s leadership. None. I will relocate first,” I said to the mayor pro tem.

“First of all, you’re delusional if you think I will allow you to relocate. You’re one of the best firefighters we have. Secondly, I would never appoint Bransford as the new fire chief. He’s way too biased in his beliefs, and that’s putting it nicely. He doesn’t care for all citizens equally. So get ready for the backlash, because you are the best candidate for that position. I’ve watched you put your life on the line repeatedly to save others. Your own safety is an afterthought most times.”

I lowered my head, grateful that we were on the same page concerning Bransford. While I meant what I said about relocating, I didn’t want to have to. My family, the only family I knew, was here in Beaumont. Besides Micah, my mama was my best friend. I wasn’t great at making friends. I was always friendly and in a good mood, but I didn’t let people in on my personal life easily. People couldn’t be trusted. Unfortunately, Kyrie had reminded me of that.

I missed him so damn much, but I had to make peace with the situation and move on. The holidays had come and gone, and we were embarking on a new year. My goal was to make it better than last year and focus on elevation in my career. Being fire chief was the next step. Our fire chief had retired, and we had a retirement party for him right before the new year rolled in. It was a great time.

“Thank you, AJ. Are you going to run for mayor?”

“Absolutely. I didn’t come all this way to go down in the books as only mayor pro tem. I’m going to make my appointment tomorrow at the city council meeting. Do

you have to work?”

“No. I’ll be there. I go back to work day after tomorrow.”

“Perfect. See you tomorrow then.”

I shook his hand. “Yes, you will. Thanks again.”

“No problem.”

When I walked out, I took a deep breath. The last time I was in the courthouse, or even in the vicinity of it, was when I’d rescued Kyrie from that courtroom. I swallowed hard and made my way to my car. It had been months, and I was still pining after this man. I didn’t understand why God was allowing me to go through this. It was like I was grieving our relationship and what it had the potential of being. I was so childish and naïve.

I was literally daydreaming about us being a family. We’d have a destination wedding, and I would get pregnant a year later. We would live at his house since it was bigger than mine. Eventually, we would have up to four children that all looked like him. My dreams were crushed. However, I seemed to be in this loop pattern, where I was easily triggered. Everything from the sight of flowers to TV court shows had me feeling incomplete and lost in this world. I was trying to be strong and trudge forward, but it was hard. It took conscious effort.

The worst part about all of this, I knew if I were to see him, I would give him a hard time. I’d make him stand on his decision in my face, just like I did when we pulled him from his SUV. It didn’t help that he’d been all over the news. He was taking a leave of absence. So I didn’t have a clue of where he was.

Getting into my car, I drove to Dairy Queen to get a crispy chicken salad, then I

would head home. I had a lot of housework to do, plus I needed to check on my grandma. She was still coming over on Wednesdays to do my laundry, until yesterday. That wasn't like her to miss, especially without calling to let me know. My uniform shirt was at her house anyway. She'd picked it up from the cleaners for me a while back, and I never got it from her house.

I needed it tomorrow to wear to the board meeting. I was almost sure Bransford would be there. His off days started tomorrow, on what would be my last off day. Like AJ had said, I had better be prepared for the fight. While he would make the appointment, the council members would have to be convinced that I could handle the position better than Bransford.

After getting my salad, I made my way to Grandma's house. When I got there, I noticed her car wasn't in the garage. She always parked in her garage. That was strange. I got out and immediately smelled food. God bless it. She was cooking or had already cooked. I walked up the stairs to the back door and turned the knob to find it locked. She rarely locked the back door during the daytime.

She probably had a boyfriend! That had to be it! That was the only reason she would miss Wednesday at my house. I could hear her laughing, and then I heard a man's voice. I froze. That voice sounded a lot like Kyrie's. I heard his voice in my dreams. I would never forget it. With a shaky hand, I knocked on the back door.

It got extremely quiet, and I could hear footsteps walking in the opposite direction of the door. Then I heard them coming my way. I plastered a huge smile on my face as the door cracked open. "Woman, why are you cracking the door open like you're hiding?" I yelled.

She rolled her eyes and opened the door. She was still blocking the door though and said, "Hey, baby! To what do I owe this visit?"

“You didn’t come over yesterday. I was off, but you still normally come over anyway.” I frowned slightly. “Are you gonna let me in?”

“Umm... yeah. Come in.”

She seemed so damn nervous. “Grandma, I know you got a man in here. I heard y’all talking and laughing. Let me meet him.”

She seemed so nervous, and that only made me more nervous. “I don’t think it’s a good time for you to meet him, baby.”

“It’s okay, Grandma,” a male voice said.

I closed my eyes because I knew it was him. When I opened them, he was standing in front of me. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

Before he could answer, I realized this was probably where the police hid him out at. How convenient. I slowly shook my head and said, “Never mind. You don’t even have to answer that.” Turning to my grandma, I said, “I came to get my dress shirt. I have to go to the city council meeting tomorrow. AJ is going to appoint me fire chief at the meeting.”

My grandmother’s eyes widened. “Congratulations, sweetness! I’m so proud of you!”

She hugged me tightly as Kyrie stood there like he was in wet cement, staring at me. When my grandmother tried to pull away, my hair had gotten caught in one of the buttons of her shirt. Just that quickly, it had gotten good and tangled. I grabbed her hand and walked to the kitchen. Grabbing her shears, I cut it off.

Her mouth opened in shock. I’d been growing my locs for years. They hung to the middle of my back. My nose twitched, along with my lips as I cut off another one.

“Genesis! What are you doing?”

I frowned hard, holding in my emotions and cut every last one of them off, leaving only a couple of inches of hair. I went and got the broom and dustpan and swept it all up as she and Kyrie looked on in shock. After I dumped it in the trash, I said, “Let me go get my shirt.”

Walking right past him, I headed to the bedroom he was probably sleeping in and got the shirt from the closet. When I got back to the kitchen, I went to my grandmother and said, “I’ll see you later. I love you.”

“I love you too, baby. Good luck tomorrow.”

“Thanks.”

Before I could get to the door without acknowledging Kyrie, he called out my name. I spun on my heels and said, “Yes, Judge Patrick.”

I’d never seen a dark-skinned man turn red, but I swore he did at that moment. “Can we talk?”

“About what? I thought you made yourself clear the last time we talked. Has anything changed?”

“No. Nothing’s changed.”

“Then there’s nothing to talk about then. Enjoy your stay. I won’t say anything to anyone.”

I quickly got out of there before I completely lost my breath. He looked so good. Before I could get in my car, my grandmother was behind me. “Please don’t be upset,

Genesis.”

I turned to her and said, “I’m not. You weren’t supposed to say anything. I get it. I just wish he would have stayed put and not revealed himself. I have to go before my salad gets soggy.”

“Okay, baby.”

She backed away as I opened my door and got inside. The minute I pulled out of the driveway, tears fell down my cheeks. He was supposed to be my forever. How was I supposed to go on without him? Cutting my locs had to represent a new beginning. Our relationship was as dead as that hair on the floor was. Neither of us wanted to change what we believed in, and now I could only hope that holding on to our opinions was worth it.

“My appointment for fire chief for fire rescue station number nine is Genesis Farris,” AJ said.

The crowd gathered nearly exploded, some of them standing from their seats. It didn’t move me one bit. Bransford was seated there in his dress shirt, but he clearly wasn’t as decorated as me. I rubbed my hand down the back of my head, something I found myself doing repeatedly since I’d cut all my hair off.

Yesterday evening, I’d gone to a barber and had him even it out to make me look presentable instead of like a plucked chicken. When I’d walked in, his eyebrows had lifted. The sign said he took walk-ins, not miracles. Those were his first words to me. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but he let me know that he was joking and let out a laugh that caused me to laugh as well.

My hair was soft and had slight curls in it, so I supposed the constant rubbing was to make sure it wasn’t sticking up in the back. When he’d cut it, I was in awe. It made

me look almost like a younger version of Nicole Murphy. He laughed about it and asked if I was sure I had chosen the right career. I belonged on someone's runway, not in a burning building. I could only laugh at his analysis and promise him that I'd gotten it right.

When I arrived, people literally had to do a double take, not recognizing me at first sight. I looked different but not that different. I honestly believed they were probably shocked that I cut my hair. I was ready to get my Angela Bassett on and show them I meant business. Cutting my hair was only the beginning.

As I sat there calmly, watching things turn chaotic, I couldn't help but silently chuckle. Bransford was fuming. It was evident with his red face and balled fists. Once the council had gotten everything calm, they took a question from a concerned citizen.

"What qualifies her for this appointment over Matthew Bransford? He's been a firefighter for a year longer than her and has military experience."

AJ smirked and said, "Bransford, will you stand, sir?"

He did so with a frown on his face. I remained calm as he scowled at me. I wanted to smile, but I chose to keep my petty under wraps for now.

"Farris, will you also stand?"

I stood, once again sliding my hand down the back of my head.

"Will the two of you turn to the crowd?" After we did as he requested, he continued. "Bransford has military background, but yet, Farris is more decorated and has more honors than he does. She puts her life on the line in every circumstance. Bransford has gone on record not wanting to rescue some people because he said they were here

illegally. Does that mean they should die such a torturous death? We don't need someone like that leading our firefighters. We need someone who will look out for all people, no matter their race, gender, social class, or even immigration status."

The room seemed extremely quiet and somewhat embarrassed. Bransford seemed extremely small in this moment. I'd given AJ that information. It was documented because he'd gotten written up for it. Even with that, our former chief had endorsed Bransford to be chief, because he said I wasn't equipped to lead. I was too soft. When I read his statement, I was pissed. Time and time again, he'd congratulated me on a job well done, when I'd run into buildings Bransford had refused to go into.

People could be so blatantly cruel, unfair, and biased. What normal human couldn't see that I was better for the job? An effective leader led by example. How could he or she expect their team to go above and beyond if they didn't? It would be pure audacity to even require a thing. A good team reflected good leadership.

"The two of you may be seated. My appointment stands."

I hated that Bransford had all these supporters here, but I had no one. I didn't invite my mother or brother, and my grandmother was busy babysitting, no doubt enjoying it. They seemed to be having an amazing time until I arrived.

AJ gave the floor to the members of the council. The first one said, "I agree with the appointment to have Genesis Farris as fire chief of station number nine."

The crowd grumbled. There were five others that had to vote. Three of them had voted for Bransford to my two. I still kept my head high with a slight smile on my face. We only had two more to go. If only one voted for Bransford, it would be a done deal. My heart was racing, because I thought the council would see right through his facade. He was an imposter. He wasn't loyal to the citizens of Beaumont. He picked and chose who he wanted to protect.

The next member agreed with my appointment, so it all came down to the last one. Everyone seemed to be sitting on the edge of their seats. He stood from his seat and stared at the both of us. “Bransford, what do you feel qualifies you for this position?”

He stood from his seat with his chest poked out like the man asking the question was his commanding officer. I wanted to roll my eyes so bad. He irritated me to no end. I really wished Micah could have been here to really talk about the kind of person he was.

“I have experience dealing with all types of trauma. I have experience with being in high-intensity situations without panicking. I know how to approach those types of situations with a logical plan. I don’t just run in without analyzing the situation. Besides rescuing people, I have to make sure my team won’t get hurt in the process.”

Oh, he wants to throw slugs. I glanced at him as he smirked at me. He could kiss my big ass if he thought he was intimidating me. The councilman nodded then turned his attention to me. He nodded politely then said, “Farris, same question.”

“In order to have a great team, you need to have a great leader. I’m not a dictator. I lead by example. I have a passion for helping people. I’ve started a couple of initiatives to make sure that we show up for the people of this community... not just when there is a crisis or accident. I already lead in a way that is natural and not forced. I have the respect of my team because I extend the same respect. I’m qualified because I’m me. I’m human, flawed just like the next person, but I find ways to overcome. That’s what sets me apart. I don’t just talk and demand. I do. That’s the type of leadership we need.”

Surprisingly, there were a few handclaps. The councilman took his seat with a slight smile on his face.

He stared down at some papers for a while, then he said, “I agree with the

appointment. I believe Genesis Farris will make a fine fire chief.”

AJ smiled, and I beamed. Bransford stood and left without a look in my direction. He was pissed, and I could only assume he would want to be transferred. I didn’t think he would go as far as I was willing to go by relocating, but he was surely going to want to be at another fire station. What he needed to realize was no matter where he went, I outranked him. If we ever ended up at the same location, I would still be his superior.

Members of council left their seats to shake my hand and applaud me on a job well done. When they left, I felt an arm slide around my shoulders. When I turned and saw my brother, I hugged him tightly.

“Why didn’t you tell me this was today? You know I would’ve been here. The lieutenant told me he saw you coming in here all decked out.”

I smiled big. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t want to disrupt y’all’s day.”

“Mama and Grandma are going to be pissed.”

I lowered my head for a moment. When I lifted it to look at him, he smiled and pulled me in his arms again. “I’m so proud of you. Daddy would be proud too.”

Neither of us really remembered much about him, especially Samuel, but we knew enough secondhand stories to know that he wanted what was best for us, whatever that may have looked like. He loved his babies. However, to see me follow in his footsteps and become fire chief at such a young age would have him beaming with his chest stuck out.

He released me and said, “We have to go to a celebratory dinner tonight. I’m gonna call Mama and Grandma.”

“Not tonight, brother. Maybe another time.”

Suddenly, I wasn't as happy as I was in the beginning. All I could think about was Kyrie. This was a moment I would have wanted to share with him, but here I was, feeling all alone while surrounded by family that loved me.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

I was lying here staring at the walls that adorned pictures of family, wishing I could be a part of something so rich in love. Grandma Jean had gone to water aerobics and promised to bring lunch back. I couldn't think about lunch right now. I was still stuffed from breakfast. She'd made buttermilk pancakes that were thick as a mattress, scrambled eggs, grits, and bacon. I couldn't even think about eating another thing. After eating three of those pancakes, it was a done deal.

I fiddled with my phone, wanting to reach out to Genesis. After she showed up here a week ago, I felt depressed, no matter how crazy Grandma had started acting, trying to get me out of the funk I was in. Nothing was helping my mood. I just wanted to be with Genesis. When I saw that she'd been appointed fire chief, my heart longed to be there with her, congratulating her right along with everyone else.

When Grandma told me she declined a celebratory dinner that night, I knew it was because she was longing for me. She wanted to celebrate with me. I could feel that from way across town. Finally, I typed her number in my text message app and started with my message.

Hi, Genesis. This is Kyrie. I just wanted to say congratulations. That position is well-deserved. I know you will do a great job and prove all the naysayers wrong. I'm extremely proud of you.

I sent the message and quickly wanted to unsend it. She could come back at me in the pettiest way imaginable, but at this point, I just wanted her to communicate. I didn't care how she chose to do so. When my phone rang, I sat up in the bed, hoping it was her, only to see my mother's name and picture. She was FaceTiming me. We typically did that since I couldn't see her. This shit was getting old.

When the screen came up, I said, “Hey, Ma.”

“Hey, baby. How are you?”

“Tired of being cooped up. The detectives are supposed to be coming by to update me later.”

“Well, hopefully, they have good news for you.”

“Yeah, Ma. I’m tired... tired of being cooped up watching life pass me by. At least when I was going to work, I felt like I was making a difference.”

“I know, baby. I hate to see you this way. It’s like you’re only a shell of the person you used to be. I don’t like that. How’s everything else going though? Are you eating good?”

“If I’m not doing anything else, I’m definitely eating good. The host cooks well and always makes sure I’m stuffed to the gills.”

She chuckled. “Well, that’s good then. Just try to keep your spirits up, baby. I needed to see your face to make sure you weren’t starving. I love you so much. Do you need anything?”

“Thanks, Mama. I love you too. I don’t need anything. Are you taking care of yourself?”

“Yeah. I’ve been eating well and exercising. It’s not like I can cook for you. So I don’t cook much at all. I mainly do frozen dinners. I’ve lost five pounds.”

“You don’t need to lose weight, Mama. You’re not a big woman. Eat a lot of protein. Get the Atkins frozen dinners. They’re actually really good. When I tried one, I didn’t

have to add seasoning to it at all.”

“Okay. I’ll check those out, baby. I just miss you.”

“I know you do. Just try not to worry.”

“Kyrie, people are trying to kill my only son. I’m going to naturally be worried.”

“But I’m safe, Ma. Okay? A cop patrols the area every thirty minutes, looking for anything suspicious. As long as I get to talk to you, I’ll be good. You help keep me sane. My host is very gracious and definitely tries to keep me entertained, whether we’re playing dominoes or watching movies.”

“Okay. I’ll try to calm down, but that won’t be an easy feat. I’ll try to call later.”

“Okay.”

We ended the call, and I noticed that the pictures on the wall were in the background. Shit. Hopefully she didn’t notice them. If she did, she would definitely call Ms. Farris to find out where her mother lived. I checked my text messages to see if Genesis had replied, and there was nothing. I let out the breath I seemed to be holding in anticipation, then went to my laptop. I had been piecing some things together on my own that Detective Johnson was sending me.

So far, there were discrepancies with what the DA said in his opening statements. He’d said that Darlene Doll had single-handedly destroyed Beaumont’s infrastructure. That she had come in and brought her theories and illegal activities to a distinguished office of law. He also said that she was padding receipts. While she did most of those things, there were quite a few receipts that weren’t signed off by her.

Upon closer inspection, I could see that her signature looked different on almost every receipt and invoice. Had her defense attorney done his job efficiently, he would have noticed that. Then again, he probably noticed, but Darlene wouldn't allow it. She was supposed to take the fall had something like this happened. Who was the whistle blower? Someone had dropped the ball. Whether that was intentional or not would be what we had to figure out.

I checked my report about my security and staying with Grandma Jean and noticed there were some similarities with one of Darlene's signatures and Lieutenant Gamble's. I frowned slightly and pulled up both documents side by side. Fuck! They were the same. I probably wasn't safe here at all. I'd have to keep this under wraps until I knew more though. I slid my hand down my face as I continued to search to see just how many documents had a signature that resembled his.

By the time Grandma had gotten back, I'd found nearly ten documents that looked like his handwriting, where he'd forged Darlene Doll's signature. I couldn't believe this woman took the ultimate one for the team. This was insane. She was definitely getting a hell of a kickback. I went up front to see what she'd brought back for lunch to see sub sandwiches on the table, along with bags of chips and sodas.

I really didn't drink soda, but whatever. I'd probably gained fifteen pounds here. I had just started working out a bit, doing sit-ups, pushups, and jumping jacks. I didn't have weights to lift, so I would just have to work on cardio. Hopefully, I wouldn't be here too much longer. I almost didn't understand the point of me being here. I knew they didn't know who to trust, but it seemed as if one of the people we were trusting was working for the opposing team. Something was off, and I wouldn't stop researching until I found the missing pieces.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, so I pulled it out to see a text from Genesis. It was a generic and simple response. Thank you.

I stared at it for a while. I wanted to say more, but if all she had to say was ‘thank you’ to what I’d already said, then she probably wouldn’t respond to anything else. The crazy part about all of this was that I knew we wouldn’t be together while all of this was going on. I slowly shook my head, then suddenly slammed my phone to the floor.

Grandma Jean came running from the back and saw my phone on the floor. Although my gaze was trained on the table, I could see her in my peripheral. “Baby, is everything okay?”

I took a deep breath and looked up at her. “My life is all screwed up, and there ain’t shit I did to deserve it. So how do I get over it? How do I move on from it?”

“The problem is that you keep running from it, baby. Genesis already knows you’re here. Stop being stubborn and talk to her. Let her know your boundaries, and I’m more than sure she will respect them... if they aren’t outrageous or something that will make her feel like she’s living in the seventies.”

She chuckled, and I smiled slightly. Maybe she was right. Maybe she wasn’t. There was only one way to find out. I glanced at her as I opened the sub sandwich. “Thank you for lunch. I have a question though.”

“Okay.”

“What did you think had happened in here?”

“Well, I just heard the loud crash, so I thought someone had broken in.”

“And just what were you going to do without a weapon, Grandma? Wrestle them?”

She fell out laughing then pushed me in the head. “Hush up! Don’t be

underestimating hammer number one and hammer number two,” she said, holding up her fists.

I laughed so hard I choked from my own saliva.

“That’s what you get for messing with me!”

We laughed more as she sat across from me to eat her sandwich. “So what are you going to do about your track meet?”

I frowned for a moment until I figured out what she was talking about. I rolled my eyes as she laughed more. “Ha, ha. Funny, funny. I’m going to use that car they left me for emergencies, and I’m going to that firehouse to see her.”

“You will do no such thing.”

“So getting Genesis back isn’t an emergency?”

“No, it’s not. That girl ain’t going nowhere. You willing to risk your life for her?”

“I don’t have a life without her.”

“Well, shit! You better say that then! My granddaughter hit the jackpot!”

I slowly shook my head as I took a bite of my sandwich. This woman, along with my mother, had been my sanity. She spoke life into me and kept me laughing as well. I couldn’t let another moment pass without getting to Genesis. Once I finished my sandwich, I was about to contact Detective Johnson to let her know I was leaving when my phone was vibrating with a call from her.

I was surprised that shit still worked as hard as I slammed it to the floor. I frowned

slightly then answered. “Hello?”

“Judge Patrick,” she whispered.

I frowned harder. Why in the hell was she whispering? “What’s going on?”

“I have reason to believe the lieutenant is in on this... proof.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“So my guess is you still aren’t safe at the safe house. I hate this shit. I have to go. I’ll call you when I leave the office.”

She ended the call, and I slid my hand down my face. All this was becoming a lot, but it only made me more determined to get my life in order before I didn’t have a life to worry about. Before going to Genesis, I needed to get to my mama and let her know what was going on. I looked over at Grandma Jean and said, “Listen to me. I need you to get out of here. Go to Miss Gabriella’s house. It’s not safe here.”

“What? Why wouldn’t it be safe here?”

“Grandma Jean, I don’t have time to answer questions. Please just go. Okay?”

“O-okay, baby.”

She grabbed her sandwich and wrapped it back in the wrapper it came in then got her purse and keys. I went to the room I was sleeping in and went to get my keys as well. We quickly made our way outside. “What are you going to do, Kyrie?”

“I don’t know yet, but I have to get to my mama.”

“Okay. Please be careful,” she said as she surveyed her surroundings.

I got in the black Explorer they provided me with and used the control Grandma Jean had given me the first week I was here to open the garage door. When I pulled out, I could see her sitting at the end of the driveway. I supposed she was waiting to make sure I would be able to get out, because she took off afterward. I made my way to MLK Parkway to get to my mama’s house. This was getting so deep, and I could already see it would be a tangled web Johnson and I would have to figure out. We’d discovered a crucial part though. I didn’t know what type of evidence she’d found, but it had to be more damning.

I turned left on MLK, and as I approached the intersection with Calder, I saw a large SUV speeding in my direction. I was hoping with my life that they’d adhere to the traffic signal. Since I had the green light, I kept going, but that red light didn’t deter them. They slammed into the back of my vehicle, causing me to spin out of control and flip a few times.

My heart was racing as the Explorer continued to flip. I thought this would be it. My entire life had flashed before my eyes. I now knew what that statement meant. Visions of my father leaving for the airport to me banging my gavel at Darlene Doll’s trial had crossed my mental rolodex. When the vehicle stopped flipping, my middle ached with a pain that was nearly unbearable. It hurt to breathe. It didn’t help that the vehicle decided to stop flipping upside down. I unbuckled the seat belt and fell from the seat, causing me to groan in pain.

“Sir, are you okay?” someone yelled out.

“Call... an ambulance.”

They stooped next to the window where I was and continued to talk to me. “We did. We dialed nine-one-one. The police and paramedics are on their way. The other SUV

kept going. Someone took off behind them to try to get their plate number.”

“Thank you.”

I was doing my best to breathe normally, but that hurt like hell. I had to take short, shallow breaths. When I heard the fire truck siren, I was somewhat relieved. Just like Detective Johnson had said, Grandma Jean’s wasn’t safe. They were watching me. For me to leave the house, they had to know that I knew something. How though?

This was getting more and more dangerous. I would have to get my mama out of here. She didn’t need to remain out here and get caught up in the crossfire.

“Get away from the SUV!” someone yelled, causing the good Samaritan to flee.

Right after, I started to feel a little heat. Dear Jesus. The vehicle was on fire. Someone else appeared in the window, and when I saw Genesis, I started shaking my head. “Get away... from here, Genesis!”

“Now isn’t the time to be a self-absorbed, insecure jackass. Let me help you, Judge Patrick.”

Judge Patrick. Less than three months ago, she was screaming my name for the entire neighborhood to hear. By the time we were done, everyone on the block knew my first name was Kyrie.

I grabbed her hand as I coughed. Just that action hurt like hell. Whoever this was didn’t play fair. The element of surprise couldn’t keep working on me this way. I knew they were after me, but they still managed to catch me off guard, striking at the most inopportune times. I knew they were coming for me, but I didn’t expect it to happen this soon.

“God, you’re heavy. How many carbs have you been eating for the past few weeks?”

I huffed as she pulled me from the burning car. She picked a great time to joke around. “Genesis, please...”

I couldn’t get the full sentence from my lips because she turned me on my back, hooked her arms underneath mine, and started dragging me at a much faster pace. She was backpedaling just as fast as I could power walk. That was impressive, especially with her full uniform on and pulling my 240-pound frame. Just as we got to what I thought was a safe distance, the SUV exploded, knocking Genesis off her feet. She immediately laid her body on top of mine, shielding me from debris that could possibly threaten my safety.

I found myself staring into her eyes, reminiscing about the last time I was with her. When all seemed to settle down, she slid off my body. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. Thank you for saving me once again. I could have been killed.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know why you won’t admit you need me. Stop being so insecure about a woman rescuing you. Would you have preferred a man slide his body on top of yours?”

I gave her a slight smile and pulled her to me, not worrying about who was watching, and hugged her tightly, despite the pain. When she tried to pull away, I kissed her lips, allowing her to see that I would try to put my reservations about us to the side and just go with what I knew I felt for her.

“Now isn’t the time for public displays of affection, Judge Patrick. However, you can call me later to invite me to a thank you dinner. Remember, I like seafood,” she said as the paramedics approached.

I wanted to laugh, but my chest was killing me. When I coughed, it felt like something popped loose. I groaned as she grabbed my hand. The worried expression on her face didn't do a thing for my nerves.

“I was only joking. Despite how you ghosted me because of your pitiful feelings, I still care about you. I don't want to see you die from this, Kyrie. Until they find out who is after you, let me be here. It doesn't make you any less masculine. I'm a firefighter first when it comes to trauma of this nature. Let me exercise the training they put me through to save you.”

I closed my eyes and nodded. “You're right, Firefighter Farris.”

She released my hand with a smirk on her gorgeous lips and moved out of the way so the paramedics could do their jobs. I couldn't keep fighting against her and my innermost feelings. Deep down, I wanted her in my life, and I was blessed that after what I put her through that she still wanted to be in it too.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

I paced back and forth at the hospital, waiting to get news on how Kyrie was doing. When we got the call, a horrible feeling hit my gut. I wasn't sure where he was going or why, but whoever was watching him had known he was at Grandma's house for them to catch up with him so soon after leaving.

He told me he'd just left her house and was heading to his mother's house. I didn't know what was going on, but hopefully, he would enlighten me. The doctor approached me and said, "He had a couple of broken ribs that we had to reset and repair. The man is strong. That vehicle flipped several times. He also has some lacerations from the glass cutting him, along with a concussion. We're going to keep him here for a couple of days for observation."

I released the breath I was holding. Just because he seemed okay and only a little banged up, that didn't mean that all was okay internally. I was worried about him. "When can I see him?"

"In another hour or so."

"Thanks, Doctor Clark."

Finally, I sat in a chair in the waiting room. I had been pacing for nearly three hours. Kyrie had said not to let his mom come to the hospital but for her to get out of town as soon as possible. That made me nervous for my mama and grandma. If things weren't safe, maybe they should leave, too, since Kyrie's last known location was at my grandmother's house.

I grabbed my phone and called Ms. Carolyn. She answered on the first ring, sounding

completely panicked. “Genesis, is he okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. He’ll be fine. He has a couple of broken ribs, a few lacerations from all the glass, and a concussion. They are going to keep him here for a couple of days to monitor him.”

As I talked to her, listening to her try to keep it together, I noticed a detective approaching me. “Miss Carolyn, let me call you back. I need to speak with a detective.”

“Okay. Please, call me right back, Genesis.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I ended the call and stood, staring at the lady as she approached. “Hello, I’m Detective Johnson. Is he gonna be okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I wasn’t sure what to reveal to her, because at this point, I didn’t know who could be trusted. Someone in the system was dirty, and for all I knew, it could be her.

“Can we sit?”

I nodded and sat back in the chair I was in. She glanced at me and said, “I really like the haircut, Chief.”

“Thank you.”

She nodded. “I called him with some information I found out. He apparently had found something as well, because we’re suspecting involvement from the same

person. He knew he wasn't safe at Grandma Jean's. That's the only reason I could think that he would leave."

I nodded as I tried to think of all the people that were supposed to be investigating this case. "I'll be able to see him in an hour or so. Are you going to hang around?"

"Yes," she said as she tensed slightly.

I looked up to see the lieutenant approaching us. "Why in the hell did he leave the safe house?"

"I don't know," she answered calmly. "We haven't been able to see him yet."

"Hello, Chief. Congratulations again on your position. I'm Lieutenant Gamble."

I nodded. "Hello. I'm familiar, sir."

Detective Johnson stood and said, "We'll be right back."

I nodded as I watched them walk away. She glanced back at me. I was sure she was communicating something. I just wasn't sure what. It definitely had to do with Lieutenant Gamble. There was no way I could let Kyrie continue to deal with these people alone. He'd already gotten into two accidents, survived a drive-by, and survived a fire. The next attempt, he may not be so lucky.

After his text message earlier, my heart was soft. Although I'd only responded with a simple thank you, my heart wanted to say so much more. It wanted to ask him if his pride was greater than our love.

It wanted to ask him if what we had was worth losing over a disagreement.

It wanted to ask him if there was some sort of agreement we could come to and meet each other in the middle.

I'd had other relationships in the past, but he and I had something so special. The way I felt for him in such a short amount of time was overwhelming. I was only twenty-seven years old, but I couldn't see myself with anyone but him. He'd gotten my soft nurturing side... a side I barely knew even existed anymore. She didn't come out of hiding easily, but with him, because of how we met, she was front and center from day one.

As I sat, waiting to see Kyrie, I received a text from a fellow firefighter. Chief, when are you coming back? Bransford is walking around here getting on everyone's nerves about how he should be running the place and how you'll eventually mess up. I'm ready to punch him right in his hating ass lips.

I took a deep breath. I just knew Bransford would have put in his transfer by now. He was hanging around, seemingly to make everyone miserable. I had been at training class at the Downtown fire station all week. So they hadn't seen me but for a couple of hours a day. However, he didn't know me as well as he thought. I would make him just as miserable. I responded to the text message.

Next week, I will be back full time, and I promise, he will hate every minute of it. He hates taking orders, especially from me. We will talk when I get back.

He sent the smiling devil emoji, and I chuckled. I'd never seen a firefighter more disliked than Bransford. Now my chief said a guy named Oscar Monroe was the fire chief before him, and he was hell on wheels. He said he was hell on wheels before he even became chief. More women came to that fire station than a few, and he was a married man. I could only shake my head at that revelation. I prayed that I would never have to deal with a man with wandering eyes. If Kyrie and I could work through our differences, I would probably never have to deal with such blatant

disrespect.

“Chief?”

I turned to see a nurse beckoning me over to her. I quickly stood and made my way to her. “It hasn’t been an hour yet, but he’s awake and asking for you. The procedure was short and only done to stabilize the bones. If nothing else pops up, he will be good to go,” she said as I followed her to the back.

“What about the lacerations? How bad were they?”

“He had one in his arm that was pretty deep. They cleaned it out real good. There was still glass in it. So he has stitches there and in another spot on his leg. The others were all minor and will heal in time.”

I nodded. When she got to where he was in recovery, I could see him lying still and staring straight ahead. He was propped up with quite a bit of pillows. I made note of that so I would know how to take care of him and how he should be taken care of when I couldn’t be there.

When he looked over and saw me, he gave me a tight smile. The nurse smiled at him and asked, “Is this beautiful lady who you wanted?”

“Yeah. Thanks,” he said softly.

I went to his bedside and slid my hand in his. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he replied. “I like your cut. It’s beautiful on you.”

I smiled and ran my hand down the back of my head. “Thank you.”

“You’re blushing.”

I rolled my eyes and tried to step away from him, but he wouldn’t release my hand. When I stared into his eyes, he said, “I missed you. I thought I was protecting you. I’m sorry I broke your heart. Please let me try to fix it.”

I lowered my gaze to our hands and softly caressed his with my thumb. Looking back up at him, I said, “I’m a firefighter, Kyrie. I’ll try to remember to tone down my protective instincts when we’re together, but it’s who I am. I save people.”

“I understand, Genesis. I just need you to understand me. In no circumstance do I want you putting your life on the line for mine. Saving me today and from the burning building, I get it. That’s your job. However, when shots rang out at Some Other Place was a totally different ball game and out of your scope of expertise. In situations like that, I need you to be protected, not the protector. I love you. I will never be able to accept you laying down your life for me to have mine.”

I lowered my head again and nodded. “I understand.”

“Is that something we can compromise on?”

“I don’t know. I’ll let you know when I finally get my seafood dinner.”

A slow smile made its way to my lips as I leaned over and kissed his. Heat went through my body, just as it had done earlier, when his lips touched mine. When I pulled away, I said, “I missed and love you too.”

He finally released my hand so I could sit in the chair next to him. “So, I know you don’t plan to leave me in the dark about what happened, but Detective Johnson is out there, and she seemed a little tight when the lieutenant arrived. She was talking to him privately when I came back here. They will probably be making their way back

before long. So is there something you can tell me about what happened?”

He nodded. I knew he really didn’t want to talk about it, since he had been so tight lipped about it before. Things were getting more intense, and if I was his woman, I needed to know what was going on so I could be aware of what or who I needed to look out for. Plus, my grandmother could possibly be a target for whoever was after him.

As my mind raced, before he could say a word, I said, “Oh shit.”

“Oh shit, what?” he asked.

“For them to be using my grandmother as a safe house, one of two things has to be true. Jesus Christ. Samuel has to be in on this. My daddy will turn flips in his grave if he is. If he isn’t involved in the corruption, he’s being blackmailed or forced to cooperate. How else would they know to use my grandmother’s house unless Samuel introduced them to her? It’s just so random that they used her. They used her before, but they know we had something going on... I mean, it just all seems so coincidental, along with Samuel’s disdain for us dating.”

“Shit,” he said breathlessly.

We were both quiet as we allowed the information I’d just spewed to settle into our minds. “Why would Samuel get involved in this? I mean, if he needed money, he could have come to me or Mama. My mother got compensated handsomely when Daddy was killed. She invested a lot, too, and that only made her more money. He knows that. She would have gladly helped him. I just don’t understand it.”

Kyrie coughed then groaned. I could imagine that would hurt with fractured ribs. He brought his hand to them as the nurse came inside. “You okay, Judge?”

“Yes. I just coughed.”

“Ooooh, I know that’s painful. I’m sorry.”

She gave him a tight smile, and he did the same to her as I watched her fumble with the ice packs in her hands. “We have to ice your ribs for fifteen to twenty minutes to keep the swelling down. You’ll have to do this for at least the next week. The doctor may recommend longer. After that time has passed, you’ll be able to use heat.”

Kyrie nodded then winced as she laid the ice packs on him. “Start that timer immediately,” he said.

She chuckled. “I started it before I put them on you. So you’ll get a fifteen-second advantage. Once I take these off, you’ll be getting transported to a room. You have people waiting to see and talk to you.”

He nodded as she left us alone again. I stared at him for a moment and asked, “Where will you stay?”

“Probably my house. There’s no point in going back to Grandma Jean’s house.”

“Oh, so you’ve adopted my grandma as yours?”

“Absolutely. She’s a fun time. I had to beat her ass in dominoes for her to calm down a bit.”

I laughed and lightly clapped. My grandmother thought she was a master of dominoes. Unless you could beat her, you would never have her respect. I ran my hand down the back of my head again as I questioned myself about what I was about to say. We’d just gotten back together, and I was ready to dive all the way back in. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my insides. The way my body was trembling, it

was like I was about to ask him to marry me.

“Just say it, baby,” he said.

I looked at him to find him staring at me. “I umm...”

“Genesis, why are you nervous? I know we just got back together, but I was hoping we would just be picking up from where we left off and not starting over. Tell me, baby.”

Although I knew he was talking softly because he was in pain, he sounded so sexy. My body didn’t even care that he was injured. It was still filled with desire. “I was going to offer my place. You can stay with me if you want to.”

He smiled slightly. “I want to, but I think my house is best. My mama can come and go as she needs to, because I know she didn’t leave town. She’s so hardheaded.”

“She’s worried about you. She wants to come up here so bad.”

“Yeah, I know. Can you call her so I can talk to her?”

“Yeah.”

I dialed her number, and she answered immediately, not bothering to say hello. “Is everything okay? How’s my baby?”

“He’s in recovery and doing fine, Miss Carolyn.”

I put the phone on speaker just as she said, “Kyrie wanted me to leave, but he has to be out of his mind if he thinks I’m going to abandon him. He’ll just have to get over it and accept that he has some strong, loyal women who will tear this raggedy ass city

up when it comes to him.”

I laughed as Kyrie extended his hand so I could give him the phone. “Woman, tone all that down.”

“Oh, thank God. Baby, I was so worried. To hell with what you say. I’m coming up there.”

“Mama, there are seriously people trying to get at me. You don’t think they may try to get to you to get me?”

“Absolutely not. To hell with those people. You’re my baby. You are not the boss of me. I’m the boss, Kyrie Jameel Patrick. Do you hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah. I hear you.”

“Excuse me? Don’t play with me, boy.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said as I snickered.

He side-eyed me as I did my best to hold in my laughter.

“That’s better. Don’t have me whupping your butt in front of my daughter-in-law.”

I had to be red because my face heated up tremendously. Kyrie turned to me, staring at me. There wasn’t a smile in sight. “Never that, Ma. I wouldn’t dare let you embarrass me in front of your daughter-in-law.”

That did nothing for my emotions. My eyes watered as my body trembled. Kyrie was mine again. I wasn’t for the back and forth, so I hoped he would take the time to talk to me before acting. I was only allowing one comeback. Yeah right.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

There was no way I could take another day of soup. Day one, tomato soup. Day two, beef soup. Day three, chicken noodle soup. Day four, potato soup. Day five, taco soup. Day six, broccoli cheddar soup. Day seven, vegetable soup.

I was in the hospital for two days for observation. There was no internal bleeding or any other complications, so they sent me home. My mama had been cooking a different soup every day and freezing what I didn't eat to rotate it again next week. If I saw another bowl of soup, I was going to throw a temper tantrum like a kid. There was no way she could think that was helping. Granted, the first day, I was still a little nauseated from the pain meds. However, after that, I was ready for a real meal.

Genesis seemed to think the shit was funny. The only thing that saved me was the daily breakfast from Grandma Jean. Genesis brought it over every morning before going to work. The past week had gone by in a blur. It wasn't much different from being confined to Grandma Jean's place. Genesis had gotten my things from her house and brought them here my second day back. I started back with where I left off in my investigation yesterday.

After Gamble questioned me about why I left Grandma Jean's house, I believed he knew that I knew something. I wouldn't give him straight answers. That wasn't a good thing. One thing that I wasn't good at was lying. I was a horrible liar, which was why I was always in trouble as a kid. My mama would stare at me after I told her a lie, and I would end up fessing up before she could even verbalize that she already knew I was lying.

Johnson had been texting me daily to see how I was doing, letting me know she was still digging to try to find something that would stick. I was looking over paperwork

to see if I could somehow connect Samuel to all of this. I was hoping I couldn't. Genesis looked to be on the verge of tears just verbalizing what she thought may have been going on. Johnson had access to camera footage, though, so hopefully, she would find something questionable that led us in the right direction.

Lieutenant Gamble was pissed that I'd gone home. He was playing his role well. That was clearly his handwriting on those documents. According to other business documents, Darlene Doll's signature was bigger and was sort of like bubble letters in a way. This was noticeably different, and I wasn't sure how it went through as many hands as it did without anyone questioning it.

As I sat in the bed, propped up on pillows, I decided to let my mind rest for a moment. I'd been at this nearly all day, stopping only to eat, and we were approaching dinnertime. I hadn't heard from Genesis since lunchtime, but she'd been busy this week, asserting her authority. One guy at work was giving her problems because he was trying to get the appointment. He'd already tried to start mess about the mayor pro tem being biased because he and Genesis went to the same church.

He had a few people following his stance, but for the most part, the people that could make a difference didn't care to listen to his outrage. So, basically, he was having a meltdown because he couldn't have his way.

"You ready for some more soup?"

I rolled my eyes as my mama stepped inside my bedroom. "Mama, I cannot tolerate another bowl of soup. I need some food. I'm going to go get it myself in just a minute."

"Kyrie, you know I'm not letting you leave this house. Don't say I can't stop you either. You're wounded, and I have a belt that I will swing like a whip. You gon' eat what I fix you. I don't want to hear another word about it."

She walked out of the room and slammed the door, leaving me with my mouth hanging open. I couldn't believe she was treating me like this. I literally wanted to call for help. I grabbed my pill bottles from the nightstand, preparing to take them and be sick because I didn't have enough substance on my stomach, when the door reopened.

I wanted to have an attitude, but I checked myself before she came into the room. Something smelled like barbeque though. If she'd found a way to make a damn barbeque soup, I was gonna go off. When Genesis walked in with a brown bag, instead of my mama, I wanted to hop up from the bed and pick her up and spin her around in joyful jubilation. Apparently, my relief was evident on my face because she laughed.

My mama was right behind her with a smile on her face. "Relax, grumpy. I asked her to go to Charlie's Barbeque to get you some food. I talked to your doctor, and he assured me you could eat food... since whenever you could tolerate it. I'm sorry. I just wanted to be careful and not make you sicker."

When Genesis got close, I nearly snatched that bag out of her hand without speaking. "Hey, baby."

"Hey."

I kissed her lips then immediately reached for the bag. She bit her bottom lip, trying to stifle her laughter as my mama rolled her eyes and left the room. Genesis grabbed the bed table she'd bought for me and set it up across my lap. I didn't care if I had a table or not. I would have barbeque sauce all over the bed and go to sleep just like that without issue. At least I would be full and happy.

Genesis took the bag from me and pulled out a couple of containers. "That smells so good."

“I know. I felt for you when you kept saying she would only give you soup. When she called me to pick up some food from Charlie’s, I told God thank you.”

“My sentiments exactly when you walked in with that brown paper bag. I thought she’d found a way to make barbequed soup. I was annoyed as hell.”

She laughed, and it was the most beautiful sound. “I could tell by your initial facial expression. You looked over it, babe.”

I chuckled as I practically inhaled the link. “This is so good,” I said with my mouth full of food.

“Slow down before you give yourself heartburn or indigestion. Then you won’t be able to sleep tonight. Imagine having to throw up and not being able to move fast enough to get to the bathroom.”

“Point taken,” I said as I slowed my pace. “How was work?”

She huffed. “I had to write his ass up today. I couldn’t figure out why he wouldn’t just transfer. Then, I found out that there aren’t any openings to fill, and no one wants to switch locations with him. So now he’s saying that’s because no one wants to work under my leadership. I used my authority to write his ass up for insubordination, and he refused to sign it. So, of course, we now have to have a meeting with the highest-ranking chief. I’m technically a battalion chief. There are a few of us. I believe AJ will be in that meeting as well.”

“I hate you’re dealing with that. I don’t see the meeting going well for him though. AJ was against him from the beginning. What do you know about the big boss?”

“He doesn’t play games. Chief Carrier has been the chief for years. He’s seen a lot of people come and go. So I can’t see him agreeing with Bransford.”

I nodded and took another bite of my link. She started to eat her food as well. We made small talk about my day and how much I'd moved around today, when my phone rang. When I saw it was Detective Johnson, I quickly grabbed a napkin and wiped my fingers. "Hello?"

"You're at home, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm on my way over."

I took a deep breath and winced as I ended the call. "Johnson is on her way over. That can't be good." I looked at my fingers to see they were sticky. "Ugh."

Just as I was about to lick them, Genesis grabbed my hand and sucked one of my fingers. My eyes widened slightly as what was once dead stood straight up. She stared into my eyes as she did my next finger. "Genesis, maaaann, you gon' have me reinjuring myself. I don't know why you wanna play with me like this, knowing I can't do anything about what you just did to me."

"I can help you with that later if you think you can handle it."

"I already know I can't. I'll be taking deep breaths and panting, causing myself more pain for the sake of an orgasm. As soon as I can get at you, be ready though. You gon' have to take off work, because you won't be able to walk when I'm finished with you."

She giggled. "So what was the call about?"

"Johnson is on her way over. That's all she said. So whatever it is must be bad."

“Okay. Well, let me take my food to the kitchen so the two of you can have privacy to discuss things.”

I closed my eyes and said, “I want you to stay.”

When I reopened them, her eyes were wide. “What?”

“Stay.”

“Kyrie, I understand some things are classified.”

“Genesis, I trust you with my life. I want you in here with me.”

She smiled slightly and took another bite of her link. Deciding to pick with her, I said, “Plus, I know you’re nosy. You won’t be able to sleep tonight if I don’t give you a hint of what’s going on.”

“Hush your mouth,” she said, then laughed. “You’re right though.”

I chuckled slightly, doing my best not to laugh too hard to cause me pain. I ate more of my food then closed the container to save the rest for later. I drank a bottle of water and finished it off just as the doorbell was ringing. Genesis helped me get situated and removed my food from the bed table. Once she was done and about to take our leftovers to the kitchen, there was a knock on the door.

When she opened it, my mama was standing there with a seemingly frazzled Detective Johnson. She had a folder in her hands, and when I glanced at it, I could see her hands were trembling. My mama took the leftovers from Genesis and left the room, giving us privacy.

Detective Johnson glanced over at Genesis, as if waiting for her to leave as well, but I

said, "It's okay, Detective Johnson. She can stay."

"I told you to call me Stephanie. Are you sure?"

I nodded. She nodded in return and began by saying, "It's not Lieutenant Gamble."

I frowned. "That was his handwriting."

"I thought so, too, but I had it analyzed by an artist. The person who did this wanted their handwriting to look like his. They wanted to take him down unjustly, making it look like he was the one forging Darlene's signatures."

"Who would want to take him down?"

She glanced at Genesis again, and I knew this wasn't about to be good. "Samuel Farris."

Genesis stood from her seat and started pacing then went to the en suite bathroom and closed the door. "How did you figure it out?" I asked.

She handed me the folder. I opened it as she answered my question. "So while I was analyzing the signatures, he came to my desk to sign off on documents regarding an arrest he made. When I grabbed the paperwork, something in his signature stuck out to me. Gamble's first name is Scott. They sign their S's similarly, but Samuel's has an extra curve where Scott's is a little more pointed. I tried to ignore it, thinking I was overthinking things."

Looking through the folder, I could see that he and Gamble didn't have the greatest relationship. Samuel had been disciplined quite a few times, mostly for insubordination. There were complaints in his file from other cops as well as citizens, but somehow, he still had a job. I didn't understand why he hadn't been fired a long

time ago.

I looked up at Stephanie as she said, “My gut won, so I gave his signature to the artist to analyze, and he said that it matched all the records that we thought Gamble had signed. Samuel is a low man on the totem pole though. He’s only part of the battle. If I can get a warrant, maybe he will start talking.”

“Maybe. So why did he get Grandma Jean involved in his foolishness?”

She slid her hand over her face as Genesis came out of the bathroom. She probably should have stayed in there for this, because it didn’t look like Stephanie had any good news at this meeting. “She knew he was in trouble, as far as getting in trouble at work and financially as well. She asked him if there was anything she could do to help him get back in the department’s good graces. I don’t think she knows about the corruption, but I can’t be sure just yet.”

Genesis glanced at me, and I could tell she had been crying. “Is there anything I can do to help things along?” Genesis asked Johnson.

“If something comes up, I’ll let you know. In the meantime, I’m still handling Gamble gingerly. While we cleared him on this, it still doesn’t mean he’s totally innocent. I don’t want him to know more than what he has to know. That’s why I came over versus calling. I think my phone may be bugged.”

I slowly shook my head. “Is there anything else I can contribute?”

“Do you remember the case where the ex-marine assaulted a cop? I think you gave him like thirty years.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I have reason to believe that someone connected to him is helping out too. I think he’s the one who was leaving notes on your car and sending text messages. As soon as the phone company cooperates with us, I’ll be able to track it down. Have you connected any dots on your end?”

“No. I was actually trying to exonerate Samuel. So basically, he’s involved in this mess because he was having money issues.”

“Yes. His dedication to sabotage Gamble is personal, and technically, has nothing to do with this enterprise. I’m almost afraid to find out who else may be involved. Oh, and the good Samaritan got a plate number from the SUV that hit you. That car is registered to someone by the name of Brad Coler.”

I frowned slightly. “Why does that name sound familiar to me?”

Genesis’s eyes widened. She clearly knew who it was. “Who is it, baby?” I asked.

“The man that introduced you at the memorial in New York.”

I frowned hard. “What? He’s from Beaumont?”

“No. He lives in Virginia. I think Alexandria,” Johnson said.

I closed my eyes. That was where we were from and had lived before moving to Beaumont. What in the hell did he have to do with all this? This puzzle was getting more and more complicated the more we found out. Why was he involved in shit happening way out here if he didn’t live here? By his introduction of me at the memorial, I thought he had a personal issue with me, but I brushed it off because I didn’t know the man. Well, clearly, he knew me. I would have to spend the next few days getting acquainted with just who he was to level the playing field.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

I was devastated. I'd thrown myself into my work, trying to forget about the mess I'd heard about my little brother. Since my promotion, I was off on most weekends. However, I volunteered to work. I knew Kyrie could tell that information bothered me, but he allowed me time to work through it. Today, I would be going to his place to talk about everything.

I'd come to the office for a little bit to check on things and make sure I didn't have to tell Bransford a piece of mind, only to discover that he was off today. The revelations Detective Johnson spewed two days ago were affecting my memory, because it was all I could think about. This was one time I wished I would have allowed their conversation to be confidential. Knowing what I knew and not being able to say anything to anyone was tearing me to shreds. The fact that my grandma knew he was getting in trouble at work and didn't say a word to anyone made me wonder about just how much she knew.

I wasn't sure how Johnson had gotten my brother's file, but she seemed extremely nervous about it. It was like she was afraid of either how I would take what she had to say or something more. She and Kyrie ended up talking again yesterday while I was at work. I'd called to talk to him, and when he didn't answer, I'd called Ms. Carolyn. When she told me the detective had come back, I knew it had to be some things she needed to say to him without me being there.

As I signed off on an order form for new respirators, I heard the door open. It was probably shift change. I stood from my desk, and as I was making my way out of my office, Bransford was standing there, looking like he was ready to start some shit. I rolled my eyes and asked, "Can I help you?"

He extended his hand to me as I frowned and stared at it. “I wanted to apologize for the hard time I’ve been giving you. You got the appointment, and the council voted you in. I need to accept that and get over my feelings of being slighted. Of all the questionable characters that work for the city and county, I know you aren’t one of them. I signed the write-up, by the way.”

My frown eased somewhat, and I hesitantly shook his hand. I didn’t know what to make of his sudden change in attitude. It actually made me nervous. He gave me a tight smile and walked away. With everything that was going on, I couldn’t help but question his motives. When my phone rang, I once again retreated into my office. My brother’s name on the caller ID made me a little nervous as well. We talked at least three times a week, if not more, but he rarely called while I was at work. Doing my best to pretend nothing was wrong would be difficult.

“Hello?”

“What’s up, Chief? How’s it going?”

“Hey. It’s going. It’s been a relatively decent day, believe it or not.”

“What’s going on? You having issues with Bransford?”

I frowned slightly. I wasn’t sure how he knew that. “Stop thinking so hard, girl. You know he has a big mouth. He doesn’t mind voicing his disdain with not being appointed to the masses, even if that’s saying you aren’t qualified.”

I tried to relax, knowing that everyone probably knew about the issues I was having with Bransford. “Yeah, but today, he apologized. That caught me totally off guard.”

“That’s because I had a talk with him. He knew he wasn’t the best person for the job. Just because he had the endorsement of the previous chief didn’t qualify him. AJ

knew who the most qualified person was, and he appointed her... you.”

“Sam... please tell me what you said to him.”

“That doesn’t matter. As long as he fixed his shitty attitude, that’s all that matters.”

“I guess you’re right. How’s work going?”

“It’s going. I have to get my attitude in check more often than what I like, but it is what it is.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that. Just as I was about to ask, he said, “When you always have to address injustice and unfairness on your job, that isn’t a good thing, especially when you work in law enforcement. I applied to be a state trooper. So, hopefully, I get that position, and I won’t be jumping from the skillet to the frying pan.”

“Well, that’s great that you’re trying to move on. What type of injustices are you speaking of?”

“There you go... worried about me. Just with pay and assignments. I’ll be fine.”

“I’m your big sister. It’s my job to worry about you... along with Mama’s. We just want to be sure that you’re good.”

“I’m good. How are you and Judge Patrick?”

“We’re fine. Just going through the healing process. He’s tired of being cooped up in the house, but I think that’s what’s best for right now.”

“Yeah. All hands are on deck with locating the owner of the car that hit him. The man

seems to be in the wind.”

“Well, hopefully, y’all can track him down soon. Hopefully, it was just a hit-and-run and not connected to all this other foolishness,” I said, testing the waters.

I wanted to see if he would reveal anything he knew or even implicate his involvement unknowingly. He didn’t know that I knew anything, but with as smart as he was, he would probably figure I knew more than the average person because of my involvement with Kyrie. I wonder if he’s testing me to see what I know ...

“I can’t see this being random with everything that’s already going on. It’s like there’s a vendetta out for him. Someone wants him gone for whatever reason. They arrested the guy that was leaving the death threat notes on his car. Hopefully, they can get information out of him.”

“Yeah, I hope so. Well, brother, I have to get back to work. Will I see you at Mama’s house tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there. See you then.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you too, sis. Never forget that.”

He ended the call, leaving me questioning his last line. I couldn’t help but worry about him now. It was like he knew something was about to happen or that he was about to be exposed. I wondered if Detective Johnson had questioned him about something. Taking a deep breath, I gathered my things to call it a day and head to Kyrie’s house.

I needed to talk to him about how all of this was affecting me. I could barely focus on

anything else. He had a lot he was dealing with already, but I could tell that it was slightly bothering him that I hadn't been able to totally express myself to him. I had a bad habit of bottling things in at times, because, in my mind, I felt like people didn't want to hear it. They didn't truly care about your struggles, even if they were mental.

As I grabbed my purse, I decided that I would go see my friend first. Micah had been off work due to being on bed rest. She was threatening to go into labor way too early to say she was only twenty-two weeks along, so the doctor took her off her feet. She was nearly in her second trimester when she found out she was pregnant. I missed her already, and it had only been a couple of weeks since she'd been home. Just as I was getting to the door to leave, I heard someone say, "Chief."

I turned to see Bransford. While I wanted to roll my eyes, I gave him a concerned look. I knew he was only being this way because my brother had threatened him. I didn't know what was said, but it had to be pretty bad if it caused him to change his attitude.

When he approached me, he said, "I forgot to ask if I could be relieved of duty Monday. My wife is scheduled for a colonoscopy, and she'll need someone to drive her home."

"That's fine. Email me so there will be record of your request."

He nodded. "Thanks."

I did the same then left. My gut was telling me to be cautious about everything, and I didn't like how that felt. Any and everyone could be involved in what was going on with Kyrie, and until Johnson pieced things together, I needed to watch my back, front, and sides, because a hit could come from any direction. That fact had me slightly jumpy, and all I could do was pray that it wouldn't show tomorrow at my mama's house for Sunday dinner.

When I got to Kyrie's house, my nerves heightened. Talking about my issues with him shouldn't have been affecting me this way. He was the man I loved. Micah could tell something was bothering me as well, and I didn't know how to express it without giving too much away. She seemed to be doing fine, so I chose to focus on her and her health and delivering a healthy baby.

I got out of the car and felt the tremble that coursed through my body. Taking a deep breath, I headed to his back door just as the bottom fell out. It started pouring. Cats and dogs had nothing on what was coming from the sky. I quickly ran to the back, ducking under the covered patio. I huffed and wiped my eyes with my hands.

When I could focus, I saw Kyrie standing there with his walker, staring at me through the glass door. He was progressing quickly. Before long, he would only need the assistance of a cane. I smiled softly at him and made my way to the door. Once I was inside, I went to him and kissed his cheek. "Hey, baby. You look to be feeling good today."

"Hey. I'm feeling okay. I just need to move around. I gotta get back to work in the thick of things. The justice system needs me, girl."

I chuckled as I playfully rolled my eyes. He continued. "Plus, I could have taken full advantage of you in this state. We gotta get these wet clothes off of you. You know that would have led to other things. Two weeks isn't nearly long enough for me to be able to handle you like I want to."

"Right. I miss making love to you, Kyrie."

He moved closer to me and reached out to place his hand at my hip. Pulling me to him, he brought his other hand to the back of my neck. My breath seemed to get caught in my throat and refused to come out.

“You are so beautiful, Genesis. I really wish I could show you just how much I love you by making this body feel the excitement it excretes whenever I’m inside of it. However, I did the next best thing.”

I frowned slightly as he released me and turned to walk toward his dining room. That was when I smelled food. This man had to be the one if I missed the smell of food because I was distracted by his presence. After entering the room, I sucked in air. There were flowers everywhere with flickering candlelight. It was so beautiful. He smiled at me as I admired the room. The wooden dining table was set with covered plates sitting on their designated chargers.

I turned to him. “How did you do all this? It’s beautiful.”

“I got my mama to do it before she left. You deserve all this and more. I figured the least I could do is ease your soul by being the man you needed in this moment.”

“What man do I need in this moment?” I asked.

“A romantic, sensitive one. We both know I can be hard. I’m that way more than I’m soft. You need the man I was in New York, minus the alcohol.”

I smiled slightly as I went to the table and lifted the lid on the plate. When I saw the blackened fish, rice pilaf, broccoli, and baked potato, my mouth watered. “Kyrie, this looks delicious.”

His walker pressed into my rear end as he wrapped his arms around me from behind. I closed my eyes as he softly kissed my neck. His lips went to my ear, and he asked, “Do you want to eat first? I know that stomach growling.”

I chuckled softly and turned to him. After kissing his lips, I said, “Yes, I want to eat first. Do you know me?” My sarcasm made him smile. “I’m ready to talk, but I know

I won't feel like eating once I'm done. We surely can't let this food go to waste. I would never forgive myself."

He playfully shook his head with a small smile on his lips. Still trying to be the gentleman, he made me step aside so he could pull out my chair. Resting my hand on his cheek, I stroked his beard and said, "Thank you."

He nodded then walked around the table and sat in his seat. He scooted a bit, and I watched him wince as he tried to get comfortable. I admired his strength and tenacity. He refused to let his circumstances keep him from doing what he wanted to do. That was why it was killing him to stay home as the doctor ordered. I would have to draw from his strength after dinner.

He reached across the table, so I placed my hand in his. I knew even that gesture was somewhat painful for him, but he did it anyway to bless our food. He bowed his head, and I followed suit, realizing he was being a very effective leader at this moment. He was teaching me how to triumph over adversity. I knew how to do that in my career, but with my family, it was a totally different story.

Once he was done blessing our food, he released my hand and stared into my eyes. He smiled, then asked, "What?"

"Nothing. I just admire your strength, baby."

"I admire yours too. You're stronger than you think... even now."

I gave him a one-cheeked smile and went to my food, not letting another second go by before I indulged. Once my tastebuds got acquainted with the first forkful of fish, my eyes closed, and a soft moan left my lips. I swore my eyes were about to roll to the back of my head. The flavors had hit me all at once, sending my tastebuds into overdrive. It was so good and seasoned so well.

“Damn.”

I opened my eyes to see him staring at me. “What?”

“Just the way you’re enjoying that fish is making me wish I could enjoy you that way.” He slid his hand down his face. “You have me sweating, Genesis. You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?”

I giggled. “No, baby. Your mother put her foot in this fish. She got me having foodgasms. I can’t wait to tell her how good this is.”

He slightly rolled his eyes. “Don’t fill her with anymore helium. She’ll float away, and you’ll have to take a leave of absence from work to take care of me.”

I laughed. “Don’t talk about my girl like that. However, if I ever needed to take a leave of absence for you, consider it done. I love you.”

“I love you too, baby.”

We continued our meal, making small talk about the weather and me sitting at the table in wet clothes. I refused to undress and end up injuring Kyrie any further because we couldn’t contain our desires. There was no way I would have put clothes back on without having an orgasm with him watching me. No way in hell. The man turned me on just that much.

After clearing the table and putting the dishes in the dishwasher, I joined Kyrie in the family room on the couch. He reached over and grabbed my hand as I cautiously leaned over to him. He kissed my forehead, allowing me to get myself together in silence. I was desperately trying to figure out where to start.

Finally, he said, “Just say it how it comes out, baby. You’re thinking too much. This

is a no judgment zone. “

“You’re right.” I huffed, then continued. “I’m extremely bothered by my brother’s involvement in all of this. Plus, I feel like my grandmother knows a lot more than we think.”

“Grandma Jean? Why do you think that?”

I sighed. “She’s a very intuitive woman and can squeeze blood from a turnip. If she knows the details mentioned the other day, I’m almost sure she knows even more. That bothers the hell out of me. Why would she think that was something to keep to herself unless she’s involved in it somehow? Darlene Doll’s death will be on all of their hands. My dad didn’t work as hard as he did to have one of his kids take this path.”

“Samuel is his own man, regardless of your father’s sacrifice. So... umm... there is more evidence that Jackson told me about yesterday. She was able to attain surveillance of your brother in Doll’s office, signing documents. He had no reason to be in her office, especially alone. Johnson is wondering if any of the activity was Darlene’s doing. She may not have had a thing to do with it.”

I closed my eyes. “Is she thinking my brother is the mastermind?”

“No. She’s uncovered a maintenance guy, a council member, and your former fire chief.”

“What?” I asked as my eyes bucked.

“Yes. She has to get all of her facts straight before she can make arrests, but they were involved and received payouts disguised as bonuses, all signed by Darlene. They were all her authentic signatures, but she could have been under duress when

she signed them. She's going to let me know when all of the facts line up. She made me take a break from investigating things to keep myself safe. She believes they are after me because they see me as a threat, thinking I will find information to implicate them all."

"My God."

"Right. Somehow, they know when I'm looking into things. That means my stuff is bugged. It's better if she does it." He kissed my head again as I laid it on his shoulder. "In the meantime, try not to worry. I know that's easier said than done, but please try for me, baby."

He slid his hand down my thigh, causing me to shiver. His touch did things to me, but now wasn't the time. I was in a sensitive state already, and I just wanted to feel him inside of me. We still had another month before we could even attempt to engage in those activities. I glanced at him before saying, "I'll try not to."

Grabbing his hand, I squeezed it and brought it to my lips to kiss it. He smirked at me and asked, "What are you afraid of?"

Without hesitation, I responded, "Physically hurting you. So stop."

He chuckled then kissed my forehead. "I promise, I'm not going to let you hurt me. I'm not as fragile as you think. Come here."

I frowned slightly as I lifted my head to stare into his eyes. He stared right back, watching me hesitate. Did he want me on top of him? I was already as close as I could possibly be without being on his lap. "I'm here, Kyrie."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it. Get up here."

I cautiously straddled him, doing my best not to put my full weight on him. He lifted his hand and placed it at the back of my neck, pulling me to him. He slid his tongue to mine, and suddenly, I forgot all about my hesitancies. He knew I would. I could very easily get lost in him. When his other hand slid to my waistline and toyed with the band there, I opened my eyes to stare into his. Once our gazes locked, he slid his hand inside and took me to ecstasy without taking off our clothes. He stroked me perfectly but not without my assistance. I rolled my hips against him, feeling his erection teasing me.

“I won’t let you suffer, baby. I know you need this.”

When he brought his fingers to his mouth to taste the essence of me, I released a soft moan. He made me forget everything I was worried about. The only thing I was worried about was how I would go home in the nude, because my clothes were already drenched. I knew he wasn’t done, and I didn’t want him to be. I was spoiled, and he loved every minute of that.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

“What else do you need from the store, Mama? I’m just leaving work, but I only want to make one trip to Kroger. If you forget anything, you’ll have to go back and get it because Genesis and I have plans,” I said to my mother as I walked to my car.

“You gon’ do what I tell you to do!” she said loudly then laughed. “That’s everything, baby. Where are y’all going?”

“I’m just taking her out for a night on the town. She’s been so patient with my journey to healing. I want to show her how much I appreciate her.”

“Umm, she wasn’t the only one that had to deal with your attitude. Where is my gratitude?”

“Mama, I felt like you gave me as much hell as I gave you, so we’re even.”

She laughed, and I did too. It had been six weeks since Genesis pulled me out of that burning car. I’d been back at work for the past two weeks. People seemed shocked to see me back so soon, but I felt like I was about to go crazy. I needed to get back to normal. Plus, Johnson had told me that arrests were going to be made soon. I had to be back at work so I could secretly hear the gossip. I was the king of eavesdropping. Nothing got by me.

My colleagues were grateful for my early return, simply because it would lighten the load. They had been swamped. Cases were so backed up they couldn’t see the light of day. I was glad to be back as well. Law—exactng justice—that was my happy place. However, I found myself being a little more lenient. I wanted to believe Genesis had a lot to do with that. That woman had me soft as cotton candy. Whenever she licked

me, I practically disintegrated. She held that much power over my heart.

Her love that she'd spilled into me was overflowing in my life and touching lives that I touched. She'd been staying at my house more often than not, and I had gotten used to being in her space. That was the only downside to coming back to work. Although she was working, her free time was devoted to me. Her mama wasn't feeling that at all. She complained that I'd stolen her baby girl from her. I could only laugh in response, especially when she said for us to give her a grandbaby to occupy Genesis's spot.

"Kyrie, the doorbell is ringing. If I think of anything else I need, I'll text you."

"Mm hmm. Don't have me in the store all day, woman."

She chuckled. "Bye, fool!"

I ended the call and slowly shook my head. My mama was a mess, but I wouldn't change that for the world. Before I could turn into the parking lot at Kroger, she was calling back, as I knew she would.

"What's up, Ma?"

"Kyrie! These flowers are beautiful! And food from my favorite place? Thank you, baby!"

"You're very welcome, Mama. I love you, and I appreciate everything you do for me. I know you love roses and Olive Garden, so I figured that would be a good way to show you how much you mean to me."

"I love you too, son. This was really nice. See you when you get here."

“Okay.”

I ended the call and made my way inside the store. As I shopped, I got an uneasy feeling in my gut. I turned and surveyed my surroundings, trying to make sure I wasn't being followed. I didn't notice anything suspicious, but my guard was still in place. Besides work, I hadn't been going many places. I started at the gym last week, just doing light cardio, and I went to church with Genesis and my mama. Those were the only places I had been besides the grocery store. This was the first time I'd gotten this feeling though.

My gut was telling me that they were after me again, but I realized it could also just be paranoia. Despite Johnson's advice, I couldn't just sit idle. I'd been looking at every document Darlene had signed. So far, I'd pointed out four different types of signatures for her. One was identified as Samuel Farris's handwriting, one was Darelene's, and I'd narrowed one down to either city council member, Jackson Doyle or Dana Houston, Judge Cameron's stenographer. I was leaning more to Jackson though. I hadn't even come close to figuring out the last one.

Another reason I wanted to take Genesis out was because her brother would be among those getting arrested. I just wanted her to have a relaxing weekend before chaos ensued. She deserved that and so much more. There was proof that he'd received money from the mayor along with the checks and documents he forged and made to look like the lieutenant's handwriting. They were going to come down on him hard to get him to talk and reveal other parties involved.

From what Johnson said she could deduce from her own reasoning, Samuel was bribing the main parties. They were basically paying him to keep his mouth shut. He got cut into the deal that way and was way too intuitive for them to try anything. He would know who was after him... unlike me. I didn't feel like he had a thing to do with the vendetta they had out for me, but he definitely knew who was involved.

Once I was done with my mother's grocery list, along with the couple of things she added while I was shopping, I went to her house and dropped everything off, promising to spend a little time with her, Sunday. Sundays were my days to wind down and get ready for the work week. I noticed Genesis had adopted that practice as well since her schedule had been set to weekdays.

When I got home, I went to take a shower, but before I got in, I sent Genesis a message, letting her know I would be at her house to pick her up in an hour. We hadn't had sex yet, but tonight would be the night that I felt her walls wrap around me again. I'd been making sure she was pleased, whether that was orally or with my fingers. Whenever she tried to return the favor, I would stop her. I had to breathe too deeply and didn't want to put myself through that pain.

I didn't care if she had to do all the work tonight. I had to feel her. It felt like I was about to lose my mind not being able to indulge in her waters. Seeing her sexy ass daily and watching her sex faces when she orgasmed was torture. While I was happy to oblige her needs, it was hard as hell to restrain my own desires, although I knew that physically, I couldn't handle it. After emerging from the shower and drying off, I checked my phone to see if she'd responded.

Okay, baby. I'll be ready. Love you.

I smiled. Her words of love made me feel good inside. It was what my mama spoke of that would have my soul light and make me slow down some. Work came second now. It was hard to even believe that transition had occurred. Genesis Farris was my number one priority, and it happened naturally. I wanted her to be number one without even thinking about it or rationalizing it. Everything she'd shown me had told me that she deserved that spot, even when I was pushing against it.

Once I moisturized and put on my black slacks and black shirt, I checked my reflection. The waves in my hair seemed to be more defined, and my dark skin looked

flawless. It was like loving her had affected everything about me. She made me different... better. I was a fool to think that I could go on without her after encountering just how amazing she was. The bug had bit me, and thankfully, I learned to accept it while Genesis was still receptive.

I pulled into her driveway, ready to actually enjoy a night out on the town. It would only be our third date due to the circumstances. Taking a deep breath, I put the car in park and grabbed the pink lilies from the passenger seat. When I got to her door, before I could ring the doorbell, she opened it, wearing a black formfitting dress that dipped low in the front and left her shoulders exposed.

She smiled brightly as I salivated over her figure that was on full display. "Hey, baby. Come on in."

"Damn, you look gorgeous. These are for you," I said as I extended the lilies to her.

"Thank you. You look amazing yourself. These are beautiful. Thank you."

She took them from me and went to the kitchen. When she turned her back, I got the perfect view of her curves, especially the one on her back that I wanted to squeeze. God, she was so perfect. Her hair had grown out a little and had more waves in it. It framed her gorgeous face perfectly as well. God definitely took his time when He sculpted her. From the top of her head to the soles of her feet... it all had been touched by God.

Once she came back to me, she smiled. "I'm ready."

I smiled back and followed her to the door. I could imagine now that I would be walking behind her every chance I got. My pants were getting uncomfortably tight, though, so I had better calm down before I got past the point of no return.

After she locked the door, I grabbed her hand and led her to the car. For some reason, I felt nervous, like I was trying to make a good first impression. She already knew me, so I didn't know why I was tripping. I opened her door and rested my hand at the small of her back. Before getting inside, she leaned to me and kissed my lips.

I smiled when she pulled away. "I didn't want to mess up your makeup."

She gave me a one-cheeked smile. "Well, I brought the lipstick in my clutch."

She patted it as I bit my bottom lip then pulled her back to me. My lips hungrily devoured hers in the most pleasing way, causing her to release a moan of passion into my mouth. Her hand traveled to the back of my head, holding me in place. My tongue explored her mouth like it was a whole new world. I wanted my encounters with her to feel brand new every time. Pulling her hips to mine, I allowed my hand to travel to her ass and grip it.

"Mmm... Kyrie. We better stop before we don't leave," she said after pulling away.

"You're right. I just can't help myself."

She bit her bottom lip. "It's hard restraining myself as well. Where are we going?"

"Get in, and I'll clue you in."

She rested her hand on my cheek for a moment, then slid inside to the plush leather seat. I closed her door then adjusted my erection as I made my way to the driver's side. This woman was going to be the death of me. I loved and craved her so much I could barely think about anything else. During cases, I would find my mind drifting to her. That was the reason I'd become a little more lenient. I was zoning out and probably not hearing all the facts. Suddenly, that wasn't as important as her.

When I got inside, I said, “First we’re going to dinner at Riverside Grille. I’ve never been there, but I’ve heard good things about it. Then after that, we’ll be going to Jefferson Theater to see a play.”

Her eyes brightened. “A stage play?”

“Yes, ma’am. Is that cool?”

“Absolutely,” she said as she slid her hand to mine. “This is so nice, Kyrie. Thank you.”

I lifted our hands and kissed hers. “You deserve this and so much more. Thank you for taking care of me at my weakest. You not only took care of me physically but mentally and emotionally. Your love has gotten me through these tough times, and I can’t express just how much I appreciate you for that.”

She gave me a soft smile then stared forward. I could tell something was on her mind, because her facial expressions turned somewhat serious. Her smile was gone and replaced with a face of stone. Her hand was still in mine, our fingers intertwined. “Hey. You okay?”

She gave me a tight smile when she glanced at me. “Yeah. I’m good.”

“Baby...”

She turned to me as I repeatedly glanced at her. When I got to the traffic light, I brought my hand to her face. “Just like I learned to confide in you, I need you to do the same. Life has a way of sneaking up on you and presenting problems that you aren’t able to fix or control. However, we can control our reactions to what it brings our way. I’m here to listen.”

I lifted her hand and kissed it. “I’m just worried about Samuel. I haven’t heard from him in a while, and that’s not like him. We usually talk three to four times a week, maybe only skipping a day in between. I’ve called and texted him but haven’t gotten a response.”

I gently caressed the top of her hand with my thumb, feeling her pain through her words. “Has your mom talked to him? What about Grandma Jean?”

“My mama hasn’t heard from him either, but Grandma Jean said he’s fine. He can’t be fine if he won’t talk to Mama and me. We’ve never been judgmental of anything he has going on or is doing. We will , however, express our disdain or disappointment in his actions. We don’t mean it harshly. We just want what’s best for him and want him to want what’s best for him too. He hasn’t mentioned anything about the issues I’ve been privy to, but I can’t help but wonder if the reason he isn’t speaking to us has to do with that.”

“All you can do at this point is pray about it, baby. If we haven’t gotten anything else out of the sermons we’ve been hearing, it’s to give it to God.”

She stared at me as I drove through the intersection and said, “You’re right, baby. Whatever happens is because He allowed it. I have to learn to be okay with whatever happens.”

“I understand your concern, but you can’t let it affect you to the point where you can’t function. I’m not saying that it shouldn’t stun you or that it shouldn’t hurt. I love your heart. It’s what makes you who you are.”

She nodded, and a small smile made its way to her lips as we turned into the parking lot of Riverside Grille. When I parked, I got out of the car to help her out. However, I saw a car parked afar that looked suspicious. No one was parked that far back, and I could clearly see someone in the driver’s seat watching me watch them.

I wanted to get back in the car, but instead, I pulled out my phone and called Stephanie. She answered on the first ring. “Hello?”

“Someone is tailing me. I’m at Riverside Grille with Genesis, and he’s at the back of the parking lot watching me.”

“I’m on my way. There are some new developments I need to tell you about as well.”

“Okay.”

I ended the call and helped Genesis from the car as I watched them drive away.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, turning to look in the same direction as me.

Staring back into her eyes, I wanted to say yes, but I also wanted to keep it real with her. “We were being followed. I called Johnson, and she’s on her way.”

The worry lines appeared on her forehead, so I continued. “We won’t let that ruin our night, baby. Tonight is about you and how perfect you are for me.”

She brought her hands to my face and pulled me to her. Her lips graced mine with their presence, and she gave me a preview of the passion that was looming over us like a rain cloud. I couldn’t wait to get back home and allow it to rain on us without an ounce of resistance.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

“That feels so good, Kyrie. Yeeeeess.”

I was trying so hard to be in the moment because he was doing everything right. Dinner had been somewhat quiet. Thankfully, I didn't have to talk during the stage play, but I didn't have a clue what it was about. I'd checked out before it even started. I was trying so hard to take Kyrie's advice and let God have my worries, but it was so hard. Samuel was my little brother. Although he was an adult, it was my job to look out for him. I needed to know what was going on with him.

Kyrie was loving me gently, moving slowly but with purpose. Despite my mind being everywhere but where it needed to be, I could still feel that stirring below, letting me know that the gates to ecstasy were about to open. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, forcing him to lower his head to where he couldn't stare at me. When I'd opened my eyes, his gaze was locked on mine, and I couldn't handle it.

My eyes had remained closed after that, but I had a feeling that didn't deter his gaze one bit. He was extremely quiet with only the occasional grunt or moan to let me know he was still enjoying our connection. Pulling away from me slightly, he brought his hand to my neck and gripped it gently. “Genesis... look at me, baby.”

I hesitantly opened my eyes, and when my gaze met his, the intensity I found there coaxed the orgasm right out of me. My eyes rolled to the back of my head, and I lifted my hips, trying to make sure I felt every stroke he laid on my G-spot. Breaking his silence once again, he said, “You are the only woman for me. I need you to relax in it and know that I will protect you and care for you with everything in me. I want to love you through your fears, your doubts, and your sadness. I need you to focus on our love, baby. We were created for each other.”

The tears sprang from my eyes without warning, and I needed every ounce of love he was pouring into me. “I believe that wholeheartedly, Kyrie. Ooooooh, yeeeeess.”

It felt like I was going to release again, because my entire body was trembling and felt like it was about to go into convulsions. “Give it to me, Genesis. Give me all of you, baby.”

Hearing how soft he was being had the tears running down my cheeks without restraint. I didn’t even want to restrain them. He said to give him all of me, and that was part of it. My orgasm ripped through me once again, my body flopping around like a fish. I couldn’t control it, and the fact that I didn’t try seemed to turn Kyrie on even more. He stroked me with more intensity, helping me be sure I’d gotten complete satisfaction, then he released inside of me.

His panting alarmed me though. He rolled to my side, and I rolled on my side next to him and laid my hand on his chest. I felt bad for a second that he was struggling to breathe through the pain he was feeling, but I knew he wouldn’t want me to. In my head, I could hear him saying, “I’m a grown man, Genesis. I knew what I was getting into.”

A slight smile made its way to my lips as I did my best to help him through it. “I know it probably hurts like hell, but take a deep breath to help your breathing.”

He did as I said as I watched him wince in pain. However, once he released that breath, his breathing had calmed significantly. Turning his body to me, he said, “Don’t worry. I’m fine. As good as you feel, I would do this all over again. I’ll never regret a moment with you.”

Sliding his hand over my cheek, he pulled my face to his and softly kissed my lips. When he pulled away, I took a deep breath. God had truly blessed me when he aligned Kyrie’s path and mine to meet. Although I doubted it for a while, He showed

me that His divine plan was for us to be together, embarking on a life He intended for us to have. I laid my head on his chest once his breathing was completely under control. We remained quiet, soaking in the aura of the moment, not to mention the evidence on the sheets.

The sound of glass breaking interrupted our peace though. Kyrie literally jumped from the bed like a cat on a hot tin roof, and I wasn't far behind him. Going to his dresser, I grabbed a pair of his basketball shorts and a T-shirt. When I smelled smoke, I immediately grabbed my phone and called 9-1-1, alerting them of an arson in progress, along with a breaking and entering.

Kyrie bolted from the room, and I was right behind him. When we got to the front room, the wall surrounding the front door was in flames. "Shit!" Kyrie yelled. "I need to get a water hose."

"No! The minute you open that back door, the fire will spread quickly. Do you have an extinguisher?"

"Yeah. I forgot about them. I have three."

I followed him to his laundry room and got the extinguishers. I could hear sirens in the distance. I couldn't believe people were really trying to kill him. This was crazy! We sprayed the fire, hoping that it would be enough to control it. Once my tank was empty, I went to the next one, spraying it in its entirety. There was only a little bit Kyrie couldn't get with his tank, so I quickly ran to the kitchen and filled a large pot with water.

Running back to it, I doused it and prayed that would kill it. Before I could even suggest it, Kyrie grabbed the pot from me and went to fill it again. When he came back, he threw it in the same spot. I looked around his foyer to see it was completely burned. I watched him survey the area as well, when suddenly he yelled, "Fuck!"

Johnson had met us at Riverside Grille, but she didn't stay. Since we had a night planned, Kyrie didn't want to throw those plans by the wayside. I wish he would have, though, to possibly avoid this. The house was extremely smokey, so I walked over to him and said, "We need to go outside, baby."

He nodded and followed me out the back door. We both looked like we'd just hopped out of bed. We wore shorts and T-shirts and were both barefooted. From what I could see while we were inside, someone had thrown something through the window that started the fire. The smoke limited visibility, and my main objective was to get the fire contained.

Once we were outside, the fire truck pulled up against the curb. I grabbed Kyrie's hand and went to the truck to meet them. When I saw Bransford, I wanted to roll my eyes. He quickly approached and asked, "Are y'all okay, Chief?"

"Yes. We got the fire contained with fire extinguishers and water, but please go check it out."

"Yes, ma'am."

I nodded at him. When I glanced up at Kyrie, I saw him feverishly typing on his phone. While I wanted to help him through it, like he did with me earlier, I remained quiet. It was too soon for that. I was just grateful this didn't happen while we were asleep. It could have been so much worse. It almost felt like whoever was doing this just wanted to scare him. If they wanted to kill him, I truly believed he would be dead by now.

They would have set the house on fire without making a sound. When they hit him, they could have rammed him a second time right in his door, possibly killing him instantly. They could have had better aim and shot him at the soup kitchen. There were too many instances that he'd survived. Had they wanted him gone, there would

have been no chance of survival when they were done. I slid my hand over my face as I watched the firefighters grab the hose, preparing to go over the affected area once again.

After Kyrie slid his phone in his pocket, I grabbed his hand, and he pulled me close. I wrapped my arms around him, doing my best to console him. When he pulled away, he asked, “Is it okay for me to stay with you?”

“Of course. That goes without asking. I love being in your intimate space.”

“Thank you, baby. I can’t wait until this is all over. I’m sick of this shit.”

“I know you are. They must be getting close to figuring things out for them to restart the threats and attempts on your life. Just hold on.”

“I have no choice but to hold on. I’m ready to get to the bottom of this.”

“Me too. I can imagine you’re tired of having to look over your shoulder.”

He nodded as I noticed Detective Johnson approaching us. “We caught him.”

Our eyebrows lifted in shock. We stared at her, waiting for her to reveal what she knew. She cleared her throat and said, “Brad Coler.”

My mouth fell open. That man came all the way to Beaumont, Texas, to wreak havoc. But why? Kyrie and I both frowned. I was confused as hell, and I was sure Kyrie was just as confused. Sensing our confusion, she said, “Mister Coler is the son of Missy Coler... your dad’s mistress.”

With as dark complexioned as Kyrie was, he turned completely red. “You have to be kidding me. Why is he after me?”

“That’s what we have to find out once we get him booked. I’m pretty sure you will be coming to the police station to listen in on the interrogation if he doesn’t lawyer up.”

“Absolutely. Do you think this has anything to do with my other issue?”

“I don’t think so, but we are going to find out as soon as we can.”

I wrapped my arms around Kyrie as his mother came running toward us. She must have parked down the street. She stopped and took a huge breath in, then blew it out when she saw us. I was sure it was one of relief. I wasn’t sure how she knew anything had happened. If Kyrie had texted her, she would have known that he was okay. She crashed into him, but he didn’t seem to want to be bothered at the moment. I gently grabbed her hand and pulled her away from him.

“Kyrie! What’s going on?” she asked.

“The man you called a husband... the man you want me to forgive is the reason for this. The son of the woman he was fucking is trying to kill me. Apparently, he’s trying to exact his revenge on me since Kenneth is no longer here. But you want me to love him and forgive him. His sins nearly destroyed my house and could have killed us in there! What if we would have been asleep and not heard a thing? Huh? We would be severely injured or worse!”

Ms. Carolyn’s body trembled in my arms, and a tear slid down her cheek. “I’m sorry, son. I just wanted you to release the anger you felt and move on with your life. It’s not healthy. Again, despite all of this, he loved you.”

“I don’t want to hear that shit right now.”

Kyrie walked away from us, and Ms. Carolyn buried her face in my shoulder. “I just wanted him to free himself from the bondage hatred brings. His father wasn’t perfect,

but he loved him perfectly. He was a good father, and I could never take that away from him. Kyrie chooses to focus on how piss poor of a husband he was instead. I need him to focus on who Kenneth Patrick was to him , not to me . ”

“I understand, Ms. Carolyn, but I can guarantee that this isn’t the right time for that. He’s probably angrier about his father’s infidelity and demise more than he has ever been right now. His father’s infidelity has come back years later and threatened his life.”

“You’re right. I just can’t understand why anyone would want Kyrie to suffer for what his father did.”

“He was an easy target. Mister Patrick is no longer here, so someone has to suffer for his sins, although I feel like he paid the ultimate price when he died in that plane crash.”

“Yeah, but unfortunately, so did his mistress. It probably seems like Kenneth was responsible for her death as well.”

I nodded as I watched Kyrie pace back and forth while Detective Johnson talked to him. My heart went out to him at this moment. Although I was in just as much danger in there as he was, the issue surrounding what happened had caused me to forget about my own issues to focus on his. He was hurting, and there was nothing more I wanted than to be consoling him instead of his mother right now.

Pulling away from her, I said, “Let me go check on him.”

She nodded as I walked away from her to Kyrie. When his eyes met mine, I could see the anger, the sadness, and the hurt. He suffered from his father’s death, but it seemed he was suffering more now that he was gone than from his actual demise. I hated this for him. He had enough to be concerned with.

When I got to him, I immediately slid my arms around his waist. He put his arm around me as I said, “I’m so sorry, baby. I totally understand your reaction.”

He kissed my forehead. “I’m sorry you had to see me somewhat unhinged. I’m just sick of dealing with shit. This right here is unnecessary. The person that’s at fault is no longer here. How did I inherit his consequences?”

“I know it’s hard to understand. Just know that it’s Mister Coler’s mental issues that has caused this. Direct your anger to him. He did this.”

“I wouldn’t even know who that man was had it not been for my father messing around with his mother. We would have no connection. That’s our only connection.”

“I get it. Let me make sure everything is wrapped up so when you go to the police station, I can go with you.”

“Okay.”

When I turned to go see what the firefighters had come up with, I saw Bransford going back inside the house. He was looking around like he was making sure no one was watching him. I frowned slightly and quickly followed behind him to make sure I didn’t miss what he was up to. As I entered the house, I saw him walking around looking with a flashlight. He pulled out a bag and picked up a bottle and put it inside.

I released a sigh of relief. He was only bagging evidence of foul play. All this betrayal and underhandedness had me on edge. When he looked up and saw me, he gave me a slight smile. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes. Thank you.”

He nodded and looked around more. “This is what was thrown through the window to

start the fire. The judge is going through a lot. This is crazy.”

“Yeah, it is. Neither of us can wait until it’s done. It’s been a lot.”

“I can imagine.”

“Is everything pretty much wrapped up?”

“Yes, ma’am. Our investigation is done, but I’m sure his homeowner’s insurance is going to send their own investigator as well, mainly to assess the damage since we already know the cause.”

I nodded and patted his back as he walked past me. “Thank you, Bransford.”

“No problem.”

I wanted to ask him what prompted his change of attitude, but I knew it wasn’t the right time for that conversation. Something had definitely happened to provoke that change, and it was more than Samuel threatening him. Once all of this came to a head, I would be sure to have that conversation with him.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

“My mama didn’t even want to go on that trip. I remember her telling my father that Mister Patrick was forcing her to go. She cried the entire night before because she said she felt uneasy about the flight. That man couldn’t accept rejection. I’m not saying my mother was innocent, but when she tried to break things off was when he became desperate. She was pregnant when she died, and now, I don’t know if that child was my dad’s or that monster’s.”

I closed my eyes, trying to stomach everything I’d heard. My mother was standing next to me crying, and Genesis was on my other side, holding my hand between hers. I didn’t know how this man found me or why he thought it was a good idea to come for me. My head was pounding as we stood in the room listening to what he had to say.

“What did Judge Patrick have to do with that? He was only ten years old when nine-eleven happened. He was just as innocent in this as you are.”

“Someone has to pay for what happened to my mother. It was pretty convenient for Kenneth Patrick to die in that plane crash. Had he not forced my mama to go on that trip, she would still be here. Judge Patrick is just as ruthless as his father was. That man didn’t care about people in the gray area. Everything was black and white to him. He didn’t care about anyone else. He only cared about making a name for himself. Kyrie Patrick is the same way. I’ve reviewed his sentencing practices. Most of them are questionable.”

“He has never gone beyond the scope of the law.”

“Yeah, but does everyone deserve the maximum sentence? I figured he would be the

perfect person to suffer the consequences. The world would be just fine without another Kenneth Patrick.”

I’d heard enough. I swallowed hard as I walked away. Hearing someone compare me to Kenneth Patrick had angered me. My mama always compared my good qualities to his, and that would piss me off as well. This was different though. To say that I was, basically, a chip off the old block had taken my anger to new heights.

When Genesis’s arms wrapped around me from behind, I stopped walking and closed my eyes, trying to allow her spirit to calm me. “You are not your father.”

“I know. That’s what makes me so angry.”

“That man doesn’t know you from Adam. He wants to talk about being in the gray but is judging you based on black and white. How contradictory is that? Don’t let what he’s said affect you negatively, baby. He’s a mental case due to his loss. He needs help. He is a prime example of how trauma can affect people and why we sometimes need counseling to deal with loss. You are an amazing man. I didn’t know your father, but I know the man I’m in love with. You are nothing like he described.”

I nodded and turned around in her arms. The problem was that I saw the resemblance as well. That man was right about me. I had only begun to change after falling in love with Genesis. I was a cold-blooded bastard in that courtroom. I didn’t care about extenuating circumstances. While I wasn’t as selfish as he said I was, I realized I treated everyone that came through my courtroom like a criminal when, technically, they were innocent until proven guilty. My mind treated them as guilty until proven innocent.

I hugged Genesis as I saw my mama approaching us. I owed her an apology for how I spoke to her. I released Genesis and pulled her into my arms. “I’m sorry for the way I spoke to you, Mama.”

“It’s okay, baby. I understand.”

“It’s not okay, but thank you for forgiving me. That man in there was right.”

She pulled away from me with a frown on her face. Genesis adorned the same frown.
“Kyrie?—”

“No. He was right. I’m a lot like him... good and bad. I didn’t realize it until he pointed it out. Had it not been for Genesis snatching my heart out of my chest, I still would be. I was arrogant, and while I thought I was serving the community, I was serving my own ego. I know I didn’t get that mentality from you, so it had to come from him. All these years, I hated that you compared me to him and refused to look at him as the father he was. However, it took someone trying to kill me for sins he committed for me to see what you’ve been trying to tell me all along.”

My mama brought her hand to my cheek and gently stroked it as tears fell from her eyes. “I only wanted you to embrace who you are and realize that a lot of good qualities you possessed came from him. I never saw you as egotistical, selfish, or arrogant... well, maybe a little arrogant.” She smiled. “While your father cheated on me, I never knew about it until this unfortunate incident. I thought I was the most blessed woman in the world because he treated me like a queen. We had disagreements, as most married people do, but he was good to me. I can’t let what I found out after his death take away from that, or it will drive me insane.”

I nodded. She was a strong woman and a way better person than me. It took me all this time to finally release forgiveness for my father, simply because someone had the audacity to knock me off my high horse and prove to me just how much like him I really was. I slowly shook my head as I put my arm around Genesis.

She smiled as I said, “Thank you for making me a better man simply by loving me.”

She kissed my lips. “You’ve made me better also.”

Detective Johnson joined us with a sympathetic look on her face. “Well, since he confessed, there is nothing left to do but wait for him to be arraigned. I’m pretty sure they will throw the book at him, especially since you’re a judge. I’m just happy we were able to catch him.”

“Thanks. Me too.”

“If only the other foolishness was this easy.”

I nodded as she glanced at Genesis, probably wondering if I had told her. Since the rest of our night was ruined, I may as well tell her. I knew she wouldn’t alert her brother, especially since she couldn’t even locate him right now. Genesis frowned slightly, probably trying to figure out why Stephanie glanced at her that way. She walked away, and I slid my hand to Genesis’s. She looked up at me and asked, “What’s going on? Why did she look at me that way?”

“I’ll tell you when we get to the car.”

“It’s about Samuel, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. They plan to issue a warrant for his arrest Monday.”

She nodded repeatedly as a lone tear escaped her. She quickly swiped it away and said, “Okay. Let’s head back to your place to pack you some things, then we’ll go to my place. It’s not as big as yours, but hopefully, you’ll still be comfortable.”

I pulled her to me. “I’ll be comfortable wherever you are.”

She nodded once again, and we made our way out of the station to our cars. I kissed

my mama on her cheek and reminded her that I would see her Sunday, then got inside the car with Genesis. She was wiping her face quite a bit. I knew she was trying to restrain her tears in front of me, but that wasn't necessary.

After starting the engine, I turned to her. "Genesis, it's okay to cry. It's okay to be hurt, angry, disappointed... all that. You don't have to hide that from me. I know this is killing you, especially since you can't even talk to anyone about it. At least once he's arrested, you can get it all out of your system and try to convince him to talk."

She gave me a tight smile. "Yeah. I just hope he'll listen. Today has been quite emotional. I think I've experienced every emotion on the spectrum, and I just want to pop a few Ibuprofens and go to sleep."

"Touché, baby. Touché."

I woke up in a cold sweat after running for my life in dreamland. I looked around the bedroom, trying to remember where I was. After a minute or so, I remembered I was at Genesis's house. I took a deep breath and rubbed my hand down my face. Turning to my left, I realized she wasn't in bed. The clock on the nightstand read three a.m. I got out of bed and went to the en suite bathroom only to find the door locked.

When I knocked, the toilet flushed, and she unlocked the door. I walked in as she washed her hands. She looked at me through the vanity mirror. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I just had a nightmare. I need to clean up. I'm wet with sweat."

She nodded as I started the shower. Her bedding was probably wet on my side of the bed as well. There was no way I would be sleeping after this. Thankfully, neither of us had anything to do this weekend. As I stared at her, I could tell that she probably hadn't gotten much sleep. Her eyes were puffy and red, like she'd been crying for hours. We'd gotten here around eleven last night and was in bed before midnight.

Going to her, I slid my hand to hers. I didn't want to initiate any more contact than that since I was sweaty. She had different plans though. She turned and fell into me, crying her eyes out. "I hate this shit!" she said through her cries.

I circled my arms around her for a moment then pulled away and started undressing her. She'd put on a nightshirt and underwear before going to bed. I took off my shorts and pulled her to the shower with me. Allowing the water to drench us felt refreshing to me. It was like we were getting cleansed of all the bullshit the night brought us and starting fresh with a renewed spirit. Genesis laid her head against me then lightly kissed my neck. I kissed her forehead, then said, "I'm always here for you, baby. This has been a lot to deal with, but I feel like it's wrapping up."

She lifted her head and stared into my eyes. "What makes you so sure?"

"Things usually get to a point where they feel unbearable just before there is a break of some sorts. When the warrants are issued for the individuals they plan to prosecute or milk for names, this will go downhill fast."

She nodded. "I just wish my brother wasn't involved in all of this. While knowing that this type of corruption is going on in our city, it makes it ten times worse knowing someone I love dearly is involved in it."

I truly understood her turmoil. Although I didn't have siblings, I could understand being caught off guard and being disappointed or angry with someone you loved because of something they did. I'd been that way for most of my life concerning my father. Just from Coler mentioning that he forced that woman to go on the trip with him didn't help matters. At least Samuel had time to rectify his actions. The clock had run out on Kenneth Patrick.

I gently caressed her back and listened to her take deep breaths. When she had calmed down some, she asked, "What happened in your dream?"

It was my turn to take a deep breath. “I was being chased. I was on foot, and they were in a car. It seemed I was trying to run to my father in the dream. I could see his face plain as day. The crazy part was that I was a ten-year-old boy. He had smiled at me and stretched out his arms, welcoming me, just before the building he was in the doorway of exploded. That was when I woke up.”

“Wow. I assume you can attribute that to everything that happened tonight.”

“Yeah. It’s a painful reality. Now that I’m no longer angry about the details surrounding his death, I still can’t embrace him. The only person that matters to is me, because he isn’t here. No matter how badly I want to embrace him, I will never get that opportunity again.”

I closed my eyes and felt the lump forming in my throat. After twenty-three years, I was just feeling the effects of grief. The first couple of days after his death, I’d cried like a baby, missing my father. However, once the allegations started flying, my tears dried up, and my feelings of heartache and grief turned into feelings of disappointment and anger and stayed that way until tonight.

Genesis’s arms slid around me, and I opened my eyes, allowing a couple of tears to escape them. She gently wiped them away. “I’m so sorry, baby. But at least you can begin to heal now. The circumstances won’t change. Unfortunately, neither of our fathers can come back, but we can be better to ourselves, knowing that’s what they would want.”

I nodded then grabbed the loofah hanging on the faucet to wash our bodies with. I hated that it took me this long to finally release the anger I held concerning him, but I supposed the point was that I finally released it, and I could deal with the aftermath of it before it totally destroyed me inside. Choosing to focus on my woman’s grief instead of my own, I said, “I’m so sorry about your brother, baby.”

“Yeah, me too. But the bright side is, once he’s arrested, I can talk to him about everything and see what he can do to not only help himself out of this situation but to help you as well.”

I smiled at her as I dragged the loofah over her nipples, watching them harden. My mind had shifted to pleasing her body just that quickly. I wanted to not only relax her mentally but physically as well. There was no way she would be able to take me inside her walls and still remain tense with stress and worry. It was somewhat of a cocky thought, but two things I was confident about was my worth and capabilities.

Lowering my head to her neck, I softly kissed her there then said in a low voice close to her ear, “Thank you for always coming to my rescue. I plan to do the same for you whenever you need me, and that’s including what happens to Samuel Farris.”

She stared into my eyes, and I watched hers fill with emotion. Despite how her brother felt about me, I knew how she felt for her brother. His disdain toward me wasn’t my business. However, her heartache was. I would do whatever I could to ease her pain, dealing with this situation, even help a man that played a role in what was happening to me, no matter how significant or insignificant that role was.

He was definitely involved with people that were out for my blood to protect their greed. Having Genesis in my life had only helped me be a better man. Seeing the growth for myself left me in awe, especially with this. The old me would have let his ass rot in prison. Instead, I was hoping to be able to have him come through my court if he went to trial, just so I could be easy on him. If my gut was right, though, I knew this wouldn’t go to trial. Samuel would drop a dime, if for no other reason than to protect his family and make them proud.

The tears had fallen down her cheeks as I continued to bathe her, but no words had left her lips. I wanted to believe that she was stunned into silence. I could understand her reaction because I was in a state of disbelief as well.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

“Arrest warrants have been filed for two council members, one of them being Commissioner Joe Alfred, two city police officers, and a constable. More warrants are promised to come. The district attorney and detectives are combing through allegations with a fine-toothed comb, being sure to serve justice to everyone involved in the corruption of city and county officials after the incarceration and, later, death of Darlene Doll. They are looking at charges of embezzlement, money laundering, bribery, arson, and attempted murder.”

My mama and I sat in front of the TV, watching the news. Her mouth had dropped when she saw Samuel’s picture. Although I knew this was coming, it did nothing for my emotions. The tears flowed as if I was hearing these allegations for the first time.

“Oh my God!” she screamed. “Samuel! What were you thinking?”

She was staring at the TV, questioning his picture as if it would hear and respond to her. Tears were streaming down her face as well. I went to her and hugged her tightly as my body quaked. I could feel the hurt surging through her. It mirrored mine. Suddenly, she pulled away and stared at me. “You knew, didn’t you?”

I looked away from her. “Yes, only from being present when the lead detective spoke to Kyrie about it.”

“And you couldn’t warn your brother?”

I frowned. “And what exactly would that have done, besides cause me to lose my job? Samuel had already messed up! They already had evidence of his involvement.”

She slowly shook her head. “You put Judge Patrick’s interests before your brother’s. That’s what you did.”

I was stunned. How did what Samuel did become my fault? “You can’t be serious right now. The turmoil I’ve been in the past few days has been overwhelming, and you’re coming at me like I’m somehow responsible. I don’t believe this.”

I grabbed my purse and keys and prepared to leave. As I turned around to head out of her house, without another word, she grabbed my arm. “You’re right, baby. I’m so sorry. This isn’t your fault. Lord, Jesus. I guess I’m just that quickly looking for someone else to blame except the person responsible. Maybe that’s why he thought this was okay. I babied him.”

“No. Don’t blame yourself. We both babied him, but Samuel is a grown man who knows right from wrong. I think Grandma knew what he was involved in. The police were using her as a safehouse of sorts. Kyrie stayed there for a while. I believe it was his way of taking the heat off his issues at work.”

I practically snapped my lips shut, realizing I had said too much. My mama stared at me, her eyes wide. “What issues at work?”

I closed my eyes. “Mama, you can’t say anything. I wasn’t supposed to let that out. He’s been written up several times for insubordination and misconduct. I truly believe the only reason he hasn’t been fired is because of his involvement in this foolishness. He obviously knows names—powerful ones—that are keeping his employment intact.”

She pulled away from me and sat on the couch as I set my purse and keys down on the countertop and went to sit next to her. I pulled her in my arms as we continued watching the news. The constable and one of the city council members had already turned themselves in. Samuel was still in the wind, and it had been over a week since

I'd heard from him. Turning to my mama, I said, "Let's go."

She frowned slightly and asked, "Where are we going?"

"To Grandma's house. I'm more than sure she knows where Samuel is. When I messaged her to ask if she'd heard from him, her only response was that he was fine. I haven't talked to Samuel in over a week, despite my attempts to reach him."

"Yeah. Same here. Honestly, I felt like something was going on with him, but I would have never thought it was something like this. I thought he was depressed or something."

Samuel had a bout with depression a few years ago when he was first trying to get on the force. The academy had turned him inside out, making him feel inadequate and unworthy. So for him to do this, as badly as he wanted to be on the force, had me thoroughly confused. We stood from the couch and headed out to my car as my phone rang.

I didn't want to speak to anyone other than Samuel and my grandmother right now. I'd already talked to Kyrie while en route to my mother's house, so I knew it wasn't him. I didn't want to hear a word from anyone, especially not the media. Everyone employed by the city and the county police force, along with firefighters, knew he was my brother. I wouldn't be surprised if someone ratted him out, instead of the evidence Detective Johnson claimed to have had.

Bransford came to mind when I thought about how quickly his attitude changed. If he did, there would be nothing I could do about it, especially if Samuel was actually guilty of those crimes. I believed that he was guilty simply because he was avoiding our mom and me. He knew how important communication was to us. We always wanted to know that he was okay... that he was maintaining. Plus, the last conversation we had came to mind. I love you... always remember that.

I slowly shook my head as I got in the driver's seat. Being that Samuel had depression issues, I could only pray that he wouldn't take the same route Darlene Doll took. Once my mama got in, I quickly backed out of her driveway as tears streamed down my cheeks. My phone started ringing again, and I rolled my eyes. I grabbed it from the console, where I'd thrown it when I got in the car, and silenced it. The screen adorned a number that wasn't programmed in my phone, so I surely wasn't in a hurry to answer it.

Throwing it back to the console, I focused on getting us to my grandmother's house in one piece. The ride was quiet, neither of us offering any words of consolation. I had to assume that, like me, my mama didn't have any. Thankfully, my grandmother didn't live too far away from my mother's house. I noticed my grandmother's car was outside. That was a telltale sign that something was up. The last time her car was outside, Kyrie was staying there.

We quickly got out of my car and practically ran to the door. I knocked then rang the doorbell, feeling extremely impatient. Apparently, she wasn't moving fast enough for my mother, because she started knocking on the door as well. Sensing her urgency, I started ringing the bell repeatedly. My grandmother flung the door open with a frown on her face. However, when she saw us, her frown lifted into an expression of surprise.

"What's going on? Why are y'all knocking and ringing my doorbell like that? Did something happen?" she asked, firing off questions one after the next.

We both walked inside her house without an invite and saw Samuel sitting on the couch. He looked disgusted, as he should be. "Samuel..." my mama said, then immediately started crying all over again.

I was trying to channel my feelings of hurt versus those of anger when I sat next to him. I glanced at my grandmother as she stood there looking as pitiful as he did.

“Samuel, I only have one question.”

He looked at me as I grabbed his hand. “Why?”

He swallowed hard, again lowering his head. My grandmother sat across from us, and she said, “He’s never been able to live up to your standards.”

I frowned and turned to her. “No disrespect, but I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to Samuel. I want to hear what he has to say.”

Why was I the one getting all the blame? What expectations? I only wanted Samuel to do what was right, be a grown ass man, and be able to sustain himself. That was what was referred to as adulting. How was that too much to ask of a grown man? My grandmother stood from her seat. “You said ‘no disrespect,’ but that was very disrespectful, Chief Farris.”

“But it was very truthful. Samuel is an adult who can speak for himself. I want to hear his reasoning from him.”

I wanted to roll my eyes at her, but I was able to restrain myself. When I turned back to him, he said, “I felt the pressure of being successful. That wasn’t your fault, Gen. You and Mama bragged on how good of a man Dad was all the time. I just wanted to live up to those standards. Because you went to the fire academy, I decided to go to the police academy. Dad was a first responder, and I wanted to be like the man y’all admired so much. I probably would have done better learning a trade.”

I frowned slightly. He said it wasn’t my fault, but his explanation almost made it seem like he was blaming us for expressing how great Dad was. That couldn’t be further from the truth though. I barely remembered Dad. I had just turned four when he died. “I’m confused, Sam. I couldn’t brag on Dad to that extent because I barely remember him. I only know what I was told about his personality.”

“I know. It’s not an excuse. I’m just explaining the self-imposed pressure I was under. I just wanted to be great, following in his footsteps of service. I obviously wasn’t cut out for it. I was about to be fired. However, I walked in on some things I shouldn’t have seen and heard some things I shouldn’t have heard. I told them to either cut me in and preserve my job, or I was gon’ sing like a canary.”

“How long ago was that? And who is ‘them’?”

“That was a couple of years ago, and you know I can’t tell you who.”

“There is a warrant out for your arrest, Sam. They are going to want names. I’m more than sure they will offer you a deal for them. You are going to have to turn yourself in. This is probably the next place they will look after going to your place.”

“I’ll be here when they get here then. I’m not turning myself in. That makes me look guilty.”

“No, it doesn’t!” my mama interjected. “It makes you look innocent! It makes it look like you’re willing to cooperate with them to get this confusion resolved.”

I was trying not to yell at him, but he was taking me there, too, so I was glad she did it and not me. He would have assumed I was just saying that because I worked for the city. He probably would have accused me of working with the “opps.” Had he done that, I would have slapped the piss out of him. My brother was an idiot. Who didn’t know that turning yourself in was a good thing?

He glanced at my mama and lowered his head. I had never heard her really yell at him as an adult. If anything, she typically made excuses for him, like she’d initially done and how my grandmother had done. When she turned her attention to my grandmother, I braced for what she would say. The look on her face made me nervous. I’d never witnessed a serious argument between the two of them, but I felt

like that time was coming now.

“Mama, are you involved in all of this?”

Oh, damn. I didn’t expect her to ask that question. I was expecting something along the lines of why she didn’t tell us or something close to that.

“Why would you think I was involved in this?”

“I mean, you didn’t bother telling me that my son had some issues at work. I’m his mother. I should have known.”

My grandmother frowned. “What makes you think I knew?”

“He’s here, isn’t he? Clearly, he’s been confiding in you. Instead of offering him sound advice, you’ve been coddling him like a child. If you want to blame someone for his behavior, make sure you include yourself. We all babied him, you and me even more so.”

My grandmother looked like she wanted to spit nails. Just as she stood from her seat, there was a knock on the door. We all stilled and became silent. Just as I figured, the police had probably come here to arrest him. Grandma went to the door. We remained quiet, and that was the only reason we heard my brother whisper, “I’m sorry.”

When my grandmother walked into the room with Kyrie, I was thoroughly surprised. Sam’s eyes widened for a moment, then he frowned. I stood from my seat. “Hey. What are you doing here?”

“I knew you would be having a hard time, so I’m here to comfort you... to be here for you.”

“Oh, I see what this is,” my brother said, suddenly finding his balls. “You tryna talk me into turning myself in because of him. He’s your primary concern now.”

I was so sick of this bull. I didn’t know why I became the punching bag in this situation, but I didn’t deserve it. I frowned hard as Kyrie wrapped his arm around me, trying to hold me in place.

I jerked away from him, though, and practically ran to my brother and slapped the spit out of his mouth. “You know, I’m so sick of being blamed for your lack of judgment. This has nothing to do with my love for him. This is about you! Even now, you lack the ability to take responsibility for your own actions!”

“Genesis, you put your hands on me again, you’re gonna see how much responsibility I will take. If it weren’t for me, you would still be fighting with Bransford. Actually, you wouldn’t even be the chief. How about that reality check? The only reason you are the chief is because of my influence, speaking up for you and making some things happen. You aren’t better than me, and I wish you’d stop acting like it.”

Kyrie stepped in front of me. My brother had just threatened me. It was time for me to go. I nodded my head repeatedly. “I see how it is, Samuel. All I’ve ever done was love you, but this is the treatment I get, because you can’t figure out how to be a productive citizen. Kyrie was even going to put in a word for you if it came down to it. After this, I won’t allow it. You get what you get. I’m done.”

I snatched up my ringing phone from the couch and walked out with Kyrie and my mother on my heels. My heart was hurting, because in no way did I expect to get attacked that way. I was so angry I couldn’t even cry. Samuel was only younger than me by a little under three years. Before I could get inside the car, Kyrie wrapped his strong arms around me from behind. “I’m so sorry, baby. Had I known my presence would have made this worse, I would have stayed home.”

“It’s not your fault. I was already under attack.”

I glanced at my mother, and she lowered her head and walked to my passenger side. I unlocked the doors so she could get in, then turned around in Kyrie’s arms. “I’ll meet you at my place after I take her home.”

“Okay. I love you, baby.”

“I love you too.”

I watched him walk to his car parked along the curb. Once he got inside, I got inside my car and backed out of the driveway. I swallowed the lump in my throat, wanting my anger to stay at the forefront. I was tired of crying over this situation. After all the heartache and anxiety I felt about this, to be attacked this way was so unfair. I didn’t deserve this, and I still couldn’t believe it had happened.

As I drove to my mother’s house, she said, “I’m so sorry, Genesis. This is all my fault. Growing up, I held you to a standard as the oldest. I was harder on you than I was on him, and it shows. Your grandmother and I both were. He’s our baby, but we crippled him. His reasons for doing this doesn’t even make sense to me. I think he’s lying, and honestly, I think Mama is lying too.”

I glanced at her as she slowly shook her head. “How did anyone know where Kyrie was unless she and Samuel were in cahoots?”

“Well, Samuel could have done that on his own. He had access to that information,” I deduced.

“I don’t know. Either that or she told him. I just... I don’t know. She’s defending him too hard. It’s like she has something to lose. I don’t like it.”

“Mama, she’s always defended him hard. She’s just never done that against me, especially when I had nothing to do with it. I’m just trying to figure out why he thinks he had something to do with me becoming chief.”

“Maybe he swayed some of the council members since two of them were arrested today.”

“Yeah, maybe so, but I don’t like how it makes me feel. It’s like he’s making it seem like I didn’t deserve my position. I worked hard, and I still do. Why did he think he needed to do that for me?”

My feelings spilled all over my face in the form of tears... the ones I thought I had in a chokehold. I truly wanted to resign at this point. I was the best person for the job. I knew I was, but knowing that he had something to do with why I got the position made me sick inside.

When I got to my mother’s house, I put the car in park and said, “I’m not going in. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Okay, baby. I guess I’ll watch the news to see when they catch up with him.”

I nodded as she got out of my car. I sat there until she was safely inside, then backed out and headed home. This was a day from hell, and I just wanted it to be over as soon as possible. I was thankful that I had Kyrie to lean on, because I needed the support more than ever. Not being able to count on my family for that was foreign to me. However, I knew there was nothing I could do to change that. It made me see just how they really felt, including my mother. Her first reaction was to blame me.

I’d never been so hurt. My daddy came to mind, and I could only wonder if things would have happened the way they did if he were still alive. It seemed it was me against the world now. I was the bad guy for caring and loving people who I thought

felt the same about me. My family turning on me revealed where we stood. I would stay in my bubble from now on because I never wanted to feel this empty again.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

The courthouse was in a frenzy. Everyone was suspect. Coworkers were turning on each other, and the place just felt cold. It had been a couple of days since warrants had been issued, and they had yet to catch up with Samuel. As I sat at my desk going over case notes, Tyson walked into my office. He slid his hand down his face and said, “You won’t believe who just got arrested.”

I rolled my eyes, not knowing if I even wanted to know. Slowly shaking my head, I asked, “Man, who now?”

“Kerry.”

I frowned. “The tax assessor?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised you didn’t hear the commotion in here. Everyone is in shock.”

I was surprised Stephanie hadn’t called me about that. I knew about everyone else beforehand.

“AJ called an emergency meeting. I’m pretty sure the media will be swarming that meeting like flies on shit.”

“A meeting with who?”

“All city employees and officials tomorrow evening. Since we work for the county, we get to miss out.”

He chuckled. I was grateful, because I had no desire to be amongst those people. My

mama was going to meet me at Genesis's house to cook for us tonight. Genesis had been going to work, but she was clearly affected by all of this. She was extremely withdrawn, far from the bubbly personality she normally was. I couldn't imagine my family turning on me that way. I just tried to be there for her as much as possible. Monday night, I held her in my arms the entire night, occasionally hearing her snuffle.

Feelings of sadness, hurt, anger, and even betrayal seemed to be crawling all over her, threatening to choke her to death, but the biggest issue was what her brother had said to her about being chief. Genesis was extremely independent and by the book. She worked hard for everything she had. Her brother made her feel unworthy of her title. No matter how much I told her she deserved it, for her quick thinking in my trauma situations alone, she couldn't seem to snap out of the funk his words put her in.

Her mother had been calling every day to check on her, but she didn't really want to talk to her. She told me even her mother had blamed her initially. I hated this for her, so I tried to fill all those shoes alone. I was failing miserably. Her grandmother had called too, and she refused to answer the phone. When she told me what Grandma Jean had said to her, I was in shock. I'd only met her sweet and fun sides. What she said to Genesis caught me by surprise.

I didn't feel like Grandma Jean was involved. I felt like the only thing she was guilty of was trying to protect a grown man and not making him accept responsibility for his actions. She might have even known about him being in trouble, but I highly doubted she was accepting money or anything like that, except for when she was a safehouse for someone. I wondered what the going rate for that sort of thing was.

I looked over at Tyson to see him gathering his things. It was getting to be about that time. I was ready to head out of here and start my evening as well. However, my office phone rang, halting all progress. I went to it and saw the mayor pro tem's number. I frowned slightly, already sensing that I wouldn't like this call. I answered. "Kyrie Patrick."

“Judge Patrick. How are you this evening?”

“I’m good. How about you?”

“Good. I have a huge favor to ask of you. We’re having a meeting tomorrow evening with all city officials. I know that you are a county official, but since a lot of this concerns you, I wanted to ask if you would join us for the meeting, possibly filling us in on missing information.”

I rolled my eyes. “I would join, but I can’t say that I know any more than you do. You would need to get with the detectives on that.”

“Yes, sir. They will be in attendance as well. Thank you. We need to get to the bottom of what’s going on, because this is wrong on so many levels, not to mention embarrassing. First BISD, now the city. We owe the citizens of Beaumont better.”

I nodded. There was no way I would tell those people anything I knew. There was no way to know who was clean and who was dirty in that meeting. I supposed he thought all the guilty parties had been arrested. “That they do, sir. Do you mind if my bailiff comes?”

Tyson frowned at me, causing me to chuckle. I was more than sure he was wondering what I was roping him into.

“I don’t mind at all. See you tomorrow night, Judge.”

I ended the call without acknowledging his last statement. Looking up at Tyson with a smirk on my lips, I said, “We have to go to that meeting tomorrow night.”

“Maaaaaan, for real?”

“Yep. I asked for you to go because I need someone there that I trust. I don’t know AJ like that, and everybody else can be suspect.”

He slowly shook his head. “A’ight. But ain’t your woman gon’ be there?”

“She most likely will since she’s a city employee, but my job is to protect her, not have her in the trenches with me.”

He huffed. “I guess. See you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, man.”

He left out, and I prepared to leave for the day to be with my love. I grabbed my briefcase and my cell phone from the desk to head her way until I saw Stephanie standing in my doorway. I frowned slightly, because I felt a way about her not telling me about the tax assessor. She lifted her hands when she saw my facial expression. “I apologize. I had to keep that one under wraps until I got the warrant. As soon as I got it, I went and got her ass.”

“Why did you have to keep it under wraps?”

“The lieutenant said her family was amongst the affluent of Beaumont and that I couldn’t tell a soul until it was in the bag. When I got the warrant, I wanted to get to her before she left the premises. She was the financial mastermind... had to be. She even went as far as padding taxes to get what they needed. Once this is all over, the city may have to file Chapter 9 bankruptcy.”

My eyebrows lifted. This was unreal. Not only were they betraying the citizens’ trust, but they were beating them out of their hard-earned money. She was right. The public outrage would be so great people would probably start to move out. Not to mention, the city would have to reimburse those overpayments for however many years it was

going on. Then the financial structure would be unstable and would likely crumble without a bailout.

“That’s crazy. Well, I will be at the meeting tomorrow. The mayor called and asked me to attend.”

She nodded. “I figured he would. It was because of your diligence and judgment about this case that got us as far as we’ve gotten. It seemed they were just fine with letting Darlene hang for it all... no pun intended.”

I slowly shook my head. This was wild. “They only brought attention to themselves by coming after me.”

“Yeah. I’m more than sure they thought you would be dead by now though. Had it not been for Genesis, that last car accident would have taken you out for sure, even though it wouldn’t have been at their hands. Mister Coler probably has had a moment of reflection and regret by now though, since his sentence of forty years.”

I nodded slowly. “Possibly.”

I hadn’t even thought about Coler. My focus had been on Genesis and her family. I just wanted to make sure she was good. I didn’t even go to the arraignment. I really didn’t care. It was because of his actions that I was able to see myself for who I was. “Has Samuel Farris surfaced yet?”

“No. We’ve been watching his grandmother’s house as well as his. He may have skipped town on us, but it’s only a matter of time before we track him down. I feel like his grandmother knows exactly where he is, but she keeps saying she doesn’t. You think Genesis may be able to find out?”

I took a deep breath as I shook my head. “Not at all. She hasn’t spoken to anyone in

her family since the warrant was issued. Somehow, they all blamed her for this.”

Stephanie frowned. “What?”

“You heard me right. Everything from her being too hard on him to her putting me before protecting her brother. It’s crazy. Could have sworn he was a kid. She’s been depressed about it all week. So, I’m on my way to her now.”

“Okay. I didn’t mean to hold you up. How’s the house repairs going?”

I huffed as we walked out the door. “That bad, huh?” she asked.

“They haven’t started yet. The insurance is holding everything up. I just want to get it fixed. I mean, I’m enjoying my time with Genesis, but there’s no place like home. I would much rather she stay with me.”

She slowly shook her head. “Well, whatever. Enjoy your time with your lady, and I’ll see you tomorrow. If something comes up before then, I’ll text you. I still haven’t found anything proving the lieutenant’s involvement, but I still want to be extremely careful.”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

I walked away from her before she kept talking. She seemed extremely talkative today. She probably thought I was pissed about her not letting me know about Kerry. I still somewhat was. No one could be trusted these days. Kerry stealing from the citizens had caught me by surprise. Some people could barely afford to pay their property taxes, and she was padding their bill. That would most likely be a federal crime.

When I got to my car, I noticed a damn note on the windshield. I rolled my eyes. I

was so sick of this bullshit. However, when I pulled it off the windshield, I saw it was from Tyson. He'd written on the outside of it, This is from Tyson.

I pulled it from the wiper and got in the car, not wanting anyone to see me reading it. Once I cranked up, I opened the note. It simply read, Don't trust nobody. I overheard someone talking about a couple of detectives that were working for the opps. Keep your eyes open, and I got your back in case you miss something.

That put me on edge. I wondered who he'd overheard. He didn't put names. I slid my hand down my face and pulled out of my parking spot. Although things seemed to be getting more intense, I knew they were wrapping up. People were starting to scramble, doing what they could to protect their identities and hide their misdeeds.

As I racked my brain, trying to think of who else could be involved, I was turning into Genesis's driveway. My mama was already there, waiting for me. When I got out of the car, she hopped out of hers with a huge smile on her face. I couldn't help but reciprocate it, although my mind was in turmoil.

"Hey, Mama," I said as I made my way to her.

"Hey, baby. Can you help me with the bags?"

I frowned slightly. "What all did you buy?"

She frowned back. "You know Genesis is my girl. I bought turkey legs, cabbage, cornbread, stuff to make maque choux, and sweet potatoes."

"All that?"

"Don't act like Genesis don't deserve all that. I bought stuff to make lemon bars as well. Her mom said it was her favorite dessert."

“I didn’t say she didn’t deserve it, Ma, but I don’t want it to take you all night to cook either.”

“Come on here, boy. Only an hour or two.”

I rolled my eyes and led my mama to the back door. Once I unlocked the door, Mama made a beeline to the kitchen, and I went to the bedroom to take a shower so I could help her. As I put my things down, I figured it would be better to go help her prep, then take my shower. It wasn’t like I would be able to help her cook.

I changed into shorts and a T-shirt then made my way back to the kitchen. When I did, my mother said, “I was wondering where you went. You worried about the time, but yo’ ass ain’t in here helping me.”

“Okay, okay. I’m here now. What do you need me to do?”

“I need a sous chef. You can mix the cornbread batter and cut up sausage for the maque choux for me while I season this meat and get it to the oven.”

I nodded and dove all the way in to make sure this would be a night Genesis would remember and appreciate. I wasn’t sure if she liked creole food, but maque choux was the truth. It was a corn dish that my mama made. She found a recipe on TikTok, and we loved it. She doesn’t cook it as often as she did when she first found the recipe, but whenever she cooked it, we rarely had leftovers.

I couldn’t help but smile as I cut up sausage. Despite the foolishness in that note from Tyson, I knew tonight would be a good night. While I knew Genesis’s family would eventually come around, and she would welcome them back into her life, I wanted to cater to her mental state as of right now. She was saying she was done with them, but I knew her heart. She was speaking from places of hurt and anger. She loved her family and was just a loving individual.

Her mother was already trying to make things right. However, she told her that would be done in her time, not theirs. I had a feeling that time would be coming soon, because she was so depressed and lost without them. Her heart wasn't going to let her stay angry too much longer. They'd messed up, especially Grandma Jean, but I knew they loved her. She knew it too.

"Put the sausage in this pot, Kyrie. I've started the fire, so after you're done mixing the cornbread, you can sauté them while I work on the cabbage."

"Yes, ma'am."

I added her cut vegetables to the pot as well then checked the next thing off my to-do list. "Thank you for doing this, Mama. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to help me cater to my one."

She smiled. "I've been waiting for the day you would find someone to love and that would reciprocate that love. Genesis is perfect for you, so I don't mind doing whatever to help you make her feel special."

She pinched my cheek then went back to her cabbage. I smiled as I thought about how she used to do that to my fat cheeks when I was a kid. That was her way of showing affection. Now that I was grown, though, it made me feel like her little boy again. Those were happy times, receiving her praise and love. I had to admit, I was a mama's boy because of that. Thankfully, I wasn't too spoiled to where I was useless. She showed me how to be a man and to appreciate women, especially the right one.

Those lessons definitely came in handy, because I wanted to love and appreciate Genesis for the rest of her life, and we'd only been together a couple of months. Destiny had found me, and I was thankful that it forced me to recognize it through all this trauma. I couldn't regret a thing that had happened, because it led her to me.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

As I sat at my desk, I watched my phone ring. The media were like vultures, and they didn't give up, even when a person blatantly told them to get lost. I literally wanted to change my number, but I knew that, somehow, it would get leaked all over again, and it would all be for nothing. Samuel was still in the wind, and people were accusing me of knowing exactly where he was. His bullshit had me under the microscope. My chief had been up here twice this week already, "checking on things."

As if my family blaming me wasn't enough, the community and city officials thought I had something to do with it as well. If it got out that Samuel had indeed said something to members of the council about appointing me, I would be out of here on the first thing smoking. I would be guilty until proven innocent, simply because of his actions. He didn't even see how his actions affected everyone else. Somehow, I was the bad guy though.

Work had been uneventful... not a fire or emergency call in sight. My week was filled with paperwork and equipment maintenance. I checked the time to see it was already five thirty. Thankfully, the time had still gone by pretty fast. The only downside to getting off was being bombarded by media. I'd gotten some sympathetic looks from my fellow firefighters, but I'd also garnered some hateful ones as well. The stress of it all was crippling, but I knew I had to keep showing up. If I didn't, the allegations would spread like wildfire.

Just as I was gathering my things and shutting down my computer for the day, Bransford appeared in my doorway. Out of all the people against me, I knew he would be leading the way. He hadn't said much to me, but he'd given the sympathetic looks and smiles I needed. I gave him a soft smile. "Hi, Bransford. How can I help you?"

He stepped inside and cleared his throat. “I needed to come clean about my behavior before you were promoted. I couldn’t do so before.”

I frowned slightly and gestured for him to take a seat. I was curious as well. I thought he was just a jackass, but now, since he brought it up, I was the only one he treated that way. He only treated Micah that way when she was with me. I’d witnessed their one-on-one interaction, and it was never as heated as it was when she was with me. I couldn’t believe it took all this time for me to realize that. I probably wouldn’t have realized it had it not been for his statement.

After he sat, I said, “Okay. I’m listening,”

He nodded. “I’ve known about your brother for a while. Not many people know, but Lieutenant Gamble is my cousin. He told me about all the issues he was having with Samuel. He believed Samuel was involved in something, because his write-ups would never get him anywhere, like Samuel was his superior. He could never find proof of anything though. So, I took his disdain with your brother out on you. I truly apologize.”

My eyebrows had lifted, and my lips had parted. “Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“My cousin asked me not to. He wasn’t supposed to be sharing that information with me. He had suspicions but no proof to back any of it up. So instead of being neutral in the situation, I took it out on you because I made the assumption you were as dirty as he was. At least that was what I thought at first. After working with you for a while, I realized you were nothing like him. I realized how dedicated you were to this job and helping people. That didn’t change my behavior, though, because again, I was taking my frustrations with him out on you.”

I was in shock. Not only did Samuel’s actions threaten my job, but they affected my

work relationships as well. I swallowed hard.

“Thank you for telling me that. I had no idea. When he was implicated in all this mess, it hurt me to my soul. I would have never thought he was capable of corruption at this level. However, what hurt even more is that my character is being called into question by everyone, including my own family. People I work with are accusing me of being a part of this mess, and my family is accusing me of throwing my brother under the bus for Judge Patrick. I just...”

I closed my eyes and gently rubbed my temples until I felt his hands on mine. He pulled them away from my head and held them in his. “You are an amazing human being. Just keep being who you are, Chief. All this will blow over soon. No one knows who to trust in all this. As far as your family goes, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. They should know you better than anyone.”

He gently caressed the tops of my hands with his thumbs then released them. “Thank you for that.” I stood from my seat, and he did so as well. “Will you be at the meeting tomorrow night?”

He frowned. “What meeting?”

“A mandatory meeting was called with city workers and officials.”

“I didn’t hear anything about it. Was it emailed?”

“Yes, about an hour or so ago.”

“Oh. I haven’t checked my email yet. I guess I’ll be there then,” he said, then chuckled.

I smiled at him as my cell phone vibrated on the desk. Closing my eyes without even

looking at the caller ID, I huffed.

“It’s Micah this time,” Bransford said, then gave me a smile and left the office.

I smiled slightly and answered. “Hello?”

“Hey, boo. How are you?”

“I’m okay, considering. How are you?”

“Sick of being in bed. I’d rather run into a burning building,” she said, then giggled.

I rolled my eyes. “You do that anyway sometimes, Micah. The gist of it is you’re supposed to rather do something you wouldn’t normally do.”

I chuckled as I listened to her laugh. “Okay. Well, I’d rather kiss Bransford’s ass.”

That produced a laugh out of me. When I calmed down, I said, “Actually, he’s alright with me now. I’ll explain it in person. How are you really?”

She sighed and remained quiet for a moment. “I’m okay. I’m just nervous. I have preeclampsia. They are treating it and caught it pretty early, but I’m just hoping I don’t have lasting effects of it or my baby.”

“Is Kevin helping at all?”

“Yeah, he is. He’s been great, actually.”

“Good. Well, try to stay calm. You being nervous and stressing about it can only make it worse, right?”

“Yeah. How are you and the judge?”

“We’re great. I’m about to head home to him now. I’m glad you called to check on me. I didn’t want to bug you with my issues, and now that I know your condition, I’m glad I didn’t. What are you having? Did you cave and ask the technician?”

“I did indeed cave. The suspense of it all was driving me crazy. I’m having a little princess. Hopefully, she won’t have my attitude. With all the trouble she’s causing, it will probably be worse.”

She chuckled, and I laughed with her. “Well, congratulations! I will call and check on you tomorrow, and I’ll try to go see you over the weekend.”

“That would be great. Love you, Genesis. Keep your head up.”

“Thanks, and love you too. Talk to you soon.”

I ended the call and took a deep breath, preparing to deal with the hoopla outside, then grabbed my things and headed out. When I got to the door, I quickly walked out, power walking to my car, only to realize no one was out here. I looked around and saw the crews on the street, but no one was at the door. When I turned back to the door, Bransford was standing there. “Have a good evening, Chief.”

I nearly wanted to cry. After swallowing hard, I said, “Thank you, Bransford. You too.”

He nodded and went back inside once I got in my vehicle. I drove away, thanking God for small favors.

When I turned in the driveway, I saw that Kyrie had beat me here. I was shocked that he didn’t text or call. Usually, if he got off early, he sent a text to discuss dinner

plans. I supposed I had better mentally prepare to cook something. It was after six o'clock already, so I had better get a move on. Maybe we should go out for dinner if he was up to it. I didn't know what type of day he'd had to endure. That was probably why he hadn't communicated. It was probably horrible.

As I got to the back door and fished in my purse for my keys, I smelled food. I frowned. Kyrie didn't really cook like that. It smelled like Ms. Carolyn's cooking. Once I got my keys out, I quickly unlocked the back door and walked in to find my man standing in the middle of the floor, shirtless and with a single red rose in his hand.

The tears sprang from my eyes out of nowhere. He looked so amazing. I didn't know if my appetite had increased for the food or him. His beard was glistening under the recess lighting, and his skin was oiled, begging me to trace the tattoos on his chest with my tongue. His lips looked moist and ready to be kissed as his gaze penetrated my core.

My eyes slid down his body to the black dress pants he wore and just how tight they were becoming, down to his bare feet. Jesus. The man was truly blessed in the looks department, but it was the parts of him that couldn't be seen with the physical eye that kept me fiending for his time, attention, and touch. His heart was gold, his soul was pure, and his mind was brilliant. I loved all three components that made him him.

I slowly made my way to him, dropping my things to the floor along the way. His eyes never left me, and I couldn't dare tear my gaze away from him either. It was like he was silently summoning me to him. When I got close, I stood there silently staring into his eyes as he extended the rose to me. "Hey, baby," he said in a soft voice.

My eyes closed just as I took the rose from him. He leaned over, nuzzling his nose in my neck. "Hey," I whispered.

He kissed me right beneath my ear then grabbed my hand and led me to the bedroom. My heart was so full, I knew if I said another word, I would break down emotionally. Once inside, he turned to me and began taking my clothes off. As I stood quietly, I could hear the faint sounds of jazz coming from my bathroom. God, what was he doing to me? How did he know I needed this?

Once he'd fully disrobed me, he slowly scanned my body and licked his thick lips. When his eyes made their way back to mine, he said, "You're so beautiful, baby."

"Thank you. You are so handsome... inside and out."

He licked his lips again and bit the bottom one as he pulled me closer to him, my breasts pressed against his chest. Lowering his head, he kissed my lips slowly, pulling my bottom lip into his mouth. I slid my hands up his chest and circled my arms around his neck as his hands slid down my back and rested at the small of it.

When he pulled away, I followed him part of the way. I needed him in the worst way. He grabbed my hand and asked, "How was your day?"

"Who cares?"

He gave me a one-sided smile and led me to the bathroom. "I care. How was it?" he asked as he opened the door.

I was stunned into silence. There were candles lit, soft jazz was playing, and there were rose petals in my bubble bath. There was also a glass of wine on the side of the tub. I couldn't stop the tears from falling if I wanted to. I turned to him and said, "This is beautiful, Kyrie. Thank you. My day was okay, actually. Not nearly as bad as it has been. What about yours?"

"Good. Like you said, who cares? This evening is about you. I'm glad you like it.

While you relax, I'm gonna go make sure dinner is done. I'll be back to bathe you."

He was about to leave, but I grabbed his hand. "And like you said, I care. How was it?"

"Shitty, but we can talk about that another time. I don't want anything to ruin the ambiance I'm trying to create."

I nodded as I looked around the bathroom again, loving the ambiance so far. However, my mind had gone elsewhere, trying to figure out what could have happened today.

"Look at me, Genesis."

My eyes slid over to his, and he continued. "Don't think about anything that doesn't have to do with me and you. Think about how badly I want you but how I'm willing to cater to your every need, putting yours ahead of my own. Think about how much I love and cherish you. Think about how happy we are together. Things like that should keep your mind right where it should be tonight."

I nodded then leaned in with puckered lips. He obliged me and softly kissed them. "I'll be right back."

He assisted me in the tub, and after I was seated in the hot water, he left me alone. I lay back on the bath pillow, thinking about how perfect Kyrie was for me... how I couldn't wait to spend the rest of my life with him. I wondered if he was thinking about forever like I was. There was no way he couldn't be thinking about the future with as passionate as he was with me. While we hadn't been together a long time, our spirits felt like they'd known one another for years, especially the first time we were intimate in New York a little over six months ago. Nothing about that moment seemed weird.

When I heard the door open, I turned to him to see he had shed the pants and was only wearing his black boxer briefs, his erection teasing me. He went to his knees and grabbed the glass of wine, putting it to my lips so I could get a sip. Once he set it down, he grabbed my loofah and squirted some Dove bodywash onto it. Before he started washing me, though, he slid his fingertips down the side of my face.

He took a deep breath and began washing me, taking his time as if I was his prized possession. He thoroughly cleaned every part of me, and when I stood, he rinsed me off with the sprayer on the side of the tub. Neither of us had spoken a word, but our stares were intense. He grabbed a towel to wrap around me, then led me to the bedroom where he proceeded to pat me dry. There was lotion and oil situated on the nightstand and a fresh towel on the bed for me to lie on.

When I turned around to look at him, he said, “Lay down so I can give you a miniature massage, then we’ll go eat.”

I frowned slightly. “You actually think I’m going to be able to make it through all of this without trying to attack you and take what’s mine? I’m so turned on right now my bath water should have been boiling from the heat my body is emitting.”

He smiled playfully. “Mm hmm. You don’t have a choice.”

“Lies,” I rebutted. “You’re suffering just like I am.”

As I lay in the bed, he put oil in his hands with a slight smile on his lips and began rubbing my upper torso slowly but firmly. My eyes fluttered shut, and a moan left my lips. I couldn’t contain it. His touch was driving me insane. Once he’d done my front, I turned over on my stomach, and that was when things took a turn. He rubbed me firmly still, but he paid extra attention to my backside.

A smile made its way to my lips because that was one of his favorite parts of my

body. He'd once told me that when he stared at it for too long, his mouth watered. He stopped briefly, then I felt his body slide on top of mine. I looked over my shoulder at him. He pecked my lips and said, "I only want to hear your moans. No I told you so's."

I giggled as he kissed my nose, then my ear and neck. "I love you, Kyrie."

He pushed inside of me before responding. "I love you more, girl."

He stroked me slowly and passionately, moaning as he did so. His moans were heating me up beyond belief. I loved to hear his moans. It let me know just how much he loved making love to me. Moans from a man signified what was in his heart. I was in his heart, and it felt so good to him for me to be there, he could only moan in response. Sex with him had so much meaning. We weren't just having sex; we were making love.

"Genesis, damn, baby. I love the way you feel... not just physically, but the way you feel to my soul. Even when I was running from you, I knew you were the woman for me. I knew you would be the woman to show me what it truly meant to love a woman. Everything in me is in awe of you. I want to continue feeling that for the rest of my life. Damn!"

My orgasm had surfaced during his words to me, and I knew those words played a huge role in why it surfaced so quickly. I screamed out my intense pleasure as he continued to stroke me at the same pace. I wasn't sure how he was able to do that without letting the intensity of the moment take over, but he somehow accomplished the feat.

When my body had begun to relax again, Kyrie said, "This is sooooo good, Genesis. Damn."

My eyes became watery, and I couldn't even explain why. It was like he was making love to my soul. He kissed my cheek then my shoulder then rolled over to his back next to me. I lifted my head to stare at him. He licked his lips and said, "Mount up, baby. I want to stare into your eyes."

My body trembled at his words, and I did as he said. I straddled him and slid down his pole like I'd been called out for a fire and began rolling my hips. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as I enjoyed every stroke.

"Open your eyes, Genesis."

When I slowly opened them, I noticed he had something in his hand. I frowned slightly until he opened it. The tears sprang from my eyes once again as I stared at the platinum beauty. I brought my hands to my mouth as audible cries left my lips. Somehow, Kyrie kept making love to me, touching my G-spot in ways it had never been touched. My orgasm was rising to the surface once again as he asked, "Will you agree to be my forever, baby?"

My orgasm grabbed ahold of me and refused to turn me loose. "Yeeeeesss!" I practically screamed out.

Kyrie set the ring on the bed and wrapped his arms around my waist and plummeted my goodness until he released in my depths. I lay on his chest, feeling our hearts beat in sync while trying to get my breathing under control. The tears wouldn't stop falling, but they were happy tears. I was beyond happy to have him in my life.

"Kyrie, I love you so much. I will gladly be your wife. You showed me love in ways I didn't think you were capable of. I'd be a fool to want to live the rest of my life without you."

He continued to hold me and kissed my forehead. "Even in all the turmoil, I'm the

happiest I've ever been. Tomorrow isn't promised to anyone, and I refused to go another day without taking a step toward making us official."

"Your timing is perfect. I can't wait to be Missus Kyrie Jameel Patrick."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:14 am

I grabbed Genesis's hand as we arrived at the entrance of the courthouse. When I got off work, we'd gone out for dinner then made our way back here. I kissed her hand then glanced at the ring I'd slid on her finger last night. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I wanted her to be my wife a month or so ago. My mama was gonna be pissed that I didn't tell her that was what I was preparing. However, I knew if I told her of my plans, she would have found a way to screw them up.

She would have been way too excited and would have wanted to be there for when I asked the question. It wouldn't have been nearly as passionate as it was. She wouldn't have left the house in time, and Genesis would have known something was up. I didn't want Gen to know it was coming. I wanted to catch her completely off guard. If I would have been taking too long, Mama would have probably popped the question for me.

I opened the door for my wife-to-be, and we were both stunned when we saw Samuel being escorted in handcuffs. "Samuel!" Genesis yelled.

He didn't look at her. He kept his head lowered in embarrassment. I wasn't sure how they'd found him, but obviously, they had. I put my arm around her and pulled her closer to me. Stephanie appeared next to us and said, "I'm sorry you had to see him that way before I could inform you that we found him at a hotel in Nederland."

Nederland was only about twenty minutes from here. If he was gonna go somewhere, I couldn't understand why he wouldn't go further. This whole thing was weird to me. He could have at least gone to Houston. I slowly shook my head as Stephanie patted my back. She walked away, and I looked around to see if Tyson was here yet. When I didn't see him, Genesis and I proceeded into the auditorium where the meeting would

be held.

Surprisingly, there were only about twenty people here so far, and we were only ten minutes ahead of schedule. Apparently, feeling the discomfort I felt, Genesis frowned. "I wonder why no one else is here yet."

"I know. I don't like this. It feels weird, like others know something we weren't privy to."

Genesis held my hand tightly as we sat, looking around at everyone here. So far, there were only a few police officers, one of which responded to the house fire at my house, a judge, and a few office personnel, along with roads and drainage workers. Stephanie joined us inside and kind of glanced around as we had done. She sat next to me and said, "I guess everyone is running late."

"Mm hmm," I responded, offering no other words.

Suddenly, what Tyson said in that note yesterday came back to me. Just as I was about to stand from my seat, Stephanie pulled her weapon and aimed it at me. She slowly shook her head and chuckled as Genesis wrapped her arms around me from behind.

"You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?" she asked.

I couldn't respond, because it seemed my tongue was on hiatus. The one person I chose to trust was dirty. The feeling I had in my gut was definitely misinterpreted concerning her. As she held us at gunpoint, I looked around the room to see other people watching but doing nothing. We got invited to a damn team meeting. "You can't expect to get away with this in the courthouse."

"Oh, but we do," she said as Samuel was pushed inside. "You see, Samuel was

disgruntled about being found and arrested and somehow stole a gun from officers and opened fire on the entire room.”

When he stood next to her, she handed him the gun. He was trembling. I could tell he was being forced to do this. He didn’t want to kill anybody. I also had to assume they were altering the camera systems as well. It seemed all of this would be picked up on if they hadn’t.

“Samuel! What are you doing?” Genesis yelled as she stepped to the side of me.

I stepped in front of her again and swallowed hard. I didn’t know how I would escape death this time, but I was praying in my spirit that He spared us once again.

“Genesis, I didn’t want to do this. I knew if I turned myself in, they would get to me. That was why I didn’t want to do that. They found me anyway. I never wanted anyone to get hurt, especially not Darlene. She always looked out for me.”

I frowned. “Darlene killed herself,” I said. “She couldn’t bear the guilt of the crimes she’d committed.”

He slowly shook his head and lifted the gun to where it was aimed at my head. Tears fell down his cheeks as AJ entered the room. He gave us a wicked smile and said, “I thought y’all would have handled this by now. What’s the hold up?”

“Do it, Farris!” Stephanie yelled.

“Please, Sam. Don’t do this. I love you so much. You’re willing to kill me? Your big sister who taught you to tie your shoes? The one who read books to you at night and taught you to play baseball? You can’t, Sammy. Pleeaaaaaasse. I don’t want to die, but I will die for Kyrie, and I know he will do the same for me. You know how I know?”

She held her hand up to show him her ring. The gun lowered some as he stared at it. “He asked to marry me last night. I won’t allow him to die unless you kill me too. I refuse to live without him. I know it’s the same for him.”

“Good, because we didn’t intend for either of you to make it out of here alive! Shoot them!” Stephanie yelled then pushed Samuel.

The gun went off, causing Genesis and me to hit the floor. When I heard her moan, I spun around to see her wincing in pain. “Genesis! Nooo! Where are you hit at, baby?”

I looked over her body and didn’t see blood until I got to her foot. There was blood all over it. I quickly began unbuttoning my shirt, prepared to tie her foot with it, when I felt the barrel of the gun pressed to the back of my head. Genesis’s eyes widened as I stared at her. The tears were falling down her cheeks. I gently swiped them with my hand.

“I love you so much, baby.”

“Noooooo!” she screamed. “Sammy, please!”

“I’m so sorry, Genesis! I have to do it.”

“No, you don’t! They are going to kill you too. Can’t you see that? They aren’t going to let you live to tell about this. They aren’t going to take that risk! Please. I’m begging you. Ooooh my God,” Genesis said as I glanced down at her foot.

She was losing a lot of blood. Suddenly, there was a gunshot, and Samuel fell to the floor as Genesis screamed and cried. Her agony at this moment was tearing me apart, and I wanted to comfort her so badly. AJ was standing there with his weapon and slowly shook his head. “This emotional shit is on my last nerve. Genesis, I hate you

got wrapped up in this. You really are a good person. Despite Samuel speaking up for you, you deserved to be chief. Unfortunately, there is no way you can live with what all you know. I know you know a lot since you're tied to this man."

He cocked the gun and pointed it toward us. I lay on top of her, trying to do anything to buy time, hoping someone would intervene before he could get to her.

"You, though. Man, you are too smart for your own good. This had nothing to do with you. We were running Beaumont until Darlene had to mess up and take too much money at once. She drew attention to us, and she had to go. Making it look like she did it herself was great work by the C.O. Now you will have to suffer the same fate."

Stephanie smiled as AJ aimed his weapon and was about to fire until a bullet went right through his head then another through Stephanie's. I closed my eyes, feeling relief flood my being. Easing off Genesis, I looked up to see Tyson standing there. He looked at us and yelled, "We need a bus! Who's hit?"

Blood was all over the floor and was on both of us as well. "Genesis got shot in the foot."

I quickly took off my shirt, what I was attempting to do earlier, to make a tourniquet for her foot. I needed to slow the blood loss as much as possible. She was starting to blink slowly. "Baby, this is about to really hurt."

When I pulled my shirt tighter around her foot, she yelled out in pain. I immediately went to her and held her in my arms as Tyson knelt to check Sam's pulse. "Yo! He still has a pulse!"

Lieutenant Gamble and Genesis's coworker, Bransford, came over where we were. I recognized him from the news when he was seeking the appointment against Genesis.

He knelt beside her and grabbed her hand as he nodded at me. “Chief, we got you. You’re gonna be okay.”

Genesis nodded as I stared at her, doing my best to hold in my emotions, but I failed miserably. A couple of tears fell down my cheeks as she stared at me. I was so scared I was either going to lose her or she would lose me. Either way, I didn’t want to be without her. Heaven could wait. She brought her free hand to mine and gently held my cheek.

I could hear sirens, so I turned to Tyson. “Man, I owe you my life. We were about to die. How did you get in here?”

“I knew you had plans with your lady last night, so after I left the note, I went to the fire station. I knew Bransford was cool with Lieutenant Gamble. I didn’t want to risk anyone seeing me at the police station and overhearing what I had to say. I didn’t even want to write names in that note just in case someone else got ahold of it first. I was risking a lot by putting my name on it. I overheard one of the detectives talking to an engineer about making sure the cameras wouldn’t be functional tonight.”

He slowly shook his head. “I knew we needed to get a team together and fast. Gamble got at least thirty officers to show up here tonight, and that was how we were able to get in. Carl joined us as well. He said there is a camera that isn’t on the same network as the others. Not many people know that.”

“Carl... the DA?”

“Yeah. I was worried that he was one of them for a while, since he didn’t seem to be investigating anything after Darlene, but to my surprise, he was. He has an entire file on who were suspected players. He just couldn’t take a chance saying anything to anyone about it.”

I nodded as paramedics rushed inside, going to Samuel first. When the bullet hit him, I thought he was gone. Clearly, AJ wasn't as good a shot as he thought he was if he still had a pulse. I knew he didn't shoot him in the head, but I was sure he'd gotten him in the chest from the back. Not long after, another set of medics came in to see about Genesis. I looked down at her to see her eyes were closed.

Just as I was about to panic, she opened them. "I'm going to be okay, Kyrie. I just feel tired from the blood loss."

I nodded then released her so they could get to her and get her to the hospital. I stood from the floor and shook Tyson's hand then pulled him in for a hug. "You are the definition of a true friend. Whenever Genesis and I set a date, I want you to be my best man."

He frowned slightly. "You proposed?"

"Yeah. Last night, man."

He smiled and shook my hand again. "Congratulations. God definitely has some things He wants you to do. You got more lives than a cat. There was no way I was going to sit idle after what I'd heard. You're my boy. You want me to call anybody?"

"Yeah. Call my mama and Genesis's mother."

I gave him their phone numbers as I watched Bransford watch Genesis. To say he was so adamant about her not being chief, they seemed extremely close now. That was probably why her day wasn't too bad yesterday. They'd probably cleared the air. We didn't get to talk about a thing last night. After my proposal, we could barely concentrate long enough to eat. Every moment was consumed with me showing her how much I loved her and how happy I was for our future.

That almost came to an end tonight. Had Tyson and Lieutenant Gamble been five seconds later, Genesis and I would both be dead. I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, then followed the paramedics out to the ambulance. This was finally over and probably would have been over if I weren't so quick to trust Stephanie Johnson. Seeing her go out like this was hard, but at that moment, it was either her or us. She'd impeded the investigation and made it seem like she was making progress. I was a fool to think that she had my best interest at heart.

When I got into the back of the ambulance with Genesis, I watched them set up her IV then give her fluids and pain medication as we made our way to the hospital. I grabbed her hand and stroked her head with my other hand, staring into her eyes, grateful that God spared us.

"We have to get married ASAP, Kyrie," she said quietly. "I don't want another day to pass without me being Missus Patrick, wife of the esteemed Judge Kyrie Patrick."

"Whatever you want is what we will do, baby, but I totally agree."

"I saw they took my brother out on a gurney. He's still alive?"

"He still had a pulse, so yes. Of course he's extremely critical, but he's alive."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she nodded. "Did you call your mother? I'm sure all of this is on the news by now."

"I got Tyson to call her and your mother."

She nodded and drifted off just as we were turning in the hospital parking lot. My heart was heavy, thinking about how I could have lost her tonight. Hearing her say that the only way I would die was if she died, too, moved me in ways indescribable. Hearing her words of devotion and loyalty was overwhelming. She was the woman

I'd been needing and after tonight, there wasn't a single doubt in my mind that she was who I was intended to spend the rest of my life with.

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TWO WEEKS LATER...

“You may now kiss your bride.”

Kyrie leaned over and kissed me passionately on my lips like no one was watching. I held on to him tightly, making sure I kept my balance. The applause and Tyson yelling, “That’s enough!” caused us to separate.

I flopped down in my wheelchair and glanced at Micah in her wheelchair. She was still on bedrest, but she wouldn’t hear of me getting married without her being a part of it. We smiled at each other, then I told her, “Okay. Get back home. You have to deliver a healthy little princess soon. You can’t have my god baby cutting up because you won’t listen.”

She rolled her eyes, and her boyfriend wheeled her closer to me. She kissed my cheek and said, “I’m so happy for you. I thought I had lost you when I saw the news. Bransford finally did something right,” she said loudly so he would hear her.

He rolled his eyes as I chuckled. “Thanks, girl.”

She squeezed my hand, then they left. The past two weeks had been tough. Thankfully, Kyrie had been taking excellent care of me. There was only soft tissue injuries except one bone fracture. The bullet had gotten me right in the top of the foot. When Stephanie pushed Samuel, the gun pointed downward. Seeing the footage from the alternate camera was hard. My mental issues from that night were far worse than the physical ones.

I had nightmares for the first week continuously, even when I was only napping. Everything that happened that night played through my head on repeat whenever my eyes closed. I was still going through counseling to get through it. Kyrie was in counseling as well. Although I'd recommended it for him, I didn't have to put too much effort into urging him. He received my advice the first time I suggested he see a therapist.

As I waited for Kyrie to come back to me, I noticed Grandma walking toward me. We hadn't spoken in three weeks. It hurt me to my heart the way she treated me. She'd come to my hospital room to see me, but we didn't talk about anything of significance concerning our relationship. I knew she was hoping to speak to me privately, but she wouldn't get that moment today, that was for sure.

When she got close, she grabbed my hand as tears graced her cheeks. "Congratulations, baby. I'm happy for your new beginnings with the man of your dreams."

"Thank you."

"I know today isn't the day, but I hope to be able to talk to you soon. I owe you a few apologies for the things I said and the way I treated you. You are my only granddaughter, and I love you dearly, although I wasn't great at showing it this past month. Please let me know when you have time."

I nodded. "Okay."

She gently stroked my cheek with the backs of her fingers, then she left. I was more than sure she had to get back to Samuel. He was the only officer shot that wasn't wearing a vest. They were going to kill him anyway, so he surely didn't need a vest. Tyson and Gamble had shot AJ and Stephanie in their heads because they knew they would be wearing vests. I was so happy that I didn't really see that happen. Kyrie was shielding me from it all.

When he laid his body on top of mine, the only thing I could see was his white shirt and neck. He was willing to die for me, and I would never forget that. However, my nightmares consisted of Samuel holding that gun to Kyrie's head. It would have killed me long before they would have if he would have pulled the trigger. Knowing that he was willing to kill me to save himself didn't sit well with me.

Mama was so angry when she arrived at the hospital that night, but her worry took precedence over everything. After she saw I was going to be okay, she went to check on Samuel. He didn't live long after, dying during the night from massive blood loss and internal bleeding. My family chose to cremate him, and my grandmother had kept his ashes. She sat in the room with those ashes right next to her. My mama said she would always say she had to get back to Samuel when she left the house, as if he were still alive.

I was still angry at him. Now I knew how Kyrie felt, being angry at someone who couldn't make their wrongs right. It was extremely hard to get closure that way. While I knew that I would eventually forgive him and miss him, that time hadn't come yet. I couldn't even properly grieve his death. I didn't want him to die, but knowing he put himself in that situation infuriated me to no end.

My mama and I had gotten over everything together, and she was helping me through my anger. Bransford had come to see me quite a few times already and was helping me through my thoughts as well. He was the acting chief for now until I returned. I told him not to get too used to my office because I would be kicking his ass out of there as soon as I returned. He'd laughed and said he wouldn't have it any other way.

Once Kyrie was done greeting his guests, and they had all congratulated me as well, he came to me and kissed me. "You ready to go eat?"

"Absolutely."

He chuckled. "I knew you would be."

I playfully swatted his hand as he wheeled me out of the small venue space he'd rented. There was no way in hell I was having our wedding at the courthouse. I didn't know when I would be able to go back inside of it, but it would be no time soon. I probably wouldn't even be able to sit through proceedings for the people arrested that night. It was still hard to believe AJ was a part of all that. Obviously, there would be no trial for him or Stephanie.

When we got to the car, Kyrie lifted me and placed me inside. I slowly shook my head. He acted like I couldn't stand. The wheelchair was so I didn't have to stand for long periods of time. I didn't complain, though, because I loved how he loved me. Through every nightmare, he held me tight, even when he wasn't stable himself. He always made sure I was okay.

Ms. Carolyn had prepared food for us... somewhat like a small reception that only my mother, Bransford, and Tyson and his family would attend. I told Kyrie he could have invited more people, but he refused. He didn't want all those people in my house. I believed he was still untrusting of a lot of people. Tyson was his friend, but two weeks ago, he'd definitely solidified his position in our lives.

Kyrie grabbed my hand and kissed it. "Through all the drama and trauma, I still get to call you Missus Patrick. Had it not been for all of this, we probably wouldn't have ever met. I'd be wandering aimlessly through life, still searching for my forever. However, through the fire, I was able to see the desire and passion between us. I'm just happy I made the right decision after acting like a fool and that you were still receptive to being with me."

"Baby, I didn't have a choice. We were destined to be together. Not even I was in control of that. While I wish some things didn't happen, I can't regret where all the trauma has landed us. Forever in love."

The End