



Love & Vendettas

Author: *Cassie Verano*

Category: Romance

Description: He built his empire from the destruction of his past—but revenge might tear it all down.

Thirty years after the Knight family was torn apart, Zaire Knight now rules Chicora Falls from the shadows.

With his team and a secret coalition comprised of his siblings, he targets the woman who destroyed his parents.

But as he targets her rise to power, Zaire risks the underground dynasty he's painstakingly built.

As he seeks revenge, someone is targeting Bayleigh Reed, the love of his life, his businesses, and his family.

Will his vendetta risk the underground empire he's built, or will he uncover the enemy within his circle?

She had the crown, the man, and the life—but in the streets, peace never lasts.

Bayleigh Reed built her world brick by brick beside Zaire—the love of her life and a boss in the streets.

But while Zaire's battling his war, a quiet insurgency brews in their home.

Kidnapped by Zaire's enemies, Bayleigh comes face-to-face with her enemy.

When she fights her way back, her world is in turmoil—Zaire's world is crumbling, their dynasty is shaken, and the enemy might be someone sitting at their own table.

Now Bayleigh's got no choice but to ride for her man, protect her kids, and find out who's biting the hand that feeds them before everything they built burns down.

Behind every powerful king stands a beautiful queen ready for war.

Total Pages (Source): 47

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

“On another note, we have the name of the other player who’s put their hat in the ring for mayor,” Kim Bridges, my special undercover operator, informs me.

“Let me guess, Jessi Franklin?”

“Actually, she changed her mind about running for mayor. I haven’t gotten the inside scoop on that yet, but as soon as I do, Z, you’ll be the first one to know.”

Smiling at her, I tap the long, oval glass conference table and reply. “You’re slipping, Kimmie baby. Are you losing your touch?”

Rolling her eyes, she sucks her teeth and replies with sass. “Never that, baby. You’re trying the wrong bitch.”

“Okay, then, why don’t you know what’s going on with Jessi Franklin?”

“Because she hasn’t shared it with anyone yet,” Kim remarks, leaning back in her chair at the other end of the table.

I watch as she plucks imaginary lint from her pink Chanel suit.

“Go ahead, girl. Humor us. How do you know?” Aris Waters, my data analyst, asks.

“Let’s just say her husband’s head game is tight. By the time his face left my twat last night, he was ready to tell me all her secrets.”

“Bitch.” Janel Howard, one of three assassins that I have on my payroll, remarks as

she leans in to give Kim five.

Shaking my head, I don't say a word, but I'm called on that subtle movement anyway.

"What?" Kim asks.

"I said nothing." I plead my case, biting back a smirk.

"But you wanted to."

"Since when have you ever known me to bite my tongue?" I ask.

"Never. But look, you're the one who said do whatever it takes to get the job done short of getting locked up or killed. Why not have a little fun along the way?" Kim asks, laughing.

"You have to put a bitch on game," Janel comments.

I glance at Aris, who is shaking her head and staring at her laptop. But I also see the tiny smile dancing around her lips.

I glance around at the men in the room, and they look as if they want to cry. All of them, except Parker Jones, my VP of Operations of The Knight Group, would give their left leg to get in Kim's pants, but she says she sees them all like brothers.

I appreciate that because they all know how I feel about fraternization. They can fuck anyone else anywhere else in my business, but not amongst this team. I don't have time or the space for negative energy or relationship blues in my core elite circle. That bullshit impacts business.

“So, who is running against Martin Brassard if not Jessi Franklin? She was the only one who I could see taking him down,” Hakeem Steele, my accountant, points out.

Kim brushes her fingers over her lapel. “So, ask me how I got this information before I tell you who it is.”

“Damn, is it that good?” Malik Edwards, my other assassin, asks.

“Even better than that good.”

“I don’t give a damn who you fucked to get the information, Kim. I just want to know who it is,” Parker, who is also my right-hand man, speaks up, sharing my precise thoughts.

Perhaps because he’s been by my side since my early days in the streets, he always seems to know just what I’m thinking. I seldom need to speak up and say a word because he’s always got his finger on the pulse of my thoughts.

I sit back in my chair, crossing my arms, and stare at Kim.

“Aww, Parkie Pooh. You take all the fun out of everything. So, I’m going to tell you anyway, although you might not want to hear it.

I was at the nightclub the other night with this person’s best friend.

She’d had one too many drinks, and her tongue got a little loose.

She started talking shit about what’s going on in city hall because she works down there.

I told her that’s where all the gossip seems to happen.

Then she told me that there was one conversation that hadn't seen the light of day at City Hall yet.

I asked her what, and she said her best friend was going to announce Monday morning that she was running for mayor. ”

“Who is her best friend, Kim?” Parker grits out.

“The former D.A., Miss Essence Hamilton.”

“I thought she gave up politics to return to private practice because it was too much for her,” Hakeem remarks.

“Apparently, she was, but for some reason, she's changed her mind,” Kim confirms.

My blood runs cold, and a pounding starts at the base of my neck. It quickly lights its way around to my temples and then my frontal lobe like a match lit to a line of gasoline. It explodes so violently that I can barely see.

Tiny explosions of lights go off behind my closed eyelids, and I massage my temples, mentally telling myself to unclench my teeth.

The room is getting too hot, and my tie feels like it's choking me.

I stand from my place at the head of the table and walk to the wall of windows overlooking my city.

My team continues to talk behind me, discussing whether we should get behind her or not, and how we can leverage her for our purposes.

“Essence Hamilton.” I pull my fingers through my beard as I look out over downtown

Chicora Falls.

Large buildings look like glass statues in the night, with indoor lighting giving the appearance of twinkling fairy lights.

I walk to the right of my office and stare out the wall of windows at the waterfall at the end of the street.

“You know her, Z?” Jamal speaks up from his place at the glass conference table.

I breathe through my nose and change my face into a cool mask of composure before I turn back to face the room.

“Who's on her campaign team?” I ask Aris.

In her usual, soft-spoken voice, she gives me a rundown of every member of Essence's campaign team.

“Kim, I need a comprehensive background check on each of them. Credit, criminal, finances, education, family, health, fetishes, weaknesses, any history of drug or alcohol abuse, and any family members with drug addictions,” I command.

“So, the usual?” Kim quips with a slight smirk, tapping away on her laptop.

My steely voice is unfair to her. She has no way of knowing how personal this shit is to me.

“Fuck the usual. I want you to go back as far as their great-grandpappy. I want to know who their neighbors are and if they have kids, where their kids go to school, who their kids' friends are, and if they've got any extracurricular activities.

I want to know what color draws they're wearing every day and when they sit down to take a piss and shit. ”

Kim's eyes widen before she glances back at her computer. I feel every eye in the room on me, aside from hers.

“Noble.”

I turn to my intelligence ops guy.

“Yes, Bossman?”

“I need you to do the same for Ms. Hamilton. I want to know everything. If she's ever had any STDs, who her last sexual partner was, and anything else that you can find out about her.”

“Gotcha, Bossman.”

“Is it safe to say that she won't be our next mayor?” Parker asks.

I roll my eyes at him, and he holds his hands up.

“I look like a muthafuckin' joke to y'all tonight?”

“No, sir,” everyone answers in a serious monotone at once.

I walk back to the giant wall of windows overlooking downtown Chicora Falls. Three of my walls are nothing but floor-to-ceiling windows. I can lighten or darken them to my pleasure so that people can see inside or not.

“Y'all get prepared to work hard for the next year.”

“We hustle hard with you all the time, Bossman,” Noble admits.

I nod my agreement because I know they do. While I may have hundreds of workers, contractors, and subcontractors in the streets and my other businesses, this is my crew right here. They are my family, and I trust them with my life.

“Wonder why she changed her mind?” Aris asks.

I know why. That’s a fact that I’m not ready to share with my team yet. Just like I’m not quite ready to trust them with what my interest in Ms. Hamilton is. I never make a business decision based on personal reasons.

Until tonight.

Shit just got real, and the game has changed.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

I climb the stairs of my twenty-thousand-square-foot mansion to the third-floor private suite that I share with my baby.

It's been a long day of consultations, along with returning to the home of an "unsatisfied client" who wanted to review some of the design decisions I made for her daughter's bedroom.

She had been on board with the design when I sketched it and reviewed it with her on numerous occasions.

She'd even had a hand in picking out some of the materials.

When the design was complete, she was so in love with the damn bedroom until her daughter returned home and decided that she didn't like it.

Apparently, the girly girl teen that she sent off to college had done a lot of changing out of her Mama's eyesight while she was gone. Somehow, Mama missed the memo that went out that her twenty-two-year-old daughter was not into pastels, cashmere, silks, and lace anymore.

Her new flair was for leather, reds, and blacks, and all things metal.

She wasn't quite sure what to call the phase that her daughter was in.

After consulting with the daughter, it sounded to me like she just wanted her boudoir turned into a BDSM dungeon for her boyfriend, who was also moving in.

The boyfriend that she hadn't told her parents was returning with her.

Before I created another design, I suggested to both independently and together that they needed to have a conversation. I told them both to call me after they did, and we could revisit the discussion at that time.

After that, I had to pick our youngest son, Zaccai, up from basketball practice because his best friend, whose parents' turn it was to run the carpool, had been sick that day. Zaccai hadn't known that the kid hadn't been at school because they weren't in the same classes.

I had just pulled up at the house when he called me, begging me to pick him up from basketball practice. When I suggested that he call his older brother, Zayn, he told me that Zayn was at his girlfriend's house and wasn't answering the phone.

I'd tried Zayn as well and got the same results.

Then I called his girlfriend, Shana, who answered the phone.

Zayn had fallen asleep, but she woke him up.

As groggy as he sounded, I wanted to make him pick up Zaccai, but I didn't want him driving my baby around when he wasn't fully alert.

Hell, I didn't want him driving around without being fully alert.

So, I'd gone back to pick up Zaccai, stopped to get us something to eat, and decided to eat at the restaurant since it was just the two of us. I'd listened attentively to hear everything about my baby boy's day before we finally returned home.

That led to an hour of helping him with his homework before I could take some me-

time. I have approximately half an hour before my man, Zaire, walks through those doors.

I strip my clothes as I close the double doors that are two feet away from the stairwell and begin walking through our living suite to our sitting room, bedroom, walk-in closets, and finally to our en suite.

I adjust the nozzles on all six showerheads and wait for the bathroom to steam up. I take in my weary appearance in the mirror.

“Bayleigh, girl, you need a facial and a massage. You’re starting to look every one of your forty-five years,” I tell myself, taking in my high cheekbones and thick eyebrows.

“Damn, you need to pluck those eyebrows too. Starting to look like two caterpillars latched together on your face.” I run my fingers over my thick eyebrows.

Turning away from the mirror, I step into the slate-blue tiled shower and begin my ritual. I wash my hair, figuring that I’ll wear it out in its naturally curly state tomorrow. Looking at my legs, I make a mental note to schedule my bi-monthly wax appointment tomorrow for all the critical areas.

I wash my body thoroughly twice before I press my hands against the tiled wall. It’s time for Zaire and me to take a vacation. We’ve both been working way too damn hard lately.

When I step out of the shower, I wrap my hair in a hair towel before drying my body off, applying my moisturizers to my body and face, and then stepping through his closet and into my closet.

I find a long, white, silky nightgown that outlines all my curves and slip into it. I’m

not going to wear any panties tonight. I'm tired, and I'm sure Zaire will be too. His morning started at four-thirty, and it's well after nine now.

I move from the closet into my bedroom and stop.

Zaire is stretched out in the middle of our Alaskan King bed. I climb onto the bed with him, and he stirs enough to wrap me in his arms.

"How's my king feeling tonight?"

"Much better now that I see you."

"Thought you were asleep."

"No, just waiting for you," he declares tiredly.

"I didn't hear you come in."

"The shower was going when I walked in. Zaccai said that you two just got home an hour before I did. I figured you were tired, so I decided to let you relax first."

"First? As in, something is happening?"

Zaire sighs. "When isn't there?" he asks, kissing my lips.

"What's going on, baby?" I ask, unbuttoning his shirt.

Zaire sits up and lets me remove his shirt. I move on to unbutton his pants and belt before he stands so that I can shove them down.

"I don't want to talk about it, Bay."

“You need to. You already know that if you don’t, you’ll be talking about it in your sleep.”

Every now and then, he has these dreams where he gets so frustrated, he says little phrases related to what he’s holding inside. He tosses and turns throughout the night and then wakes up the next morning tired and grumpy.

“You’re right. Let me take a shower first.”

“Okay. I’ll head down to the kitchen and fix you something to eat.”

“No need. Our meeting was catered tonight,” Zaire professes, slipping out of his underwear and heading into the bathroom.

“Okay, I’ll be here waiting.”

Zaire nods and disappears. I grab my iPad and look over my schedule for tomorrow. I have an appointment with a client, and we’ll be meeting at the flooring store that I use. I send several email reminders about upcoming appointments and orders that I have placed.

After I send email reminders about those, I respond to a few of my emails before I hear him wrapping up his shower. Getting out of bed, I head back into the bathroom, where I’m waiting when he steps out of the shower.

I grab his towel from the towel warmer and dry his body off. His sighs are repetitive, and I know that something is bothering him badly.

I toss the towel into the hamper and drop to my knees in front of him. Taking his length into my hands, I wrap my lips around Zaire’s dick and suck him to the back of my throat.

“Ohh, fuck. Yes, my Queen. This is what I needed . . . ahhh shit,” he moans.

I’m pleased at the way that his arousal grows harder and thicker in my mouth and hands. Zaire’s hands go up to my head, removing my towel from my hair. Slowly, he pumps into my mouth.

“Aww, fuck, Bay. Yes, baby, yes,” he grunts in that deep, growly voice that I love.

My hands move from his length to cup his ass. I squeeze and moan at the feeling of his tight, muscular ass flexing against my palms.

The more that I suck Zaire’s meat, the more that I feel the tension easing out of him.

It always feels good to know that I am my man’s peace and protection from the world.

When he comes here to his castle, this is his fortress from all the attacks outside.

Our home is his safe space where he doesn’t have to worry about shit.

My arms are where happiness, peace, and love reside.

I take care of my man because he rocks hard for me. We’ve been down since day one when he was sixteen and struggling with life and the shit that had happened to his family.

So, I have no problem kneeling in front of him right now, sucking the shit out of his dick until he can’t remember his name. Yeah, I’m that woman that has him speaking in tongues and will make sure he doesn’t look at another bitch sideways or even fantasize about one.

Yes, he owns a strip club, but those bitches can't do shit for him.

Not like I can. And it's not just about the sex either.

I'm that woman who has plenty to bring to the table.

I built him into the man that he is today, and he appreciates me for it.

He shows me daily how grateful he is to have me by his side. And I don't mind doing the same.

"Ohh, Bayleigh," he groans again, and I pull him out of my mouth to suck on his nuts.

Zaire's toes curl, and his hands fist into my hair, pulling so hard that my eyes sting. But I don't stop because I want him to remember that he's home and that whatever that world has out there for him can't touch him behind these walls.

I shove him back into my mouth again and take him all the way down, picking up speed and using the spit and my hands to work him over, jerking him until he is shooting hot sheets of cum down my throat.

When I finish, I stand, open my mouth, and let him see me swallow. He smacks my ass.

"What can I do for you, my Queen?"

"I need nothing except for a good night's sleep and for me to wake up in the morning with your face buried in this pussy. But if you don't want to talk about what's bothering you, I'm gonna go in here and get some sleep. It'd be nice to have you curled around me."

“I can do that,” he agrees, letting me tug him behind me.

We lie in the bed, and I love the feel of his warm, hard body against mine. He’s naked, and I’m still wearing the white, satin nightgown.

My baby falls asleep before me, and I know that we’ll get good sleep tonight. All is well in the world as I drift off to sleep—until he wakes me at two in the morning with two words. A name that I haven’t heard in ages.

Essence Hamilton.

I sit up in bed, staring straight ahead.

What the fuck?

3 – BAYLEIGH – MY SCREAMS

“Mm,” I groan, slowly struggling to come awake.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

The alarm clock hasn't gone off, but Zaire has never needed an alarm clock. His body is in tune with the sun. Hell, his black ass wakes the sun every morning.

He's the motherfucker who goes around and wakes up the roosters and tells them to get on the job.

"Zaire Bryshere Knight," I moan.

"Shh, woman," he whispers before he starts sucking my clitoris again.

"This is why we got a house where our bedroom suite takes up the entire floor. So, I can, ooohhh, fuckkkk," I scream as he slides two fingers into my pussy as he sucks at my clitoris.

He knows that I'm a screamer. I have always been. That's what got us caught when we were eighteen-years old in my parents' house screwing. I have never been able to hold my screams in.

Zaire was the first and only man that I've ever been with. I gave my virginity to him, and he gave me the world.

My white nightgown is wrinkled and shoved up around my hips. I have no idea how he managed to do that while I was sleeping, but he always knows how to get to what he wants.

My ass lifts slightly, but he works his hands underneath them to lift me higher. I pump my hips up and down as his tongue glides expertly through my slit, pleasuring

me the way he does so well.

That's another thing about my baby. He truly gives me whatever I want and need. Last night, I told him that the only thing that I needed was to wake up with his face buried in my pussy, and that's exactly how I woke up.

I finger my clit as he drives his tongue inside of my slit. Zaire's eyes are on me, and he winks at me. My goodness, this man still has my heart after thirty years of being together.

I honestly have no reason to cheat or mess with anyone else.

Even if Zaire were a cheating ass, which he isn't, I would have no reason to do anything because he takes good care of me physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, and sexually.

This man is everything that I need and so much more.

He's a far cry from the broken sixteen-year-old boy that I met in school back then, but it doesn't matter. Some elements of who he is have never changed, like his desire to protect someone.

He had that instinct for his siblings first and then for me. In later years, that same protective instinct was extended to our children, and he's always been that way with his team.

Zaire hums as his head moves from side to side rapidly. It's getting good to him, but I'm about to cum, and there's nothing that I can do to stop it.

He presses one hand on my belly and sucks deep and hard before he starts slurping.

“Ohhh, thank you, baby. Zaire.”

His arms wrap around my thighs as he spreads me wider. I know what he’s doing, and I’m helpless to stop him. He takes my legs and pushes them back and over my head. Slowly, he drags that long, thick tongue down to my ass and presses it there.

“So unfair,” I cry out.

That accusation doesn’t stop him. If anything, it encourages him to begin eating my ass, and it’s a wrap.

I cum, and I’m screaming at the top of my lungs as if someone is trying to murder me.

That’s what I get for reminding him that this is the reason we bought this house, with not only the entire third floor housing our suite but also ensuring the boys’ suites are on the other side of the house on the first floor.

The second floor of our home is our theater suite, office suite, entertainment room, the kids’ hangout, and other living areas.

Zaire sits up and lowers my legs. Within seconds, he glides into me, sliding home like he’d been waiting for this all night long. My legs wrap around his body, and he pulls them free.

Okay, he’s on this one this morning. The way he slams inside of me lets me know that he’s working out some demons. It doesn’t mean that he won’t make sure that I cum a second time. It just means that the aggression that’s built inside of him has to be worked out.

I recall the name that he said in his sleep last night, and when my eyes meet his, I

know that he's thinking about her too. I know that he realizes from the expression on my face that he said her name in his sleep.

The tufted headboard slams against the wall as he bares his teeth, flares his nostrils, and narrows his eyes. Zaire's balls slam against my ass, and he's tearing me up inside. I feel the pressure of what he's doing all the way in my asshole.

I give in to the pressure building inside of me, and I cum all down his dick.

"That's it, baby. Give me that sweet juice, Bayleigh," he grunts.

Biting my bottom lip, I try to hold my scream inside, but Zaire shakes his head. "Don't fucking hold back. Scream, baby. You can scream as loud as you want."

And I do.

I scream until I'm sure the roof is about to blow off the house.

I'm screaming because he's slamming inside of me so hard that it hurts, but it also feels so damn good.

I'm screaming because I feel his pain and the nightmare he is about to relive.

I'm screaming because he's about to open the gates of hell and let his demons out against Essence Hamilton, and I have no idea what she's done lately.

When he pulls out of me after he cums, he collapses beside me.

"What happened, baby?"

"She's running for mayor, Bayleigh. That bitch is running for mayor."

I gasp. “Do you think it’s a coincidence that she’s choosing now to do so?”

He turns and glares at me, and I see the gleam in his eyes that represents his pain and weakness.

“Fuck no.”

I wrap my arms around him and kiss his forehead.

My king buries his face in my chest, and I lie here holding him.

In time, I feel the dampness, and I know that he’s crying, but he doesn’t want me to see him cry. He’s not crying for what Essence Hamilton is doing to him right now. He’s crying for what she did to him in the past.

He’s crying about what she did to his mother, father, and siblings.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

I climb the stairs of my twenty-thousand-square-foot mansion to the third-floor private suite that I share with my baby.

It's been a long day of consultations, along with returning to the home of an "unsatisfied client" who wanted to review some of the design decisions I made for her daughter's bedroom.

She had been on board with the design when I sketched it and reviewed it with her on numerous occasions.

She'd even had a hand in picking out some of the materials.

When the design was complete, she was so in love with the damn bedroom until her daughter returned home and decided that she didn't like it.

Apparently, the girly girl teen that she sent off to college had done a lot of changing out of her Mama's eyesight while she was gone. Somehow, Mama missed the memo that went out that her twenty-two-year-old daughter was not into pastels, cashmere, silks, and lace anymore.

Her new flair was for leather, reds, and blacks, and all things metal.

She wasn't quite sure what to call the phase that her daughter was in.

After consulting with the daughter, it sounded to me like she just wanted her boudoir turned into a BDSM dungeon for her boyfriend, who was also moving in.

The boyfriend that she hadn't told her parents was returning with her.

Before I created another design, I suggested to both independently and together that they needed to have a conversation. I told them both to call me after they did, and we could revisit the discussion at that time.

After that, I had to pick our youngest son, Zaccai, up from basketball practice because his best friend, whose parents' turn it was to run the carpool, had been sick that day. Zaccai hadn't known that the kid hadn't been at school because they weren't in the same classes.

I had just pulled up at the house when he called me, begging me to pick him up from basketball practice. When I suggested that he call his older brother, Zayn, he told me that Zayn was at his girlfriend's house and wasn't answering the phone.

I'd tried Zayn as well and got the same results.

Then I called his girlfriend, Shana, who answered the phone.

Zayn had fallen asleep, but she woke him up.

As groggy as he sounded, I wanted to make him pick up Zaccai, but I didn't want him driving my baby around when he wasn't fully alert.

Hell, I didn't want him driving around without being fully alert.

So, I'd gone back to pick up Zaccai, stopped to get us something to eat, and decided to eat at the restaurant since it was just the two of us. I'd listened attentively to hear everything about my baby boy's day before we finally returned home.

That led to an hour of helping him with his homework before I could take some me-

time. I have approximately half an hour before my man, Zaire, walks through those doors.

I strip my clothes as I close the double doors that are two feet away from the stairwell and begin walking through our living suite to our sitting room, bedroom, walk-in closets, and finally to our en suite.

I adjust the nozzles on all six showerheads and wait for the bathroom to steam up. I take in my weary appearance in the mirror.

“Bayleigh, girl, you need a facial and a massage. You’re starting to look every one of your forty-five years,” I tell myself, taking in my high cheekbones and thick eyebrows.

“Damn, you need to pluck those eyebrows too. Starting to look like two caterpillars latched together on your face.” I run my fingers over my thick eyebrows.

Turning away from the mirror, I step into the slate-blue tiled shower and begin my ritual. I wash my hair, figuring that I’ll wear it out in its naturally curly state tomorrow. Looking at my legs, I make a mental note to schedule my bi-monthly wax appointment tomorrow for all the critical areas.

I wash my body thoroughly twice before I press my hands against the tiled wall. It’s time for Zaire and me to take a vacation. We’ve both been working way too damn hard lately.

When I step out of the shower, I wrap my hair in a hair towel before drying my body off, applying my moisturizers to my body and face, and then stepping through his closet and into my closet.

I find a long, white, silky nightgown that outlines all my curves and slip into it. I’m

not going to wear any panties tonight. I'm tired, and I'm sure Zaire will be too. His morning started at four-thirty, and it's well after nine now.

I move from the closet into my bedroom and stop.

Zaire is stretched out in the middle of our Alaskan King bed. I climb onto the bed with him, and he stirs enough to wrap me in his arms.

"How's my king feeling tonight?"

"Much better now that I see you."

"Thought you were asleep."

"No, just waiting for you," he declares tiredly.

"I didn't hear you come in."

"The shower was going when I walked in. Zaccai said that you two just got home an hour before I did. I figured you were tired, so I decided to let you relax first."

"First? As in, something is happening?"

Zaire sighs. "When isn't there?" he asks, kissing my lips.

"What's going on, baby?" I ask, unbuttoning his shirt.

Zaire sits up and lets me remove his shirt. I move on to unbutton his pants and belt before he stands so that I can shove them down.

"I don't want to talk about it, Bay."

“You need to. You already know that if you don’t, you’ll be talking about it in your sleep.”

Every now and then, he has these dreams where he gets so frustrated, he says little phrases related to what he’s holding inside. He tosses and turns throughout the night and then wakes up the next morning tired and grumpy.

“You’re right. Let me take a shower first.”

“Okay. I’ll head down to the kitchen and fix you something to eat.”

“No need. Our meeting was catered tonight,” Zaire professes, slipping out of his underwear and heading into the bathroom.

“Okay, I’ll be here waiting.”

Zaire nods and disappears. I grab my iPad and look over my schedule for tomorrow. I have an appointment with a client, and we’ll be meeting at the flooring store that I use. I send several email reminders about upcoming appointments and orders that I have placed.

After I send email reminders about those, I respond to a few of my emails before I hear him wrapping up his shower. Getting out of bed, I head back into the bathroom, where I’m waiting when he steps out of the shower.

I grab his towel from the towel warmer and dry his body off. His sighs are repetitive, and I know that something is bothering him badly.

I toss the towel into the hamper and drop to my knees in front of him. Taking his length into my hands, I wrap my lips around Zaire’s dick and suck him to the back of my throat.

“Ohh, fuck. Yes, my Queen. This is what I needed . . . ahhh shit,” he moans.

I’m pleased at the way that his arousal grows harder and thicker in my mouth and hands. Zaire’s hands go up to my head, removing my towel from my hair. Slowly, he pumps into my mouth.

“Aww, fuck, Bay. Yes, baby, yes,” he grunts in that deep, growly voice that I love.

My hands move from his length to cup his ass. I squeeze and moan at the feeling of his tight, muscular ass flexing against my palms.

The more that I suck Zaire’s meat, the more that I feel the tension easing out of him.

It always feels good to know that I am my man’s peace and protection from the world.

When he comes here to his castle, this is his fortress from all the attacks outside.

Our home is his safe space where he doesn’t have to worry about shit.

My arms are where happiness, peace, and love reside.

I take care of my man because he rocks hard for me. We’ve been down since day one when he was sixteen and struggling with life and the shit that had happened to his family.

So, I have no problem kneeling in front of him right now, sucking the shit out of his dick until he can’t remember his name. Yeah, I’m that woman that has him speaking in tongues and will make sure he doesn’t look at another bitch sideways or even fantasize about one.

Yes, he owns a strip club, but those bitches can't do shit for him.

Not like I can. And it's not just about the sex either.

I'm that woman who has plenty to bring to the table.

I built him into the man that he is today, and he appreciates me for it.

He shows me daily how grateful he is to have me by his side. And I don't mind doing the same.

"Ohh, Bayleigh," he groans again, and I pull him out of my mouth to suck on his nuts.

Zaire's toes curl, and his hands fist into my hair, pulling so hard that my eyes sting. But I don't stop because I want him to remember that he's home and that whatever that world has out there for him can't touch him behind these walls.

I shove him back into my mouth again and take him all the way down, picking up speed and using the spit and my hands to work him over, jerking him until he is shooting hot sheets of cum down my throat.

When I finish, I stand, open my mouth, and let him see me swallow. He smacks my ass.

"What can I do for you, my Queen?"

"I need nothing except for a good night's sleep and for me to wake up in the morning with your face buried in this pussy. But if you don't want to talk about what's bothering you, I'm gonna go in here and get some sleep. It'd be nice to have you curled around me."

“I can do that,” he agrees, letting me tug him behind me.

We lie in the bed, and I love the feel of his warm, hard body against mine. He’s naked, and I’m still wearing the white, satin nightgown.

My baby falls asleep before me, and I know that we’ll get good sleep tonight. All is well in the world as I drift off to sleep—until he wakes me at two in the morning with two words. A name that I haven’t heard in ages.

Essence Hamilton.

I sit up in bed, staring straight ahead.

What the fuck?

3 – BAYLEIGH – MY SCREAMS

“Mm,” I groan, slowly struggling to come awake.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

The alarm clock hasn't gone off, but Zaire has never needed an alarm clock. His body is in tune with the sun. Hell, his black ass wakes the sun every morning.

He's the motherfucker who goes around and wakes up the roosters and tells them to get on the job.

"Zaire Bryshere Knight," I moan.

"Shh, woman," he whispers before he starts sucking my clitoris again.

"This is why we got a house where our bedroom suite takes up the entire floor. So, I can, ooohhh, fuckkkk," I scream as he slides two fingers into my pussy as he sucks at my clitoris.

He knows that I'm a screamer. I have always been. That's what got us caught when we were eighteen-years old in my parents' house screwing. I have never been able to hold my screams in.

Zaire was the first and only man that I've ever been with. I gave my virginity to him, and he gave me the world.

My white nightgown is wrinkled and shoved up around my hips. I have no idea how he managed to do that while I was sleeping, but he always knows how to get to what he wants.

My ass lifts slightly, but he works his hands underneath them to lift me higher. I pump my hips up and down as his tongue glides expertly through my slit, pleasuring

me the way he does so well.

That's another thing about my baby. He truly gives me whatever I want and need. Last night, I told him that the only thing that I needed was to wake up with his face buried in my pussy, and that's exactly how I woke up.

I finger my clit as he drives his tongue inside of my slit. Zaire's eyes are on me, and he winks at me. My goodness, this man still has my heart after thirty years of being together.

I honestly have no reason to cheat or mess with anyone else.

Even if Zaire were a cheating ass, which he isn't, I would have no reason to do anything because he takes good care of me physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually, and sexually.

This man is everything that I need and so much more.

He's a far cry from the broken sixteen-year-old boy that I met in school back then, but it doesn't matter. Some elements of who he is have never changed, like his desire to protect someone.

He had that instinct for his siblings first and then for me. In later years, that same protective instinct was extended to our children, and he's always been that way with his team.

Zaire hums as his head moves from side to side rapidly. It's getting good to him, but I'm about to cum, and there's nothing that I can do to stop it.

He presses one hand on my belly and sucks deep and hard before he starts slurping.

“Ohhh, thank you, baby. Zaire.”

His arms wrap around my thighs as he spreads me wider. I know what he’s doing, and I’m helpless to stop him. He takes my legs and pushes them back and over my head. Slowly, he drags that long, thick tongue down to my ass and presses it there.

“So unfair,” I cry out.

That accusation doesn’t stop him. If anything, it encourages him to begin eating my ass, and it’s a wrap.

I cum, and I’m screaming at the top of my lungs as if someone is trying to murder me.

That’s what I get for reminding him that this is the reason we bought this house, with not only the entire third floor housing our suite but also ensuring the boys’ suites are on the other side of the house on the first floor.

The second floor of our home is our theater suite, office suite, entertainment room, the kids’ hangout, and other living areas.

Zaire sits up and lowers my legs. Within seconds, he glides into me, sliding home like he’d been waiting for this all night long. My legs wrap around his body, and he pulls them free.

Okay, he’s on this one this morning. The way he slams inside of me lets me know that he’s working out some demons. It doesn’t mean that he won’t make sure that I cum a second time. It just means that the aggression that’s built inside of him has to be worked out.

I recall the name that he said in his sleep last night, and when my eyes meet his, I

know that he's thinking about her too. I know that he realizes from the expression on my face that he said her name in his sleep.

The tufted headboard slams against the wall as he bares his teeth, flares his nostrils, and narrows his eyes. Zaire's balls slam against my ass, and he's tearing me up inside. I feel the pressure of what he's doing all the way in my asshole.

I give in to the pressure building inside of me, and I cum all down his dick.

"That's it, baby. Give me that sweet juice, Bayleigh," he grunts.

Biting my bottom lip, I try to hold my scream inside, but Zaire shakes his head. "Don't fucking hold back. Scream, baby. You can scream as loud as you want."

And I do.

I scream until I'm sure the roof is about to blow off the house.

I'm screaming because he's slamming inside of me so hard that it hurts, but it also feels so damn good.

I'm screaming because I feel his pain and the nightmare he is about to relive.

I'm screaming because he's about to open the gates of hell and let his demons out against Essence Hamilton, and I have no idea what she's done lately.

When he pulls out of me after he cums, he collapses beside me.

"What happened, baby?"

"She's running for mayor, Bayleigh. That bitch is running for mayor."

I gasp. “Do you think it’s a coincidence that she’s choosing now to do so?”

He turns and glares at me, and I see the gleam in his eyes that represents his pain and weakness.

“Fuck no.”

I wrap my arms around him and kiss his forehead.

My king buries his face in my chest, and I lie here holding him.

In time, I feel the dampness, and I know that he’s crying, but he doesn’t want me to see him cry. He’s not crying for what Essence Hamilton is doing to him right now. He’s crying for what she did to him in the past.

He’s crying about what she did to his mother, father, and siblings.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

THIRTY YEARS EARLIER

“Come on, Zay,” I hear a voice in the back room.

I step into the mostly dark house, looking for my dad.

“Nah, baby. Not tonight. I gotta go home.”

That’s my dad’s voice. Anger flows through me, but I know what it is. I don’t give a shit. I want him to know that I know. I continue to the back of the house.

“I’ll tell her where you were.”

“Not fucking with you, Essence. I’ve told you what it is.”

As I draw closer to the room, I hear the moans of a woman being pleased. I step inside of the room and see Essence Hamilton riding my dad’s dick. Those big titties are bouncing up and down, and I just shake my head.

If her boyfriend, Julius, were to see her now, he’d beat the shit out of her. I don’t get why women like her stay with men who can’t do anything more than kick their asses. And I don’t get why they provoke men like Julian to do the shit that he does.

“That’s it, Zay. Ohhh, yes,” she moans, bouncing up and down.

My dad’s eyes are closed, and he’s so deep into what she’s doing that he never heard the door open, but she did.

Essence keeps riding my dad while she's watching me in the mirror on the wall. There's a mirror that hangs above her bed in place of a headboard. I guess she likes seeing herself fucking or getting fucked.

It's been this way with the two of them for the last six months. My dad never cheated on my mama until Essence Hamilton moved into the neighborhood.

She knows that he's married with six kids. Do you think she gives a fuck? Nope. She's gone out of her way to get his attention and keep it on her. She did everything that she could to lure him into her trap.

I've watched her, but I thought my dad was smarter than that. I thought he was smart enough not to get trapped by a woman like Essence, especially when he's got a good woman like my mama at home.

Don't get me wrong, I know my daddy loves the hell out of my mama. He's protective over her, affectionate with her, and there's nothing he won't do for her. But somehow, he can't keep his dick out of Essence Hamilton's pussy.

It's been that way since the first time that he slipped up. She knows that she is his weak spot. And so does everyone else in the neighborhood. Everyone knows my daddy is fucking Essence.

I only hope that Mama doesn't know. I've never heard them argue about it.

If my siblings knew, they would be devastated.

My father is their hero, and they're too young to get caught up in this bullshit.

Savannah's the second youngest after me, and she's only eight.

The twins are six, Cheyenne is four, and the baby, Damascus, is two.

Essence was my dad's high school sweetheart. Only she broke it off with him when she moved away to go to college, and he stayed right here in Chicora Falls to work and take care of his mama, who had diabetes and heart disease.

He met my mama at the factory where they both worked when they were eighteen and fresh out of high school. When he got her pregnant a year later, they moved in together and eventually got married.

Now Essence is watching me in that mirror, taunting me to let me know that she took my daddy from my mama. I want to beat the shit out of her right here, but the way she's watching me tells me there's more.

Essence rolls those thick hips of hers and lifts her ass just enough so that I can see her pussy. She slides her tongue out between her teeth and wiggles it at me in the mirror. She cups her breast, slides it in her mouth, and then out again.

She mouths to me, "You want some?"

My jaw clenches, and my nostrils flare. This bitch is fucking my father and fucking with me. If I said yeah, I bet she'd have me over here the minute my dad hits the streets tonight.

"Zay, you like it like this, baby?" she asks my daddy.

"Ohh, yeah," my daddy responds.

I clench my jaw and my fists. I want to punch him in the throat.

"Like it better than what Nora Grace does for you."

“Baby, nobody holds a candle to you,” he declares.

It’s at that moment that I want to throw up. The retching starts first, and I hear my father say, “What the fuck?” as I throw up in the hallway.

“Shit!” my dad exclaims, and Essence hops up and screams as though she hadn’t seen me all along.

“Boy, what the hell are you doing here?” he asks as I continue spewing my dinner on her carpet.

“He’s ruining my floors, Isaiah,” she whines.

When I finally finish, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and stare at my father.

“Boy, I said, what you doing here?” he demands.

“Mama sent me out to look for you. She ran out of diapers for Damascus, and you said that you were going to the store to get some. That was two hours ago.”

“I know how long I’ve been gone. Fuck! Go home. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Are you leaving?” I Essence asks.

“I told you I can’t stay.”

“I’m tired of coming second to your family, Isaiah. You need to choose tonight. If you can’t, there will be consequences.”

“Are you threatening me?” he asks as I walk into the living room.

“I’m just saying. Make your choice. I won’t play this game with you much longer.”

I slam out of the door and head down the street, running past my house and not stopping until I reach the basketball court.

“Aye, Zaire. You up for a game?” Parker asks.

“Nah, I ain’t feeling that.”

He bounces the ball toward the other guys on the court and walks my way.

“Aye, yo’ wassup, dude? You look like you ’bout to kill a nigga.”

“Might be.”

“Who?”

“My dad.”

“Oh,” he replies grimly. “Essence?”

I glance sideways at him. “So sick of this shit.”

“I know. It wouldn’t be so bad if the whole neighborhood didn’t know. Or if he didn’t do it right across the street, and one door up from your place. I mean, all our old men fuck around. At least the ones who are still in our lives.”

“Yeah, but not where the whole neighborhood knows.”

“Nah, they usually do like my old man and go across town.”

“They don’t go across town. They go a few neighborhoods over. Your daddy is the only one going across town.”

“That’s because he’s fucking that white woman,” Parker declares, shaking his head.

“I just don’t get it. I mean, Essence left his dumb ass. Why would he fuck it all up for her?”

“Sometimes the pussy’s just that good, man.”

I look at him sideways again and nudge him with an elbow. He cracks a smirk and starts laughing.

“What? I’m just saying.”

“You ain’t saying shit, my guy. You’ve only been with Natasha Stanley. That’s the only pussy you know,” I reply, cracking up laughing.

“Yeah, whatever. That’s all I’ve told you about.”

“On the real, let me get up out of here. I need to get Baby D some diapers. He ran out a while ago, and Moms is gonna be bitching about diaper rash in a minute. Don’t know if my daddy’s pulled his dick out of Essence long enough to figure it out.”

Parker starts walking down the block with me.

“How do you know that’s where he’s at?”

“I walked in on them.”

“Fucking?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“Don’t I know it? Then she tried to get with me while she was fucking him.”

“Word?”

“Yeah, she’s got this mirror over her bed.”

I told Parker all the details about what happened on the way to the store. He shakes his head. “That’s a grimy bitch.”

“You telling me. Anyway, I don’t want my mom stressing about this bullshit. I wish she’d just leave him.”

“She can’t take care of six kids on her own, man.”

“I know. I’d help her, though.”

“And what? Drop out of school?”

“If that’s what it takes to get him to wake up, then hell yeah. Maybe he’d come to his senses and be a real man.”

“I don’t know. Maybe leave well enough alone. Six kids ain’t no joke. Even if you were working and she was working, you couldn’t do it. That’s why your dad hustles the way he does. That nine to five ain’t taking care of y’all alone. Hell, both of their nine-to-fives can’t do it.”

I sigh because I know Parker’s right. After I pay for the diapers, I head back home.

My dad is there talking to one of his boys when I walk in. He still hasn't thought about the diapers. I guess he figured I'd do it.

I throw the diapers on the kitchen counter, and my mom looks up from cooking. She leans over and smiles at me before she kisses my cheek.

"Thanks, Zaire. You're a good son."

I nod and head back to the room that I share with my twin brothers, Aspen and Denver. They're only six. Savannah and Cheyenne are only four years apart, and they share a room. Damascus is two, but he sleeps in the crib in Mama and Daddy's room.

I lie back on the bed, put my earphones on, and listen to some music, eventually drifting off to sleep.

I have some things to figure out to get us out of this mess.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

THIRTY YEARS EARLIER

Damascus is screaming. That's the first thing that I hear before the crash. The next thing that I hear is the girls screaming, "Let my daddy go!"

I jump out of bed, and the twins instantly wake up.

"Go back to sleep, boys."

"What's wrong, Z?" Denver asks as tears fill his eyes.

Aspen rubs his eyes sleepily and yawns.

"Go back to sleep. Both of you and I ain't playing with your bad little asses. It's gonna be okay. I'll be back in a minute," I tell them. "I'm gonna lock the door. Don't open it for anybody but me, you hear?"

They nod, but the fear doesn't erase from their eyes as they lie down in their twin beds. I slip out of our bedroom, locking the door behind me.

"I said, get on the floor!" I hear someone say as I creep toward the other room and stare at the chaos.

It's not the first time that my dad has been robbed, but they've never come into our home before. It's always been something my mom worried about, but my dad has a lot of men on the streets who fear him. They wouldn't dare do shit like that.

This ain't that.

The dining room table is broken, chairs are turned over on their sides, and some dishes lie shattered on the floor. The girls are crying on the couch, sitting beside a woman police officer who's restraining them from going to my parents. That same officer is holding Damascus, who is crying.

My parents both lie on the floor in handcuffs.

"What the fuck is going on?" I ask, rushing to my sisters.

"Hey, buddy. Slow up," another cop orders.

The house is crawling with police officers, and for the first time, I notice that they're in the kitchen, my parents' bedroom, and there's another one heading to my sisters' bedroom.

"I want to know what's going on. Why are my parents being arrested?" I demand while another cop shoves his gun under my chin.

Fear and rage flow through me. I want so badly to snatch this gun out of his hand and then beat the brakes off his ass with it. Then I want to put a bullet in his brain.

Unfortunately, I have a quick temper. It's something that I've struggled with all my life. In school, I'm in anger management classes, and I see a therapist twice a week.

"Z, calm down, son. Everything's going to be okay. Just chill out. It's all a misunderstanding that I need to straighten out," my father commands.

"If you call a misunderstanding a few bricks stored in the same house your kids are in, a misunderstanding, I guess we can call it that," the arresting officer states.

My mother is crying and saying my dad's name repeatedly.

"Sir, please let my wife go. She has nothing to do with this. Neither do my children. Please, tell your officer to get that gun from underneath my son's chin."

"Richards, you can remove the gun. I'm not letting your wife go until I finish my investigation," the officer professes.

"I'm not lying, sir. She didn't know any of this stuff was stashed here," my father pleads.

"I didn't, officer. I swear that I wouldn't have had this around my children," my mom cries.

"Listen, Mr. Knight, we've been watching you and your home for some time. Now, I know that you've been dealing drugs, and there's no misunderstanding," the officer counters.

My father drops his forehead against the floor with a thud.

"Officer, please. Do what you've got to do with me, but please let my wife and kids go."

I reach for my sisters, and the female cop releases them, and they run into my arms.

I hold them as they tremble and cry for our parents. I stroke their thick hair and whisper to them both, "It's okay. I've got you. I ain't gonna let nothing happen to either of you, you hear me?"

They both nod, but they don't stop crying. Eventually, the cops move to the rear of the house, where they find my twin brothers. The boys are obedient and don't unlock

the door until I tell them to. I only do that to prevent the officers from kicking the door in as they've threatened to do.

The investigation goes on for another two hours before they take my father away and put him into the back of the police car. They've released my mother, and she's a wreck. She huddles with both girls and the twins on the couch and the twins. Damascus is now in her lap.

"I'll be back, Mama."

She nods woodenly, but I swear it's like she doesn't even see me. She's so zoned out and shivering her ass off. I could kick my daddy's ass. What the hell was he thinking?

I head outside into the night, where the entire neighborhood looks on.

"May I speak to my father?" I ask an officer.

He nods and replies. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

"Okay."

Shoving my hands into the pockets of my sleep shorts, I stick my head inside the car.

"Daddy, what's up, man?"

"I don't know, son. I never bring shit into the house. I have no idea how it got there. I swear."

Jutting my chin at him and then widening my eyes, I'm nonverbally asking him if it was his stash. He blinks once to confirm that it is.

I lean a bit closer and whisper, “Where was it?”

He glances sideways and up. I lean out of the car in the direction that he’s looking at and see Essence’s house. She’s standing on the porch with her arms folded. Her eyebrow lifts, and she’s wearing a smirk.

My father was a fucking fool for that bitch.

“Word? With her?”

He nods.

“Son, I’ll be gone for a while. There ain’t no way around it. I’ll do what I can to beat this thing, but the reality is, it ain’t happening. Hold things down and keep your mama strong.”

“I’ll come visit, Daddy.”

“I don’t want that for you, son.”

“It ain’t about what you want no more, now is it?” I ask, hardening my gaze and my voice as I take a step back from the car.

I head inside the house to check on my mother.

I pull Damascus off her lap and sit him on Savannah’s lap. I pull my mother into my arms and rock with her. I kiss the top of her head as she cries and wraps her arms around me so tightly.

What am I going to do with this?

My mama's a good, loving woman. She doesn't deserve this bullshit. I ask her, "Mama, did anyone come over here today?"

"Not that I can recall. Not any of his boys. What? You think that somebody placed it here and set him up?"

I nod.

She shakes her head. "Your daddy didn't have any visitors today. The only person who came to visit was Essence."

"What did she want?"

"That was earlier this afternoon when your dad was still at work and you were at school. She came to give me a break with Damascus so that I could run to the laundromat since the washer is acting up."

"That was today?"

"Uh-huh."

"For how long?"

Shrugging, my mama snuffles and answers. "About a couple of hours, at least. No, it was more like three because I remember I drove to the school to pick the little ones up after I was finished at the laundromat."

My mama wouldn't have thought it odd that Essence came by.

She's done that from time to time, pretending to be neighborly with my mom.

She'll come asking to borrow a cup of sugar or saying that she made too much of something or other and thought she would share with us since there were so many of us.

Or she'd say she was going to the store and ask if my mama needed her to pick up anything.

She even pretended to be her friend. Mama and Essence were the only two ladies on our block who were the same age or even in the same age group.

Whenever Julius beat up Essence, she ran to our house, and Mama would fix her up, but she'd only come if Daddy weren't home.

Those visits to my mama started before Essence started fucking my daddy.

All the while, she was getting closer and closer to my daddy, sneaking him in and out of her bed, all so she could see what was going on in our home and use that as leverage.

That bitch set my daddy up, and she's going to pay.

If it's the last thing that I do, I'll see that she suffers for the hell that she's put my mama through.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

The club is jumping as we make our way through to the VIP lounge. Bayleigh bobs her head and bounces to Megan's Hiss.

I glance behind her, looking at my baby's ass bouncing in that tight dress she's wearing, and I glance around to make sure no one's sweating her. I do catch a few young niggas checking her ass out.

I shake my head because here she goes, creating a scene again. She knows that that ass draws attention.

We keep walking through the crowd, and I spot a few dudes I know and give them a slight nod.

It's Hakeem's birthday, and he wants to get wild and loose as usual. I know that he'll have several broads draped over him before the night is out, forgetting about his woman at home.

As for me and mine, my baby is with me wherever I go unless it's business-related. I don't fuck around on Bayleigh, and I don't give her a reason to do that to me.

"You think Keem's going to be mad that we were late?" Bayleigh asks as we near the section where I can see that my people are already turned up.

The music seems to be louder in this area than in the rest of the club, and bottles are being poured into glasses and on bodies. Only a few of them won't be drinking, and that includes Jamal, Janel, and Malik. They always have to be on alert in case something pops off.

“Nah, he’s too drunk to realize that we weren’t here,” I state, pointing at Hakeem, who’s standing on a table with one of the dancers, giving the rest of the crew a table dance.

Bayleigh rolls her eyes. “Anyone who sees the straightlaced, buttoned-up accountant in the daytime would have a hard time believing he’s this party animal that he is whenever we hit the clubs.”

“I know!” I shout over the music as we grab one of the couches.

“Bossman, it’s my birthday!” Hakeem shouts as he slides off the table and staggers our way.

“So, I’m told.” I laugh, leaning back into the couch and wrapping my arm around Bayleigh.

“I told errybody, my Bossman’s throwing me this party tonight!”

I shake my head. I shouldn’t be surprised. When announcing that I would fund this excursion tonight, I told him to keep it on the low.

Everyone in this city knows who I am, but I don’t make it a habit of flaunting my wealth or extravagance. I don’t like drawing unnecessary attention my way, especially in public, and definitely not when my woman and my kids are around.

I catch Jamal’s and Malik’s eyes in the corner where they’re standing. We have a few other men stationed around the club, and I know that everyone is on alert as usual.

There are only a few select clubs throughout the city and surrounding areas that we frequent, but Stage 21 isn’t one of them. This club is relatively new, and my team has been wanting to check it out.

Hakeem suggested gathering here for his birthday, and because he really wanted it, I agreed.

I've checked out the owners, and we swept the club earlier tonight before they were open for business.

But now that Hakeem is drunk and talking a little too loose and loudly, I hope that he doesn't make me regret the decision to host his party here.

Janel and Kim are in the middle of the floor dancing and attracting the eyes of all the men around us, including some who aren't in VIP. They're both wearing lace and leather. Their clothes are provocative, although Janel's outfit covers more areas than Kim's.

Marisa, my receptionist, dances her way to our couch and takes a seat beside Bayleigh, hugging her. My team respects me, but they love and adore my wife.

"Hey, Boss Lady. So glad to see you," Marisa gushes.

They talk for a while before Bayleigh's head bobs up when she hears Muni Long's Make Me Forget.

"Baby, I want to dance," Bayleigh declares.

I'm not the dancing type, but there isn't anything that I won't do for my lady.

She stands, full of smiles, and reaches her freshly manicured hands my way. I take them and let her drag me out of the VIP section.

Bayleigh's arms around me lure me into a false sense of security, and for a while, as I inhale her sweet fragrance and bask in her soft, lush curves, I don't focus on the

danger that always lurks whenever I'm in public.

I press my lips into the groove of her neck, and she purrs contentedly against my shoulder, sending a hum of vibrations right through me. We sway slowly back and forth, and Bayleigh pulls back and stares into my eyes.

Her long lashes dip down briefly to hide the desire shooting from her eyes. Full, sweet lips painted a dark shade of purple tilt into a smile that shoots straight to my groin.

We've been together for almost three decades, and I still feel about this woman the way that I felt when I first met her.

"I love you." Bayleigh mouths.

I cover her lips with mine, basking in the coolness of her tongue when she slips it into my mouth. I suck on her tongue even as the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, letting me know that danger is close.

Although I continue dancing with my woman, I break the kiss and nibble on the shell of her ear while whispering, "I love you too."

As my words and actions appear to be completely tuned in to Bayleigh, my eyes are scanning the club, and my ears are listening for the slightest thing that may be off. A pitch that doesn't gel with the music, footsteps that may seem hurried, anything that suggests something is about to go down.

As the song ends, I take her hand and lead her back to the VIP section, scanning the club. I see nothing off. We've been here for a while, and it's about time to bounce. I'll give it a few more minutes before we leave.

As we're chatting with Aris and Noble, I spot a group of four men walking by the VIP section. All four of them are eyeballing me hard as fuck. I don't break the stare even when I feel Bayleigh patting my hand and saying, "Baby?"

I don't stop staring until they're out of sight. I nod at Malik, who disappears from the room.

"Yeah?"

"You good? Seems like you dazed out for a minute there."

"Yeah, just thinking about our dance. I want to head home soon and finish what we started on the dance floor."

Bayleigh smiles at me and replies. "Of course." But that knowing gaze of hers lets me know that she's aware there's more. She turns back to Aris and Noble and continues chatting.

I wait for Malik to return and report to me. When he does, he has no news.

"By the time that I made it out there, they were jumping into a limo and pulling away from the curb, Bossman."

"Get me the plates off the nearest traffic cam as soon as you can. We're about to dip."

Malik nods.

Just before we get up to leave, a couple of bottle girls come up to us with a large bottle of Macallan.

"Mr. Knight, this bottle of Macallan was sent to you," one of the bottle girls states.

The second one hands a glass to me and then leans over, reaching toward Bayleigh.

“Here, let me give a glass to the lady too,” she remarks, rubbing her breasts against my face.

“Ma’am, he’s already got more than he can handle. Thank you. We’ll open it later at home,” Bayleigh declares in that dark, husky tone that she has, placing an arm between my face and the woman’s breasts.

She’s so damn polite with it, though. If you miss the deadly look in her eyes, you won’t realize how serious she is. Bayleigh is a sweet lady, but she is a beast when it comes to beating a bitch’s ass.

The bottle girl steps back, glances at her co-worker, and smirks before nodding and comments, “Duly noted.”

As the two of them begin to step off, I shout, “Miss!” over the music.

“Yes?” The first woman turns to answer.

“Is this courtesy of the house?” I ask, holding up the bottle of Scotch.

Looking at the other bottle girl, she frowns and then shakes her head.

“No.”

“Who did it come from?” I ask instantly, going on guard.

She turns around and looks as she answers. “The gentlemen who . . .” She looks back at me with a look of confusion on her face. “They’re gone. Meka, did you see the guys?”

The other bottle girl, Meka, who was a little too touchy for my tastes, looks out into the open area and then turns back to us, shaking her head.

“Thanks, ma’am.”

“What’s wrong?” Bayleigh asks when they leave.

“Nothing, babe. Just time to go.”

I head to Janel and give her a heads-up before doing the same with Malik and Jamal. Malik heads out of the club to do a preliminary sweep, and then Jamal and Janel lead the way out of the club for Bayleigh and me.

The moment that we step out of the VIP room, my driver and bodyguard, Ghalen, steps from the shadows to cover us from behind.

“Our bottle of Macallan, babe. You forgot it.”

I shake my head and say nothing as I continue scanning every face, looking for one of the men who eyeballed me earlier. I see no one.

Bayleigh looks at me with a worried expression, but I place my arm around her, kiss her temple, and continue ushering her from the club.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

“Tara, this is exactly what you requested. Now, if you would like to change the fabric of the curtains, that’s fine, but there will be an upgrade fee, plus the five percent fee required for modifying the contract after it has been signed and notarized.”

“Bayleigh, sweetheart, I have sent several clients your way. I would think if you’re still interested in receiving new clients as well as repeat business from me and my friends, that you would work hard to accommodate my requests,” Tara Lawrence replies, running her fingers back and forth over her freshwater pearls.

“Tara, that would be fine if I hadn’t done it already.

We altered the contract on your kitchen, your living room, and your husband’s office.

If I continue doing that, then I would need to do that for everyone, not to mention that it’s not like you cannot afford that fee, considering the ten percent discount off my services that I’ve already provided,” I point out.

Tara stands and grabs her purse. “I must say, Bayleigh, that I’m disappointed that you’re not willing to work with me. I’ll have to reconsider the service provider that I use for future home interior design needs.”

Standing behind my desk, I paste a false smile on my face and reply. “You do that. I wouldn’t want you to be displeased with the result. So, may I consider this your formal notice that you’re rescinding the contract, Tara?”

She looks shocked that I would suggest such a thing.

“Of course not. I would never cancel services in the middle of a project. That’s highly unprofessional, and I would hope that you would not do such a thing either, Bayleigh.”

“I just want to make sure that we’re on the same page and that we can work together well, moving forward on this project.”

“We will,” she retorts, turning on her heel and marching stiffly out of my office.

When she closes the door, I roll my eyes. My door pops open before I have a chance to sit down in my seat again.

“What the hell did that heffa want now?” Georgette, my receptionist, asks with her hands on her thick, curvy hips.

“What else? Another discount on the services. She wants to change the fabric of the curtains without paying the upgrade fee.”

“She knows better than that shit. Bayleigh, don’t do it.

You’ve given her too much slack already in appreciation for the clients that she sends your way.

But she’s taking advantage of it now. You haven’t had anyone come in here that she sent in months.

All these new customers, you pulled off your own hustle. ”

I smile at her feistiness. “Thank you, Mama Georgi, for the reminder. I told her pretty much the same thing as it relates to me not giving her any more discounts.”

“Is that why she walked out of here with her face all red and twisted?”

“Yes. You should have seen how she looked when I asked her if she was rescinding the contract.”

Georgette’s lips blow up as her cheeks blow out, trying to contain her laughter.

“Her ass knows that she can’t afford to piss off another interior design firm.”

Georgette can’t control her laughter any longer. It explodes from her in a fit of giggles, forcing a smile to my lips, as well.

“Then she wanted to question how professional that was and state that she would never do something like that, and she hoped that I wouldn’t either.”

Georgette’s giggles stop as her mouth and eyes open wide. “No, that bitch didn’t.”

“Yes, she did.”

It was known all over the city that Tara Lawrence was hard to work with.

She’d fired three interior design firms in the last year with incomplete projects.

That was all after she’d walked away from me at the beginning of last year because I refused to put another project on hold that I was already working on to do what she considered an “emergency project.”

The emergency project was to redesign the children’s playroom into a room for her new dog since her kids were grown and had moved out of the house.

“You should have told her to kick mud.”

“I wanted to, Georgi. But I’m not in the mood for shenanigans today. I just want to finish this project and then move on with my life.”

“You’re not accepting any more jobs from her, are you?”

“Hell no.”

I glance at my phone, which is ringing. “Let me get this call from Riley. She’s been calling me since Tara was in here.”

“Okay,” Georgette replies and sashays out of my office again.

I pick up the phone and answer it. “Hey, Riley. I’m sorry that I didn’t answer before. I was with a client. What’s up, boo?”

“I’m outside of your office. Can you come out here?”

My sister’s voice sounds funny.

“Why don’t you come inside? I don’t have anyone else. I can order some lu—”

“Please, Bayleigh.” Riley’s voice breaks off in the middle of a plea.

“Riley, are you okay? You’re scaring me.”

“Just please. Come out here. I’m in the back of the parking lot. I need you.”

“Okay, give me a minute to grab my things and let Georgi know that I’m stepping out.”

“Okay.” Riley snuffles.

I have the strangest feeling that I won't be coming back to the office today. My little sister doesn't ask for much. She and I are the youngest of four kids, with our two brothers being the oldest.

After I shut down my computer, I grab my keys, phone, and handbag. I stop by Georgette's desk on my way out.

"Hey, Georgi. I'm stepping out of the office for the rest of the day. Sam and Tess are both in the field on projects that they can handle. Let them know that I'm away taking care of family business, and if an emergency should arise, to reach me on my personal phone."

Georgette nods and asks, "Is there anything else that I can do, honey?"

My staff never calls my personal phone unless it's an emergency. All work-related issues are directed to my work cell.

"No, sweetie. Just prayer."

"Okay," she replies, bobbing her head. "Call me if you do need anything. I hope everything is good with Riley."

"It will be," I reply.

I rush out of my office and around to the back parking lot. Riley's been having marital issues with her husband, and they've been arguing a lot lately. She's mentioned getting a divorce a time or two, but that's nothing new for Riley and Kenny.

I spot my sister's yellow Mustang at the rear of the parking lot next to mine. Checking the parking lot as I go, I quickly make my way in that direction.

I know that she saw me coming, but she doesn't step out of the car or roll her windows down. I tap on her window with my keys before she finally slowly rolls the window down.

My breath catches in my throat when I see my sister.

"Did that fucker do this to you?" I shout, pointing my keys at her face.

Slowly, Riley nods.

"Fuck no!"

"Where are you going?" Riley asks as I rush back to the building.

"I'm about to fix your problem once and for all."

"Bayleigh, come back. Bay, please," Her shouts fall on deaf ears as I rush to my shop.

"Bayleigh, baby, everything okay?" Georgette asks as I storm past her and into my office.

I'm struggling to fight back the tears as I unlock my bottom desk drawer and remove my gun.

"Baby, what are you about to do?" Georgette asks, standing in my office doorway.

"Right some wrongs," I answer, rushing past her again.

"Uh-uh, honey. This ain't the way to do that." Georgette grabs my arm.

I jerk away from her and say, “Georgi, I love you, but don’t get in my way.”

“Bayleigh. Bayleigh! Bayleigh, come back,” Georgette calls after me as I rush from the office once more and toward my matte black Audi R8.

Riley jumps out of her car and runs after me.

“Bayleigh, no!”

“No, that bitch wants to hit someone. Let him hit me!” I shout over the roaring of my engine.

“Bayleigh, please, you’ll only make it worse.”

“Worse? Have you seen yourself, Riley? Your face is fucked. Up!” I say, enunciating the last two words separately to emphasize my point.

“I don’t even know how you could see to drive yourself over here with that swollen right eye.

Your lip is swollen and hanging damn near to your chin, your cheek is enlarged and discolored, and—”

As Riley starts crying, I cut myself off. But damn. My sister looks like she’s morphing from Buddy Love to Professor Clump.

Riley is five-two, one-hundred-twenty pounds, if that, and soft-spoken. That bastard is six-one, two-hundred-fifteen pounds of muscle, and loud and aggressive as hell. I’ve always hated my sister’s husband, but as long as he didn’t physically harm her, I stayed in my lane.

I didn't like the way that he spoke to her or gaslighted her, but she insisted that she was fine and she could handle him. My brothers, Quinton, and Chase, both had conversations with him before, but it seems like it didn't do any good.

"Listen, I'm going to find him, and when I do, I'm about to pop one off in his ass."

"Bayleigh, please don't go over there. You'll make things worse," Riley pleads.

"What the fuck ever." I pull my door closed and put the car in gear as she runs to her car.

I zoom past Georgette, who stands in the doorway of my shop, looking stunned as hell.

Riley pulls out of the parking lot behind me as I squeal onto the street, burning rubber.

I don't make it to the red light at the corner before Georgette calls me.

I ignore her calls, but I do speak to her aloud in my car as if she can hear me. "Georgi, don't you dare fucking call Z on me."

I know that she'll do it. But my man has his own business to handle. While I know that he wouldn't mind if I asked him to, I'm not pulling him into my siblings' affairs, not when I can handle them.

Kenny Montrose is about to answer for his crimes.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

“A new shipment’s coming in tonight. I want seven men on it.” Noble nods.

“You think those dudes are really brave enough to pull some shit like a heist, Bossman?” he asks.

“I think that anyone trying to make a name in these streets and looking for a come-up will try some stupid shit, even if it means selling his mama down the river,” I answer, taking a sip of the bourbon in my glass.

We had gotten some information on the license plates that came back from the limo at the club this weekend.

Unfortunately, it belonged to a limousine company, and the owner stated that the party had paid for it in cash.

The name that he had been given was returned as bogus when Aris worked her magic.

The person’s name they’d used had been dead for the last six years.

I don’t believe in irony, coincidences, or luck. I’m sure that their appearance has something to do with a new shipment of guns we’re getting in tonight.

Since I don’t have a name and only the face of four men, I’m going ahead with tonight’s plans, but we’ll have extra safeguards in place.

I want to bring those bastards out of hiding.

“Yeah, but maybe you underestimate your power in these streets,” Hakeem declares.

“I don’t underestimate shit. That goes for how desperate niggas can get. These guys, Crimson Edge, they’ve been coming up fast in these streets. Now, I don’t know if the dudes at the club are linked to them or not, but I’m not taking any chances.

“I never underestimate anyone looking for power or the opportunity to take my seat at the helm of this world. I didn’t get to where I am by being a fool. I learned from the mistakes of those who came before me,” I explain.

“What do you want us to do with them?” Malik asks.

“Nothing yet. I want to keep watching their movements, see what their next plan is, find out exactly who’s running shit, not the figurehead they have in place,” I reply.

Malik nods in agreement.

“It’s been a minute, Bossman. I won’t lie. My trigger finger is getting itchy,” Janel confesses.

They have all been keeping a close eye on me since Essence’s name came up.

They don’t know that she and I have a history that came before I got into the game.

Parker’s the only one who knew me before the game, the only one who knew my parents and all the bullshit that went down back then. Well, not everything.

“That will come in time,” I reply to Janel, frowning at my buzzing phone.

Why the fuck is Georgette calling me? She never calls me unless it’s an emergency, like the time that Bayleigh was in a car accident or the time when their shop was held

at gunpoint because an employee's disgruntled ex-boyfriend decided he would hold everyone hostage until they told him where his woman was.

I glance at Parker, nodding for him to take over the meeting while I step away. Lifting the phone to my ear after pushing the button, I step outside the conference room.

"Hello?"

"Zaire, I don't know what's going on. I just know that Bayleigh said that her sister needed her.

She rushed out of here, but she returned to grab her gun.

I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen to me.

Her sister was begging her not to go over there.

I don't know where 'there' was. Then she said that Bayleigh would only make things worse for her. "

"Are they still there?"

"No. I just know they both took off out of here like a bat out of hell. Riley jumped in her car and chased after Bayleigh."

"Thanks, Georgi, for calling me." I rush back into my office to grab my keys.

"Zaire, one more thing," Georgi adds apologetically.

"Yeah?"

“You should have seen Riley’s face. I don’t know if that will help you or not, but someone got a hold of that girl and did a number on her face,” Georgette states.

A growl hums low in my throat as I hang up the call without telling her goodbye. She’s given me all the information that I need, whether she knows it or not.

“You good, Z?” Parker asks, stepping out of the conference room next to my office.

I shake my head no. “Family shit has gotten out of hand. Hold everything down.”

“Gotcha, bro,” he replies, following me out to the reception area where the elevators are located.

“Marisa, I need you to send a bouquet of fresh tulips to my wife’s business, to the attention of Georgette Rivers.”

“The message, sir?”

“Thanks for everything. Your loyalty is incomparable.”

“Got it, sir,” she responds, pushing a button on her desk.

The express elevator opens, and I rush onto it and jab the button to take me to the private parking garage. The moment that I step off the elevator, the black Range Rover is waiting for me with the rear door open.

The button that Marisa pushes alerts my driver, Ghalen, that I’m on my way down. He’s always ready to go at any moment, and if he needs a break or to step away, then Jamal would be the one to replace him.

I hop into the back seat, and Ghalen pulls away.

“Where to, Bossman?”

“Riley’s home.”

He floors the gas.

I have always respected Bayleigh’s wishes to let her handle her family business on her own. What I won’t do is allow my woman to go down for some bullshit that her family couldn’t handle or something that jumps off and pulls her into it like this.

I’ve often told Riley that if she needed protection, an escape, a place to go, money, or anything, all she has to do is say the word. Riley stays because that’s what she chooses.

While she tells her big sister that her husband doesn’t put his hands on her, I’ve always suspected differently.

When they were in their twenties, Kenny tried his hand at being a dope boy.

He wasn’t cut out for the game, but that never stopped him from messing with several women at once.

At the time, Riley wasn’t involved with him, but she was crushing on him.

We all warned her to stay away, especially when he got China Houston pregnant. That girl was a whole lot of trouble.

But the moment that he realized that Riley’s attention was all about him, he used that to his advantage to make China jealous. He used to jump on China all the time.

I had one conversation with him in the beginning after learning that he and Riley

were dating.

I hadn't had to have another one because he'd never put his hands on her.

Over the last year, I began to suspect things had changed, but I'd been so caught up with my business, I hadn't had time to drop in on them and see how things were going.

What tipped me off that something was wrong was that Riley stopped coming to family events, and she seldom let Bayleigh come to visit her. There was always another excuse: she was tired from working, they were going on a vacation, she wasn't feeling well, and she and Kenny were heading out.

I hadn't pressed the issue, but now that Bayleigh has become directly involved, I know there's some shit in the game.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

There's not another house close to them, and I know that when she was screaming, no one would have heard her.

I glance in the rearview mirror, knowing that I've left her in the distance. Her Mustang can only go one-fifty-five tops.

When I pull up to their little house on the hill, I jump out with my gun in hand, leaving my bag behind and my ignition running.

I try the door but find that it's locked. I should shoot the bitch off, but I don't. I bang on the door with the butt of my gun instead.

I hear the fool holler back, "What?"

"Open this door, Kenny! I'm not playing with you."

"Go on, Bayleigh. I'm not in the mood for your shit. I don't want any trouble."

"Bitch, please! You asked for trouble the minute you put your muthafuckin' hands on my sister."

"Ask your sister what she did to me," he shouts through the door.

I bang on the door and kick it. "Open the door, Kenny!" I yell.

"I'm not opening that door, Bayleigh. Take your crazy ass back down to the valley where you belong."

“I’m about to shoot this bitch off if you don’t answer the door right now!” I shout, kicking it one last time.

“Did you see my car in the driveway?”

“I don’t give a damn about your car.” I turn to look at his car for the first time.

The front windshield of his beloved gold BMW is shattered, and the tires are slit. I can see from where I am that it appears the leather seats have been slashed as well.

“She didn’t have to do that shit, Bayleigh.”

“You must have done something to deserve it. We both know that Riley’s not destroying your car for no reason. But I don’t care if she did, the shit you did to her ain’t flying with me.”

I am tired of screaming at the top of my lungs, so I kick the door several more times until it starts splintering. Just when I aim the gun at the door to finish the job, I hear not one but two sets of cars squealing to a stop behind me.

Shit. Did he call the police?

Spinning around, I groan. It’s worse than the cops. Riley has pulled up behind me, but behind her is Zaire.

My man is fuming mad. I swear it looks like fire is shooting from those dark, midnight-black eyes when he jumps from the truck. Ghaleen’s big ass jumps out of the driver’s seat, running up to me right behind my husband.

“What the fuck are you doing, Bay?” Zaire demands angrily.

It's seldom that Zaire gets upset with me. I can name a handful of times that he's been this way and still have fingers left over.

"Did you see Riley's face?" I shout, pointing at the car parked in front of his Ranger.

"No." Zaire turns back to look at Riley, still inside her car.

Ghalen stalks to the car.

"She's not going to get out for him." I cry as tears stream down my face for the first time. I've been too angry to cry until now. More likely than not, it's Zaire's presence and knowing that he'll handle this that's causing the tears. Tears of relief and not despair.

"Ghalen, get Bayleigh. I'll get Riley," Zaire orders.

Ghalen trudges up to me and reaches for me. I wave my gun. "Don't you dare touch me, Ghalen. I'll shoot your big ass."

"Ms. Bayleigh, we both know that you're not about to shoot me. Now, come on and make my job easier."

"No, Ghalen. He didn't have to do that to her."

"I haven't seen her, but if it's got you this upset, I don't doubt that it's fucked up. But you already know that me and Bossman will take care of that muthafucka. Don't make it harder than it has to be, and don't get yourself in trouble out here," he states in a calming voice.

My eyes dart to where Zaire is kneeling between the car and the open door, talking to Riley. He's always treated her like she was his little sister instead of mine.

The moment that Zaire stands up, I know it's about to be a war. His nostrils are flaring, and he's walking slowly and steadily with his hands shoved in his pockets back to the Range. He reaches inside before he walks in our direction.

Riley climbs out of her car, leaves it running, and climbs into the Range.

"Ghalen, take the ladies back to my house in the Range."

"But—" I object.

"I'll take Bayleigh's car back."

"What about Riley's car? He'll do something to hers out of spite just because she did something to his," I explain.

"That's already been taken care of. Go home and take care of your sister, Bayleigh."

"But—"

"Bayleigh."

His voice is quiet, controlled, and deadly. Shit. Damn, Georgette. Why'd you have to call him?

The look that he gives me speaks to my soul. He feels my pain, and I know that everything will be all right, though it isn't right now.

"Zaire, please don't be mad at me."

His nostrils flare.

“We’ll talk later. Madison will meet you at the house to see about Riley’s wounds and to check for any internal injuries.”

Madison is Dr. Madison Kimbrough, who attends to the members of Zaire’s team for any urgent issues, gunshot wounds, and anything else medical-related that he needs her to handle.

“I love you,” he whispers as he holds me in his big arms. I feel safe here. Zaire is six-two with broad shoulders, muscular arms, and the build of a linebacker. Zaire presses a kiss to my head, releases me, and then turns away from me.

I turn and walk back down the sidewalk to the driveway. I hop into the backseat with my sister and pull her into my arms.

She breaks down sobbing, and I hold her and rock her back and forth for a while as we wait for Ghalen and Zaire to finish talking.

“What do you think he’s saying?” Riley asks, looking up at me with wide eyes.

“I have no idea, honey. I just know that I don’t like seeing this side of him.”

Zaire works hard to keep me out of his business, but this isn’t business; this is personal.

Ghalen returns to the car with us and climbs inside.

“Ghalen, what did he say on the way over here?” I ask, knowing the answer to that question.

I know Zaire like the back of my hand, but I’m wondering what, if anything, he has said to Ghalen.

“He’s worried, Ms. Bayleigh. He was scared that you might get hurt or get yourself in trouble, and he wasn’t here to protect you,” the big man answers, reversing out of the driveway.

It’s then that I realize Zaire never removed his hands from his pockets. No sooner than we pull out than I see a black Charger coming up the hill. It pulls to a stop, and I turn around and look out of the window.

Janel and Kim both jump out. This ends in no good way.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

I kick the door in as I hear Kenny shout. “I’m calling the cops!”

I hear a car pull up behind me, and as I listen closely, I can tell that it’s Kim’s Charger. She drove Janel over to pick up Riley’s Mustang and drive it back to our house.

I didn’t want Riley driving in the condition she was in, nor Bayleigh as upset as she was. I’ll take Bayleigh’s car back.

I step inside the house over the splintered wood and walk to the kitchen, where Kenny’s hiding like a coward.

My hands are shoved in my pockets.

“There’s no way that this ends in your favor, Kenny.”

“Man, you saw what she did to my car?”

“I don’t give a shit about that car.” My outward appearance is calm, but I’m burning inside.

I see him easing closer to the knife block, and I’m not stupid.

I pounce on him with the speed and agility of a cheetah.

Kenny falls to the ground, and I place my foot on his chest. “You want to beat on women?”

“She destroyed my car.”

“And I’m about to destroy your ass.”

I remove my foot from his chest and give a direct order. “Stand up, bitch. Fight me the way that you were fighting Riley.”

I don’t want him on the ground, and I don’t want him at an unfair advantage as it relates to his physical position. As for the rest, all bets are off.

Kenny swings at me numerous times, and I dodge his punches until he finally catches me in the ribs a couple of times, but only because I’ve turned sideways, giving him my shoulder. I let him get a few more hits off so that he can feel as if he stands a chance.

Riley’s face flashes in my mind again. We’re supposed to protect our women and be their warriors. The moment that we feel as men that we can’t do that, we need to exit their lives, not take advantage of our strength over theirs.

If the woman starts disrespecting us and we feel we can’t take it, it’s time to walk out of the door, not beat her ass.

I don’t know how that girl made it to Bayleigh’s shop the way that she did with one eye closed. Fury rushes through my body, much like the blood that flows freely through my veins. I don’t want to play with Kenny’s ass anymore. It’s time to do what I’m going to do.

The moment that I lift my hands and he sees the brass knuckles, he starts shouting for help. That doesn’t stop me from punching him in his ribs, taking several shots that have him doubling over, and then pummeling his face, carefully avoiding his temples. I don’t want to kill him.

I have no problem killing a man, but Kenny needs to suffer the same way that he's made Riley suffer and countless other women in the past.

I hear the crunching of bone as I swing and hit his cheek. I swing again and hit him in his nose and revel in the satisfying spurt of blood that gushes from there. His hands go up in a defensive posture but drop the moment that I hit him in the gut.

Taking advantage of his open face, I slam my fists into his eyes, leaving deep lacerations. I know the only thing that will repair the damage is cosmetic surgery. I don't stop because when I'm done, this muthafucka won't be recognizable.

When Kenny falls to the ground, I'm straddling him and still hitting him. I hear something behind me, but it doesn't penetrate the fog in my brain until I feel hands on me, pulling at me.

"Zaire!" Kim shouts.

"Z-dog! C'mon. If you want, I can finish him off," Janel coaxes.

I stop beating him as my chest heaves up and down.

"Come on, Z," Janel demands, reaching down for my bloodied hand.

I jump up without assistance and stare down at him. I spit on him. "Fuck him. Get someone in here to clean this place up. I need it swept, and I need him to be taken to the Hovel."

The Hovel is a shabby house in the woods where I take our enemies to either finish them off if needed, extract information, or, in Kenny's case, for a time-out. I have no plans on killing him, but his ass ain't going to the hospital or the cops either.

“All right,” Kim replies, instantly hopping on her phone to access the secure site we use for communicating with each other.

Aris built an app a few years back that is undetectable and that no one has access to except for our team.

It allows us to communicate securely with each other, bypassing internet options and navigating satellite access instead.

We can speak, text, take and send photos and videos, and navigate via the app.

“Was this the business you ran out of the meeting to handle?”

“Yeah. I called Parker to have him send you over, but I didn’t expect you this soon. How’d you get here so fast?”

“As soon as you left, Parker told Kim and me to get ready because you might need us. We were pulling out of the garage, just getting ready to cruise the streets, when Kim received a text from you with this address telling us to meet you here. Who’s this scumbag?” Janel asks.

“Bayleigh’s brother-in-law.”

“I’m guessing he’s not a family favorite,” Janel quips, looking down at where Kenny is lying unconscious on the floor.

“Is he alive?” She asks, kneeling beside him. Before I can say that I don’t give a shit, she answers herself. “Yep. He’s still alive.”

“I’m about to get the fuck up out of here. I’m heading to the house. You got this?”

“You know I do. I’ll hold it down and oversee the crew when they arrive.”

I nod and head out of the house. Kim is just finishing her call as I step into the driveway.

“Both crews are on the way, and we’ll see him to the Hovel. You good, Bossman?”

“I will be,” I sigh.

When I hop in Bayleigh’s car, I drive around for an hour before heading home. I never like to take negative energy from the streets home with me. Bayleigh is a good woman, and she works hard to keep our house a safe space for the boys and me.

It’s full of love, peace, happiness, and laughter. Sometimes, I take stress home with me, but not evil energy. The way that I’m feeling right now, I need to kill someone or something. But I’ve got bigger fish to fry than letting that punk-ass Kenny steal my energy.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

“I’m pleased to report that there aren’t any internal injuries, but Riley, honey, this damage to your face causes me concern about your vision. Are you seeing any unusual floaters?” Dr. Madison asks.

My sister’s lip has swollen more since she first called me. Her voice is garbled, and although I can understand her, she doesn’t sound the same. I grit my teeth together, refusing to let her see me cry.

The moment that I shed a tear, she’s going to be bawling again, as she’s already done in the SUV twice on the way over here. When she cries, it also hurts her, and while Dr. Madison has given her something for the pain, I don’t want to create any further discomfort.

“Not in this left eye, though he hit me there too. But the right eye? I don’t really know,” she shrugs.

“That’s understandable because it’s completely shut. I want to watch it for the next several days.”

Riley nods.

“These pills are going to make you sleepy. The injections that I’ve given you will keep the infection away.

But make sure that you’re taking the antibiotics as prescribed to keep the infection away, and these oblong pills to help manage the pain.

If you have any questions or any side effects that we haven't discussed, call me right away.

I don't care what time of day or night it is. I'll be here."

"Thanks, Dr. Madison." I thank her on behalf of Riley.

"You know that I never get involved in the details, Bayleigh, but Riley . . ." The doctor pauses and stares at my sister for effect.

"You need to stay here with your sister for a while. You need to be healed. Whoever did this to you, honey, they cannot love you. If you want further assistance or need to speak with someone, I have some recommendations."

We both look at Riley, and she shakes her head. "I'm not going back. I don't know what I'll do right away, but I—"

"You'll stay here as long as it takes for us to figure out your next step. If that's permanent, then that's what will happen," I reply.

"I can't do that, Bayleigh. Zaire and you have been so good to me through the years."

"That's what family is for, sweetheart," Dr. Madison remarks.

"I know, but I don't want to infringe on their hospitality," Riley replies.

"Honey, have you seen your sister's home?"

" Dr. Madison asks, looking at my sister as if she's lost her mind.

"I took a tour of this house when they first bought it. She has more than enough room

for you, me, and my two siblings if we want to come and stay,” Dr. Madison teases, winking at me with a warm smile.

“We really do, Riley. You know this.”

Our home has eight bedrooms, ten bathrooms, and countless other rooms. It’s big enough that when our twenty-two-year-old son, Zechariah, who is out of state attending FSU, is home, we can go days at a time without seeing him.

That doesn’t happen with Zaccai because he’s only ten, and he needs us to be hands-on at all times. Sometimes, we don’t see Zayn for a day, but that’s seldom. Although he’s nineteen, he still needs his parents more than he’s willing to admit.

“Let’s just get through the night, okay?” Riley asks softly.

Dr. Madison glances worriedly at me, and I shake my head.

“All right, honey. Go ahead and relax.” I point at the bed in the suite that I’ve placed her in for the night. “I’m going to walk Dr. Madison downstairs.”

“Okay,” Riley agrees tiredly, curling up on the bed before I can close the door.

Dr. Madison doesn’t speak until we’re downstairs at the front door.

“Is this an ongoing thing for your sister?”

“Not that I know of. I mean, Riley’s husband is an ass, and I’ve never cared for him. I always suspected that he was cheating on her, but I’ve never known him to get physical with her.”

“Do you think that she’ll use that as her excuse to go back to him? I’m worried about

her, Bayleigh. This guy caused major damage to her face, and while I couldn't convince her to go to the hospital, I am concerned that the next time, he might kill her."

"If someone had said that was a possibility before this encounter, I would have said absolutely not. I know that Kenny's afraid of Zaire, but I don't know why he became so comfortable as to slip up and do it this time."

"Does he have a history of this before your sister?"

"He does. That was one of the reasons we didn't want Riley to become involved with him. But that was twenty years ago. I just thought that after all this time, he had matured and changed."

"Abusers don't change, Bayleigh. They may allow it to lie dormant for years, but I'd be willing to bet if you were to ask your sister, and if she were to be honest, this isn't his first time hitting her.

A man doesn't go from being non-abusive to what he did to her.

That's a result of something that she's been accepting over time.

It just escalated to that today, and the next time will be far worse. "

My heart breaks inside at Dr. Madison's words because I know that she knows what she's talking about.

I nod solemnly. "I will speak with her and do everything that I can to help her, Doc."

"Okay, but we both know that we can only help her as far as she will allow us to."

“You’re right.”

“I’ll be in touch. Make sure that Riley’s taking her meds and getting some rest.”

“I will. Thanks again for everything.” I close and lock the door behind her.

With a heavy heart and mind, I head back upstairs to my sister. When I sit on her bed, she appears to be so tired, but I have to know.

“I never got a chance to let you tell me what happened.” I grab one of the six pillows on the bed and place it on my lap.

I lift my sister’s head from the pillow she’s lying on and place her head on the one in my lap. I listen to her as I slowly pull my fingers through her hair.

“I suspected that he was cheating again.”

I bite my tongue to keep from saying anything that might sound judgmental or make her stop talking.

“I put a tracker on his car, and I’ve been following him, but I hadn’t seen anything until today.

I noticed he was at a hair salon, which was strange.

So, I left work as soon as I could and drove there to see who he was picking up.

I waited for about an hour before anything happened.

Only Kenny didn’t walk out of the salon. ”

“Who walked out?”

“A woman. She hopped in his car and drove it around to the post office, the grocery store, the mall, and then back to her house. I watched as she went inside and stayed for a while. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“What did you do, Ry?” My heart breaks for her.

“I went to the door and knocked on it. The woman answered in a towel, and I asked if Kenny was there. She wanted to know who I was, and I told her that I was his wife. I could hear him in the background, saying that he wasn’t finished sliding in that ass yet and that she needed to come back to bed.

“The moment she saw me about to rush through that door, she slammed it in my face. I banged on the door, demanding that Kenny come out because he wasn’t answering his phone.

He refused to come out, so I gave them ten seconds, or I was going to fuck up his car.

He thought that I was playing. So, I fucked up his car, and then I drove home to wait to hear what he had to say. ”

“And he drove home and did this to you?”

Riley nods and starts crying. I can barely make out her words between her crying and her swollen lips, but I understand.

“I’m the one who pays his car note. It’s in his name, but I pay that and the insurance on it too. He thinks that some bitch can drive it. No.”

I continue pulling my fingers through her hair and muttering shushing noises before

she finally calms down. We remain that way for a while before I realize that she's fallen asleep. We will finish this conversation, but I'll let her rest for now.

I slide her and the pillow off my lap and slip from the room without managing to wake her.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

Bayleigh is in our sitting room when I finally arrive home.

“Where’s Riley?”

“In the Atlanta suite,” she answers softly.

When she designed each of the guest suites in our home, she used major cities in Georgia as the theme: Atlanta, Savannah, Helen, and Tybee Island.

The Savannah suite has a mural of the majestic Spanish moss trees famous in the area, along with a large fountain carved in the rear wall to emulate the Forsyth Fountain found in the park of the same name.

The Helen suite has a German theme, the Tybee suite has a beach theme with a lighthouse mural, and the Atlanta suite has a garden theme representative of the Atlanta Botanical Gardens, with peach being its primary color.

“What did Madison say?”

“She tried to convince her to go to the hospital, but you know Riley,” Bayleigh explains with a resigned sigh. “However, she had a major point in that avoiding the hospital allows her to avoid having the police called since she knows that you were probably handling the situation.”

I nod, but there were ways around that too. I’m too tired to argue the point now, and I doubt it would do any good.

“So, Dr. Madison gave her a prescription. From her preliminary checkup, she couldn’t see any long-term injuries, any internal bleeding, or anything like that. But she is worried about Riley’s vision.”

“How is she mentally?”

“A wreck, as you can imagine. She keeps breaking down crying at the most unexpected times. She fell asleep while talking to me. Did she tell you what happened when you were talking with her in the car?”

I nod and drag my hand down my face. “She did, but that shit’s still not okay. I don’t care what she did to his car. I can’t say I blame her. I think I’d be vengeful as hell if I found another nigga driving the car that I was paying for.”

Bayleigh loops her arms around my neck. “Well, that’s something you’ll never have to worry about, my love.”

I place my hands on her waist and stop her from drawing closer.

“You’re not off the hook that easily.”

She leans in and licks my lips. I groan as my dick instantly reacts to her attention.

“No, Bayleigh. We have to talk.”

She sighs, drops her hands, and drops down on the settee. My eyes go heavy looking at the way her silk robe parts to give me a glimpse of those beautiful, luscious thighs.

“I know that I was wrong.”

“You were. Bayleigh, you can’t go off half-cocked around the city with a gun like

you're about to do something to somebody."

"That is my sister, Zaire."

"I don't care if it was your mother. That's what you got me for?"

"I thunder, slapping my hand against my chest. "You put everyone at risk with a move like that. If something happened to you, what are the boys and I going to do? What will happen to your sister then? Or how about your parents and brothers? How are they supposed to feel? Did you even consider where that might leave your staff if they lost you and their jobs?"

Bayleigh drops her face in her hands and groans. "I know. You're right."

I sit down beside her and lift her thighs onto my lap.

Gripping one tightly, I massage it. "Listen, that could have gone all kinds of wrong. You kill Kenny or vice versa. You're risking drawing unnecessary attention my way, which you know is some shit that I don't need.

If things had gotten out of control, you know the forces of hell would be waiting to rain terror down on my ass.

Everyone knows you're my woman, and they know how I feel about you.

You left us in a vulnerable position, baby, and I can't have that. "

"You're right. I didn't think about that."

"Right, and that's not you. You're a smart, beautiful woman with class and strength.

I know we come from that, but we've worked our asses off too hard to get away from that.

What I do in the streets is one thing, but I do what I do so that you and the boys don't have to.

I do what I do so that a certain lifestyle is no longer yours.

Coming out of the hood was hard, but it's easy as hell to fall back there. Don't let that be us, Bay."

"You're right," she replies softly, resting her hand on mine.

I turn our fingers over and intertwine them briefly before unlinking them and tracing the diamond that she wears on her left ring finger.

We're not married by law, but we are by heart and soul.

"Come here," I demand, reaching for her.

She swings her legs off my lap and gets up so that she can straddle me.

"It took me a while to calm down so that I could get back to you. All I wanted was to come home and get inside of my woman."

"I'm here for you, Zaire. You know this."

"Show me."

The kiss is soft and gentle but hungry. Bayleigh pulls a groan from somewhere deep within me before she begins to climb off me.

“What are you doing?” I ask when she begins to kneel.

“Taking care of you.”

“How about I take care of you tonight?” I ask, grabbing her hand and pulling her to stand.

“I like that,” she answers as I swoop her into my arms and lay her on the bed.

“Mm, no panties.” I palm her mound. “You were really trying to work your way out of a punishment, huh?”

“No. I like the punishments. You being mad at me? Not so much.”

“Don’t worry, beautiful. I’m not mad at ya.”

I spread her legs wide and slick a finger against her wetness. Bayleigh bites her bottom lip, pulling it into her mouth as her gaze pins me in place, daring me to take more.

I slide a finger inside of her and then another to scissor her.

“Zaire,” she moans, dragging her gown up and around her hips. She grips her breasts and kneads them as she watches me.

When I pull my fingers out and give her a taste, she purrs contentedly.

“How do you taste?”

“So damn good.”

“Let me see.” I slide down to connect my mouth to her pussy. I don’t tease her but dive right in, tasting, sucking, and licking her. My baby rocks her hips up and pumps into my mouth, rolling her body and satisfying my need to consume her.

With one finger in her ass and another one in her pussy, I suck at her as if I’m trying to pull the soul and spirit out of her body. My fingers dive in and out of her, and she shrieks with pleasure.

“Zaire. Oh my. Baby, damn,” she moans.

The ability to make her feel this way, the way no other man can, is a potent drug. I watch as her lips part slightly, and for a mere fraction of a second, her breath departs and then slams back into her with such mighty force it seemingly catches her off guard.

Those beautiful eyes open again, hooded with the depths of lust, as she watches me take another sweet lick of her before I plunge my tongue in once more and then suck gently at her nectar.

My woman feeds me and nurtures my spirit and my mind.

And again, I think about the ongoing battle between us.

The one that hasn’t allowed me to give her my married name.

The desire to protect her if everything should fail.

All that we own is in her name. Some things are even in my oldest son’s name.

I’ve worked too hard to let everything that I’ve developed and created be taken away from my family.

Besides, there is so much pain, drama, and scandal associated with my name.

She gives me everything that I need. Now, I need to find a way to give her the one thing that she wants most in this world.

I roll my tongue inside of her and then suck at her clit as she cries out, releasing her orgasm onto my tongue.

“I love you, Zaire,” she whimpers before falling asleep.

“I love you too,” I mutter, though she can’t hear me.

Bayleigh is my reason for why I do this shit. Well, she’s the reason that keeps me going. She didn’t start out being my reason.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

TWENTY-NINE YEARS EARLIER

“Li'l G, I ain't gon' lie. I didn't think you had the balls to hold this shit down while your old man was away, but you're showing real promise,” Blacc confesses.

Bobbing my head up at him, I reply. “I told you. I watched my Pops. Watched all you ol' heads.”

“Old? Who the fuck is you calling old, young buck? You think I'm old?” he asks, laughing at me.

“I turned that shit around faster than you could have, didn't I? Also peeped you on game about that li'l investment.”

“Mm, yeah. Thanks for that on the real, dawg,” Blacc states, dapping me up while he gives me a key of dope. “Just watch yo' back in these streets, okay? Some were happy to see your old man go down, and I know they're not too happy at seeing you come up as his replacement.”

“Yeah, I know. Fuck 'em.”

“Oh, a'ight. I see you. Just be careful, like I said,” Blacc repeats.

I nod and head out of the house, looking left and right. I peep at the cars around the place, all of them I know. I look up and down the street again, checking out the houses to make sure shit ain't out of place.

Satisfied that all seems well, I head down the block to the bus stop, grabbing the straps of my backpack and tightening them just a little.

I shove the glasses up on my face and straighten out my bowtie. Blacc and the old heads laughed at my getup when they first saw it, but it works. It keeps the folks off me. When they see me, they see another young, Black brother, but they see one who ain't even trying to cause any problems.

I look like a straight nerd in this getup, like I'm about ready to sell bean pies. But I'm still young enough to look like I'm in school, which I am. With this Bible in my hand, it adds an extra layer of protection.

It ain't like I don't need it. Mama hollered at me for being blasphemous and said I was going straight to hell.

I told her that I was just trying to fill in where my pops left off without the extra problems. I believe in God, and I know that He knows I'm just trying to look out for my family. I need His protection just like the next man.

It's been hard since my pops went away. He's been gone for a year now. My pops got sentenced to twenty years for trafficking and gun possession.

I'm in my senior year of high school. I promised my mom that I would finish if nothing else.

I'm committed to keeping that promise, but I also need to bring in some money to help her with these bills.

When it comes to the pay that I'm asking for, Burger King ain't letting me have it my way, and McDonald's ain't loving it.

I know that my mom can't do it on her own, so I had to get out in these streets and do something. While Blacc didn't take me seriously when I first approached him, I had to prove to him that I knew what I was doing.

Something told me that Essence didn't turn over everything the night that she set my father up. So, I'd broken into her house one night while she was gone clubbing with some friends, and sure enough, I'd found another brick of coke that she held back.

I thought about the conversations I'd overheard my pops having with some of his men and the things that I'd seen that he didn't know that I saw. I began to put everything that I learned about the game to use, along with a few tricks of my own, and started making money quickly.

That shit happened so fast that Blacc sent for me. When I told him what I was doing, he couldn't help but put some respect on my name and my game. The little connection he was talking about that I hooked him up with was a chop shop around the way that he could get in on.

Blacc has some guys who like nothing better than stealing, but they don't know what to do with the cars other than go for a joyride. Once I hooked him up with Patch, he was able to put those boys to work to make a pretty penny for him, them, and Patch.

I'd simply asked for him to look out for me if it worked out between them.

I need to turn things around faster, though.

I'm not stupid, either. I know I have to be careful because fast thinking and foolish desires make for fatal mistakes.

Lately, my mom's been stressed out, complaining about headaches, sleeplessness, and hearing noises at night. I just want to make it easier for her.

I hop on the bus when it pulls up and head to the back, feeling pretty good about my most recent haul. I see a cute little shorty checking for me as I pass her up. She smells pretty good too.

Probably got jokes to make about my getup, but I don't give a shit. If she knew the type of money that I was hauling in, those jokes would turn into appreciation.

But I ain't got time for no honeys, especially not ones who only look at my pockets anyway. My mind is focused on getting us another car. The one that we had was taken when my pops went to jail because he had that shit in his name and not my mom.

I've got enough to get us one now, but I can't move too fast without drawing attention. Besides, I still have to help her with the bills and keep enough to re-up when needed.

I pull my backpack off and sit down. Pulling the headphones from the front pocket, I think about how much I'm about to make off this product that I'm carrying as I turn my CD player to Rakim's Paid In Full .

Yeah, it's eight years old, but it inspires me every time I hear it.

I ain't trying to be a rapper, but I do have plans of owning my own business one day. I want to invest in other people. Mama says that I have to go to college for all that, but honestly, that's not in my future right now.

I got mad skills and smarts. I just have to stick to my plan and work it.

When I look up again, I see that the girl has turned around in her seat, and she's resting her chin on her elbows, staring at me.

I lift an eyebrow at her and widen my eyes. She does the same thing in return, but the smile that's on those luscious lips doesn't drop.

I find myself licking my lips, something that I don't usually do, but it happens so naturally now. I know that it's because I'm thinking about those lips. They look soft as hell and full. She's wearing some gloss that only makes them prettier. It's a shiny pink gloss with speckles of glitter.

Somehow, I think that gloss might taste like strawberries. Mm...strawberries and chocolate.

I want to kiss her lips.

I want to do some other shit with those lips too. I think about my dick resting on that bottom lip. A lip slick from her saliva and not gloss. A lip that's coated in my cum with it dribbling off the bottom lip.

Shit, she's getting out of her seat and moving in my direction. My dick is hard.

I move the backpack from the seat and rest it on my lap to hide my arousal.

"What are you? Seven-day evangelist? Pentecostal? I know you're not a Witness or a Muslim 'cause you got that Bible."

"Neither."

"Don't tell me you're Catholic."

"Why I gotta be any of that?"

"What's with the suit and the Bible then?" she asks, jutting her chin at me.

“What’s it to you?”

“You’re kinda cute. Got my attention. You don’t usually see boys your age running around with suits and Bibles. Figured you had something on your mind. No Tims, baggy jeans, or oversized shirts.”

“You always judge guys by the clothes they wear?”

“No. I judge them by whether they’ve got something on their mind. And you? You look like you’ve got something on your mind.”

I like this girl already. She’s got a lot of sass, but she’s real.

“I got a lot on my mind,” I reply.

“Not talking about getting in my panties either.”

I smirk. “That’s what you’re thinking about? Cuz I didn’t come at you like that.”

She giggles, rolls her eyes, and looks out the window.

Turning around in the seat, she swings those long, thick brown legs sideways on her seat and pulls her purse around in her lap. She’s wearing a uniform.

“You go to private school?”

“Yeah. It’s an all-girls school. My dad wants to keep me away from the boys.”

“How would he feel knowing you’re approaching strange boys on the bus?”

She pulls a pen out of her purse. “He’d be pissed, but what he doesn’t know won’t

hurt him.”

“Little girl, what you got on your mind?” I ask as she reaches for my hand.

“Here’s my number and my name. Call me sometimes. I’d be interested in having Bible Study with you.”

I turn my hand around when she finishes and look at the number and then the name.

Bayleigh.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:34 am

TWENTY-NINE YEARS AGO

I don't know what the suit, glasses, and Bible were all about, but there was something about Zaire that got my attention the minute he stepped foot on that bus today. Not that those things weren't peculiar and stood out on their own for a boy his age.

But I saw through the facade. He was cute as hell with his dark, chocolate skin. He's tall, muscular, and quiet. There's something about the quiet ones that always has an underlying sense of danger, an edginess to them.

Zaire might look like a nerd, but something tells me that he's not. I was trying to be all flirty and cute today. That's so far from who I am.

I'm used to guys stepping to me, but he didn't do that. And I usually shy away from them anyway because I haven't always been comfortable in my skin. My body seemed to have matured far quicker than my mind did, and it wasn't easy to get acclimated to the attention that guys gave me.

Something about Zaire, though, told me that I should approach him and not be scared. I wanted to know who he was, and I had the sense that he wouldn't step to me first.

So, when the phone rang that evening around six, I jumped for it before my brothers could get to it. They were always on the phone, waiting for some fast girl to call them. My brothers could talk a girl out of her panties faster than a rat could snatch cheese from a trap.

"Hello," I greeted shyly, looking at the caller ID.

Nora Grace Knight. I wonder if that's his mom's name.

"May I speak to Bayleigh?"

"And he's got manners," I tease shyly.

He laughs. "I thought it was you but didn't want to assume anything. Sometimes, you call a girl's house with the wrong approach and get cursed out."

"That happens to you often?"

"Nah."

"Mm. So, are you going to tell me about the Bible and suit getup or what?"

"What's got you so interested in the Bible and my suit?"

"You do. I mean, you stand out with that, and I wanna know why."

"What if I told you it wasn't a getup, but that's who I am?"

"Then I'm even more interested in knowing who you are."

"Word?"

"Word."

"Maybe we can hook up this weekend and discuss it?"

"Where?"

“I’m thinking the mall. Catch a quick movie and a bite to eat. Maybe go bowling afterwards.”

“What are you taking me to see?”

“What do you want to see?”

“A Thin Line Between Love and Hate with Martin Lawrence is showing at the movies.”

“A’ight. I can get with that as long as that’s not a premonition of our future.”

“Future? You’re thinking long-term, Mr. . . . Knight?”

“That would be me.”

“Okay, let’s do that then. How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Mm.”

“What does that mean? How old are you?”

“I’m sixteen.”

“What? You’re going to tell me that I’m too young for you?”

“Not at all. Are you going to wear that suit and bowtie to the movies?”

He pauses, and I hear him chuckling softly.

“Uh...is that what you want me to wear?”

“I like the suit.”

“Okay, then that’s what you’ll get.”

“Cool.”

“Aye, I have to go, but is it okay if I call you later?”

“Depends on how much later.”

“Honestly, it might be about one or two.”

“In the morning?”

“Yeah. That a problem?”

It is, but I don’t tell him that. I guess he has a job to go to and doesn’t get off until late.

“No, that’s not a problem.”

I’ll just stay up late and be tired as hell for school tomorrow, but that’s okay. I have a feeling that he might be worth it.

Zaire and I met up at the mall later that weekend and had a good time at the movies, dinner, and bowling. He was funny and cute, but he wasn’t quick to share where he worked. I could only assume that it embarrassed him.

I did learn that he had five siblings and that he was the oldest.

“Hey.”

“Hi, you made it home, okay.”

“Yeah. I did.”

“Thanks for calling to let me know that. I had fun today.”

“So, did I. You want to do it again next weekend?”

“I can’t. I have a swim meet next Saturday, and we’re usually there all day from the morning until late afternoon. After that, my parents usually take us out to dinner, and then we have movies and popcorn at home.”

Zaire chuckles on the other line.

“What? You think it’s corny or something?”

“Nah, I think it’s mad cool. I wouldn’t mind doing the same.”

“Why don’t you then? Maybe see if your parents would be interested in trying something new. Something different.”

“Nah, it’s not even like that over here.”

“Oh. Why? Your parents aren’t into family time or something?”

“Nah. It’s not that.”

“Then tell me, Z.”

He pauses before he replies. “Yo, I like it when you call me that.”

“Z?”

“Yeah. Sounds mad cool.”

“Nobody ever called you that before?”

“Not like you do.”

I giggle. “Now it sounds like you’re trying to get in my panties.”

“Girl, I ain’t even over there. You must want me to get in them. You’re always bringing them up.”

“You think you’re slick, though.”

“What’s up?”

“You didn’t answer my question about your parents. You don’t talk about them at all, other than to say you have to watch your siblings for your mom. Is your dad not in your life or something?”

Zaire exhales loudly, and I can tell this subject is stressing him out.

“You know, it’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it. I didn’t mean to pressure you.”

“Nah, it’s all good, shorty. It’s just that...well, my pops ain’t here.”

“He walked out on y’all?”

“Nah, he’s in prison.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, somebody set him up for something, but...that was on him, you know?”

“No, I don’t know. How about you tell me?”

We spent the next couple of hours on the phone with Zaire telling me all about his family, his dad, and a lady named Essence, and what happened from there.

My heart broke at hearing what his family was going through as a result of his father’s cheating and dope-dealing ways.

That could never be me. I wouldn’t be that woman.

We ended the call after a while when there was some noise in his background. He said his siblings were acting up again, and he’d call me the next day.

Only, he never did. I wasn’t prepared for that Saturday, being the last one I’d hear from him for about seven months. The next time that we saw each other, there would be nothing but attitude from me, although I’d be happy to see him too.

PRESENT DAY

“A’ight, I have to go,” I say, hearing a knock at my door that propels me from my feet and to the partially open office door.

I open it and smile brightly at the face on the other side.

“Yeah, baby. I’ll be home late tonight. I’m meeting with the Fab Five,” I say, chuckling.

“Okay, Z. Just be safe on your way home. Tell them I said hi.”

“I will. Love you, babe.”

“Love you too,” she professes before we end the call.

“Good to see you, beautiful.” I wrap Cheyenne in my arms and kiss her.

“But of course it is. You know it’s always good to see my gorgeous face whenever I step on the premises.”

I chuckle and check out her tan pantsuit.

“You’re looking good in that suit.”

“You’re not looking too bad yourself. So, what are we eating tonight?”

“Your favorite, baby girl. Shrimp marinara, antipasto salad with bocconcini and green-olive tapenade, and garlic bread.”

“Mm. My stomach is growling already. I haven’t eaten since lunch, and it’s already after eight.”

“Why’d you wait so long?”

“Because you’re feeding me. A girl has to keep her curves and figure in check.”

“You sound like Bayleigh.”

“Speaking of, we have brunch this Saturday. Savannah, Lei-Lei, and I,” Cheyenne states.

“Don’t get my woman in trouble, you hear me?” I say, wagging my finger at her.

“If you’d give her your last name, that wouldn’t be a problem.”

Groaning, I ask, “Are we back at that? You know why I won’t marry her. She knows, and she’s accepted it, so why’s it a thing with you?”

“Are we talking about you marrying Bayleigh again?” Savannah asks, stepping through the door at the same time as Damascus.

“Yep,” Cheyenne replies, popping her “p.”

“Don’t know why you don’t go ahead and tie the knot, bro,” Damascus asserts.

Rolling my eyes, I reply, “You too?”

“Might as well go ahead and make an honest man out of yourself. It’s not like you’re eyeballing anyone else anyway. You’ve been out of the game since you laid eyes on her. Am I right? Tell me I’m wrong,” he challenges.

“Just speaking facts, bro.”

“Speaking of facts,” Denver states, walking in the door, “Aspen is running five minutes late.”

“A’ight.” I eyeball him, not wanting to start without him, but not wanting to keep the focus on myself either.

“What’s been going on with you guys?” Denver asks the girls, changing the subject effectively for me, sensing that I feel like I’m on the hot seat.

“Getting ready for this case against Dante Knotts. It’s a headache already, and we’re still in the jury selection process,” Savannah, who’s the D.A. for the city of Chicora Falls, groans.

“Why’s that?” Cheyenne asks.

“You know that they’re challenging everyone who we want on the jury, which is to be expected, but it’s getting petty now.”

“Well, what do you expect from a city whose high-profile running back is on trial for murdering his wife?” Denver asks.

“It should be an open and shut case. We found him in the house with his hands covered with blood, holding the gun,” Damascus, who’s a detective, states.

“He committed the crime; his ass needs to go away forever. It doesn’t matter how

much money he has or the power he yields over this city. They act as if he's the messiah."

"Yeah, well, it's not going to be an easy trial, I can tell you that now. With the media circus that has come to town," Savannah declares.

"Sorry, folks. I'm here," Aspen announces, sweeping through the door. "Our board meeting ran over a little bit, no matter how hard I tried to keep it on track. Trying to buy up the property the old airport sits on isn't quite as simple as we thought it might be."

He joins the rest of us at the table, loosening the knot in his tie.

"Well, let's get right down to business so that I can let y'all get back to your lives, figuring out the problems of the world," I say.

I click the remote in my hand and turn on the six monitors on the screen to our left. All eyes turn that way as an image of Essence Hamilton fills the first screen, and details fill the other five.

"What the hell?" There are variations of that from all around the table.

"You all should have heard about this by now, but for some reason, she's not announcing it until Monday. I wanted you to get ahead of the game, and I would have filled you in by now, but you all weren't available yet," I explain.

"She's running for mayor?" Cheyenne, the city planner, asks.

"Yeah."

"The timing is a little suspect to me," Damascus mutters.

“To me too. Which is why I want to jump on it before it gets out of hand. Together, we have the power to stop her advancement in the city,” I state.

Savannah looks as if she is going to be sick to her stomach, as she should be. She was appointed to her position as D.A. by the current mayor, but if Essence Hamilton wins the mayoral race, she knows that she’ll be out of a job.

Essence was the former D.A. and was replaced by Savannah when the new mayor took office four years ago. She’s taken a hard look at most of Essence’s cases since then and retried and won several that Essence lost.

I see the strain around Savannah’s eyes. I knew that it was going to hit her hard. She hasn’t been available; otherwise, I would have told her before the others.

“What do you need from us?” Damascus asks.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but—”

“Then don’t,” he grunts through gritted teeth.

“And I probably shouldn’t be hearing this either,” Savannah asserts, finally speaking up.

“The rest of us are free and clear to hear,” Aspen declares, looking from Cheyenne to his twin brother, Denver.

“I’ll just say this to protect Damascus and Savannah if it should ever arise, though I know that it won’t. We’re looking into her background from every angle. And I do mean every angle, scraping the bottom of the barrel.”

“You’re going back thirty years ago,” Denver comments.

“Even before then.”

Savannah eyes me closely and rubs my back. “Are you sure that you can handle it?”

I look around at the five people sitting around the table with me.

“I can handle whatever the fuck that I need to handle as long as I’m fighting for you five.”

Everyone grows silent for a minute.

“Essence is the only one who knows us. She’s the only one who can come close to identifying our secret.

She might not remember you, Savannah, because she never babysat you.

You were already in school, and she didn’t come around when you weren’t.

I doubt she’d remember the twins much and what they looked like because she didn’t have to watch them. They were at school.

“Most importantly, all of you have different last names now since you were adopted. But she knows me, and she babysat Cheyenne and Damascus on a few occasions. I’ve had conversations with Pops, and he’s confirmed that he never talked to her about you all.

Never said your names, Savannah, Denver, and Aspen.

He says they never talked about his family other than her trying to get him to leave Mama. ”

“Yeah, I’m sure his mind was on other things while he was with her,” Savannah mutters bitterly.

“Listen, we have to take her down. With Pops getting out of jail, she’s going to try to do everything that she can to stop him. We can’t let that happen.”

My five siblings nod in agreement. We talk a little longer before we get up, say our “I love you’s,” and hug each other goodbye before they leave my office.

There’s nothing that I won’t do to protect them because they are my world. I’ve sacrificed a lot to get them to where they are today. These five help me run our little portion of the world underground. No one knows this, and it’s best if it remains this way.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

The windows are dark, as is the street, as I stare out into the night. I close my eyes for a mental count of fifteen before I open them again. Opening and closing my gloved fists, I grip the steering wheel with one hand and drum the fingers of my other hand on my leg.

I grit my teeth and breathe out through my nose.

You got this, man, I tell myself as I contemplate my next move.

I promised my siblings that I could handle myself, but so close to her, the way that I am, I want to put a bullet through the front of her skull. For the first time in a long time, she's not surrounded by her entourage, which consists of her PA, her advisor, and a wannabe bodyguard.

I'd left her alone for a while. When Essence had left my father behind after high school, she had gone to college. When she returned and moved across the street from us, she had been enrolled in law school.

Essence had graduated just under two years after my father went to prison. It hadn't taken her long to move out of the old neighborhood, although we were no longer there. She got a job in some prestigious firm and hadn't looked back on the lives she destroyed.

She walks by the double glass doors, now wearing a nightie and slippers. I see her curves outlined in the sheer nightie, and it amazes me that her body hasn't changed much in all these years. She must stick to a serious diet and workout regimen.

She walks back from somewhere out of sight and stands in front of the doors, staring out into the night, almost as if she can see me. I know that she can't.

Slowly, I lower my window and aim the gun out at her. Looking through the sight of the gun, I think about how easy it might be to take her out now. With the silencer attached, no one would hear anything.

This gun and this car can never be traced back to me. Essence has no idea that the security cameras surrounding her house are no longer recording. When anyone goes back to look at them, they will never see the moment that they cut off and then cut back on again.

My phone rings, and I glance at the screen on my dashboard.

“Fuck!”

It's Bayleigh.

Slowly, I lower the gun, let the window up again, and start the ignition. I pull away from the curb in the all-black Lexus with the tinted windows.

“Hey, baby,” I greet her cheerily.

“Hey, where are you?”

“I'm on the way home to you now.”

“How much longer?”

“I should be there in less than twenty minutes,” I say, flooring the gas pedal.

“Okay, I’ll wait up.”

“See you soon, baby, and keep it wet.”

Giggling softly but sleepily, she replies. “I will.”

My phone rings again immediately after I end the call.

“Hello?”

“Bossman.”

“Yeah, Malik.” I sigh.

“Tell me you didn’t do anything stupid.”

“Nah, I’m on the way home.”

“Good. I told you, I know this might be personal for you for some reason, but we got you. You don’t need to get your hands dirty fucking with this bitch. We’ll take care of her, dawg.”

“I know you will, Malik.”

“You’ve worked too hard to destroy all that you’ve worked for, everything that you built for Bayleigh and the kids,” Malik comments.

What he doesn’t say or know is that not only have I built all of this for Bayleigh and the kids, but also for my siblings. Everything that they have is because of the sacrifices that I made, the risks that I took, and the moves that I have made over the last decade.

“Sides, the team and I are relying on you too. You’re our brother. You take care of our families, man.”

“I know.”

“So, all I’m saying is no matter what has happened, please keep in mind that you’ve got way too much to lose, and every decision you make impacts more than just you.”

Gritting my teeth, I grip the steering wheel tighter. “You think I don’t know this?”

“I know you do. Sometimes, a friendly reminder is good for everyone involved.”

I sigh. “Thanks, bro.”

“Any time. You have a good night and get back to that woman of yours.”

I glance in the rearview mirror and see the midnight blue Charger peeling off in a different direction. Shaking my head, I chuckle.

No matter how smooth I think I am, that fucking Malik has always been smoother when it comes to stealth moves and surveillance. The only reason I just saw him now is that he wanted me to see him.

Aris, who not only manages the data for my company and underground operations, is also paid handsomely to keep an eye on the data pertaining to all my siblings, including the twins’ businesses, Aspen’s real estate development firm, and Denver’s construction firm.

She brought to my attention today that Essence was having Denver’s real estate firm and its corresponding finances looked into.

The only way that she will do that is if she suspects who he is.

And if that is, in fact, true, then she probably also correctly assumes that the money he gained to start his construction company came from me.

Unfortunately for her, there is no way that she'd be able to trace that back to me either. She would run into so many brick walls and drive herself crazy looking for that needle in a haystack.

After I exchange the car for my own so that it can be wiped from existence, I head home and pull up within five minutes.

"Hey, you," Bayleigh greets when I step into our bedroom.

"Mm, just like I like you. Wet and waiting," I say, taking my clothes off.

"Always."

"Want to join me in the shower?" I ask.

"But of course."

After adjusting the shower settings in the display panel in our shower, I pull her into my arms and take her lips with mine.

Bayleigh kisses me hungrily as though we haven't kissed in ages. Her tongue is smooth, and her mouth tastes like honey.

My hands grip her ass and squeeze before I lift her, spreading her thighs apart so that she can wrap her legs around my waist.

“God, I missed you so much today, woman,” I growl, biting into her neck.

Her head drops back against the tiled wall as I adjust her and place my hard erection inside of her. She slides down my dick and moans shifting slightly.

“You feel so good,” she mumbles, pressing her lips against mine.

Six showerheads spray us from every angle. I smooth my hand over her hair, dousing it with water as her hair curls at the edges.

Licking the pulse point in her neck, I bite her there, basking in the groan she releases. Bayleigh’s legs clench tightly around me as she begins to rise and lower on me, riding me expertly.

The way her pussy clutches me and then relaxes repeatedly almost brings me to my knees. I lower my head, taking one of her nipples into my mouth, sucking and licking, and licking and sucking. Slowly, I drag my teeth to the edge of it, eliciting a moan and a “Please, more, baby.”

I bite harder before I release her.

“On your knees,” I say, pointing at the shower floor.

She drops her legs from around me and gets on her knees. I move behind her, parting her ass as she rests her hands on the floor.

Kneeling behind her, I place one hand against the shower wall. I ease my dick into her from behind, and my eyes close at the warmth of her sweet heat.

This is home. This woman right here always lets me know that no matter how shitty the world gets, it’s always going to be just fine.

My hands grip her hips, and I pound inside of her. I know that I'm rougher than normal, but she takes it, knowing that I need this tonight.

She is the release for the anger that I hold inside, the calm to my storm. Bayleigh takes and takes, and then she pushes back, thrusting that ass on me and sliding her wet pussy all up and down my rock-hard dick until I can't take anymore.

I hold on for dear life until she cums. And only after my woman gets what she needs do I pull out and cum all over her back and ass.

Yes, home is always good to me.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

Trigger warning: This episode contains deeply emotional content.

My day with Bayleigh had me walking around like I owned the fucking town. That girl was mad dope. I found that I could literally talk to her about anything, and she wasn't on no judgmental shit. She was genuinely interested in getting to know me and cared about my thoughts and feelings.

I didn't tell her about the dope game because I wasn't trying to run her away like that. Not before I got the chance to know her. Somehow, I didn't think she'd diss me even if I did tell her, but I just wasn't ready.

I didn't plan on doing this for life anyway. I had to figure out how to keep shit rolling when I left for college because I was going to college. I wasn't an A and B student like Bayleigh, but I had decent grades. She had all As and one B, and I had Bs, one C, and one A.

I needed to pay my way, but my mama still needed my help financially too. So, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't just walk away from the game like that.

Cheyenne runs into my room while I'm deep in a conversation with Bayleigh and shouts. "The twins are fighting again!"

I can hear their little asses going at it up front just before something crashes to the floor. I hear a screech from Savannah and then more tussling.

I roll my eyes. "Bayleigh, let me holler at you later. My brothers are on some stupid shit. I'll call you tomorrow."

“Okay, make sure you do,” she replies with her fine ass.

When I head into the living room, I see the twins fighting, and Savannah is trying to break them up by herself. Where the fuck is Mama, I wonder.

Savannah is pulling at Denver, but that strong li'l nigga ain't letting Aspen go. He has li'l dude in a headlock and is punching him in the ribs with his free hand. Aspen is trying to kick his twin in his babymakers, but he isn't having any success.

“Help me!” Savannah shouts, pressing her lips together again as she struggles to pull Denver off Aspen with no success.

“Hey!” I shout.

When that doesn't help, I walk to them and grab them by their shoulders, since they're not wearing shirts, and jerk them apart.

“Ow,” Denver cries out, rubbing his shoulder.

Aspen has a similar reaction but without words.

“The hell is wrong with y'all? Look at you. You don' broke Mama's favorite picture frame.” I point my hand at the broken frame that is now shattered over a picture of our grandmother lying on the floor.

They both start shouting something at the same time, but I can't understand them.

“Shut up!” I bark.

They do as I say. My twin brothers have always listened to me, but since our dad has been locked up, they do so even more now. I've become the father figure to all my

siblings. It wasn't something I wanted to do, but something that became necessary.

They found themselves naturally avoiding Mama and coming to me with all their troubles because she either spaced out a lot or started crying.

When our dad first got locked up, they went to Mama with every little thing, and eventually, she became overwhelmed and couldn't handle all the troubles coming our way.

She would hide in her room for hours at a time, forgetting to cook, not being bothered with homework, and trivial issues like missing socks or wrinkled clothes that needed an iron.

Those things became Savannah's and my responsibilities after about four months. She instantly became a little mama at eight, helping me with the laundry and cooking. She soon started doing laundry on her own and ironing. We now take turns cooking.

I was in the streets, hustling to help pay bills. Mama would come in from work, tired after working a twelve-hour shift, and fall asleep. We wouldn't see her again until she left the next morning, and we never had a chance to spend time with her until the weekends.

"What happened?" I ask my brothers. "You first, Aspen."

"Why does he get to go first?" Denver pouts.

"Because I'm the oldest, big head."

"That's not fair," Denver pouts.

"That's not why. Aspen goes first because you went first last time, Denver."

He sighs and folds his arms over his puny little chest.

“I was winning the game, and Denver got mad and snatched the controller from my hand.”

“Did not!” Denver shouts.

“Did too!” Aspen shouts back.

Denver is known to be a sore loser, so I’m inclined to believe Aspen.

“That happened,” Cheyenne agrees, bobbing her head as she looks up from where she’s now coloring in a coloring book on the floor.

“Shut up,” Denver tells her.

“Aye, man. Chill. That’s your little sister. You don’t talk to her like that. Remember what I taught you. We protect the ladies,” I tell him.

Denver nods and apologizes. “Sorry, Shy.”

“It’s okay,” she replies happily, returning her focus to coloring.

“A’ight. Time out for the game anyway. Aspen, take your bath. Denver, get on your homework. And then the reverse. Savvy, you good with dinner?” I ask Savannah.

“Yeah. We’re having Hamburger Helper cheeseburger macaroni tonight. I’m almost finished,” she explains.

“Cool,” I state.

I'd offered to make dinner tonight, but she has a growing love of cooking and wanted to do it on her own.

I'm sure that it won't taste like a normal Hamburger Helper.

She's quickly becoming a beast in the kitchen with those seasonings and using vegetables like peppers, onions, zucchini, and tomatoes in her daily cooking.

"I'm gonna check on Mama," I tell her.

"Okay." She turns and heads back to the kitchen.

Satisfied that everyone has something productive to do, I walk to my mom's room. I hate to disturb her if she's sleeping, but I need to check on her. She didn't eat dinner last night, and I know that she didn't eat anything at work because she never does.

I knock on her door and get no response. I knock again and wait for a minute or two before I knock a little harder.

"Mama," I call out, knocking harder this time.

She's a light sleeper, so it surprises me that she's not answering.

I turn the doorknob slowly and say, "Mama," without looking inside. I don't want to catch her undressed or anything, but when I still get no answer, I stick my head inside.

She's not in bed.

I head to her bathroom door and spot a sliver of light coming from underneath. I knock on the bathroom door, and I hear a faint mumbling. It sounds like she's talking

to someone, but her phone is still on the nightstand.

Frowning, I knock harder. “Mama, you okay?”

“Isaiah?” she calls back.

Frowning, I push the door open and ask, “Are you dressed?”

“Yeah. I’m dressed. Ready for you.”

I look inside and see my mama sitting at her little vanity counter, which my daddy bought her two years ago. She turns to me and asks, “Do I look pretty?”

She has a sad smile on her face, and her red lipstick is colored outside of the lines of her lips. She holds an eyeliner in her hand, and I can tell that she tried to apply it, but the lines don’t stop along her eyes; she’s traced the line down to the top of her cheeks.

My mother, who is an expert at applying makeup, looks like a sad clown. She looks as if she gave four-year-old Cheyenne her makeup and told her to apply it.

“Mama,” I say, walking toward her.

“You ready for our date, Isaiah? I’ve been waiting all week for this. Jessi even let me borrow her purple dress. How do I look?” she asks, standing and spinning around in her purple bathrobe.

It baffles me that she thinks I’m my daddy.

“Jessi?”

“Yeah, you know my sister Jessica.”

Aunt Jessi was killed in a drive-by shooting in New York six years ago. Fear begins to claw at my insides as I wonder what the hell is going on with my mama.

“Mama, it’s me, Zaire. Daddy is locked up, and Aunt Jessi...” I pause, not sure how to say the words, but I finally do. “She’s dead, Mama. She’s been gone for six years now.”

Mama laughs and waves her hand at me. “Boy, stop. You play too much. Are you still taking me to the Golden Palace or not?” she demands.

“Mama, they closed that restaurant over ten years ago. Come on. I think you’ve been working too hard and just need a little rest,” I say, reaching for her hand.

My mama swats at me. “Isaiah, get off me. What’s wrong with you?”

“Mama, it’s okay, it’s just me, Zaire.”

Frowning, she shrieks, “I don’t know no Zaire!”

My heart slams against my chest as fear and pain rival within me for the top position in my chest.

“I’m your son, Mama,” I explain, but I can’t hide the hurt in my voice.

She starts screaming. “Don’t hurt me. Please take my purse. You can have everything. Just leave!”

Her screams bring my siblings running, including Aspen, who’s wrapped in a bath towel. She starts screaming at them, asking who they are, causing Damascus to cry.

Savannah picks him up, and I take him from her.

“Savvy, y’all go back to the living room.”

“What’s wrong with her?” she asks me with those wide, big, brown, teary eyes.

“Mama’s just not feeling well. You, Shy, and the boys go on,” I instruct, unsure how to handle this latest crisis we’re dealing with.

But Mama takes it out of my hands.

“Hello, operator? Some man just broke into my house, and he won’t leave. He’s got some other folks with him. Help me!” she screams.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“Hey, you good?” I ask Riley.

She’s sitting outside on the lanai with her feet propped up and reading a book. Large sunglasses cover her eyes.

It’s taken two days for her to come out of her suite and downstairs with the rest of us. She’d said that she didn’t want the boys to see her like that.

My sons indeed loved their Aunt Riley to pieces. They were closer to her than they were to Zaire’s siblings, whom the world had no clue were related to him. So, it wasn’t often that they came to our home or that we traveled to theirs.

It was imperative to him that the world not know about his connection to his siblings. It was just the way that their business worked.

We often got together for Christmas at an undisclosed location in the Colorado mountains. Everyone took separate flights from various locations around the world to meet up there. We never headed directly to Colorado from Chicora Falls.

“Yeah, I guess I am. I haven’t heard from him strangely,” she remarks, lifting her phone and glancing at it over her sunglasses. “I expected to have heard from him by now.”

“Why?”

“Usually, he’ll text or call with his apologies . . .”

My sister took her light coloring from our father, as did our oldest brother, Quinton. So, unlike me, who has a toasty brown coloring, her cheeks flame red whenever she's embarrassed, like now.

"He usually calls you or texts to apologize. Usually, Riley?"

"Never mind. It's nothing."

"No, don't sit here and lie to me, Riley. He usually calls you or texts to apologize after what?" I demand.

"It's nothing, Bay. Just drop it."

"I'm not dropping anything. Are you sitting here telling me that this isn't the first time that this has happened?" I demand.

She blows out a breath and swings her legs over the side of the chaise lounge.

"Riley."

"What?"

"What the hell? Has that asshole been putting his hands on you before this?" I ask, thinking back to Dr. Madison's words about how men don't go from being non-abusive to damn near killing a woman.

I knew that she was right when she said it, but still, I held out hope. Not my sister. Not right under my nose.

"How long has this been going on, Riley?" I ask.

She looks away out onto the waterfall at the rear of our backyard.

“Riley.”

She sighs. “It’s been an on-again and off-again thing since the third year we were together, but it was nothing more than a slap here and there.”

“Nothing more than? Our mama and daddy didn’t slap us. What the fuck gives him the right to do that to you? How did you accept that shit from him, Riley? You never saw that in our household growing up.”

“He apologized, and it would only happen after something really crazy. Maybe he was stressed, or lost his job, or things like that.”

“No excuses,” I fume.

My sister looks at me, and she removes her sunglasses and sets them on the table. Grabbing a tissue, she dabs at her eyes, and fury rises in me again as I see the swelling and discolorations from the bruises on her face.

She doesn’t look as bad as she did that first day, but it’s bad enough.

Riley widens her eyes and then looks at me in astonishment. “Bayleigh!”

“What?” I ask, alarmed at the fear I hear in her voice.

“You don’t think . . . you don’t think that Zaire did anything to him, do you?”

“Anything like what? Un-alived him? I hope to God he did,” I seethe.

She bursts into another round of tears again, and I feel like it’s a lost cause. If that

bastard shows up again, I suspect she'll run right back to him.

"Don't say that, Bayleigh," she cries.

"Why? He deserves that, at least. That muthafucka deserved to be burned alive!"

"Bayleigh!"

The plea in her voice tears at me. Not because I don't think that Kenny deserves it. That's the least he deserves. It's because I don't want to hurt my sister any more than she already is hurting.

"Riley," I say, pushing off my lounge chair and squeezing onto the one that she's sitting on. I wrap my arms around my little sister.

Riley's shoulders shake as she buries her face against my chest, crying her heart out.

"I don't mean to hurt you, Riley. I'm sorry if my words did that. I just can't believe that he's been taking you through this bullshit all these years. That's not what I would have wanted for you. Neither would Mama, Daddy, Quinton, or Chase. You're the baby. We've spent our lives protecting you."

"I know," she cries.

"You deserve nothing but the best, honey. You're so compassionate and thoughtful when it comes to others. You give of yourself and your time unselfishly. You love hard, and you're beautiful and intelligent. You deserve nothing but the best, honey."

"It's not always bad times, though, Bayleigh."

Gripping her chin firmly, I tilt her head up to look at me.

“Any time he puts his hands on you, it nullifies any good times that you could have had,” I say.

“I know,” she replies softly.

“Do you? Because I don’t think that you do.”

Riley lowers her eyes again, and an idea comes to mind.

“Hey, I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Why don’t you, Trina, Alicia, and I take an impromptu weekend getaway. An extended weekend. Maybe leave Thursday afternoon and return Monday morning. Take off Friday and Monday and return to work Tuesday.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. You never use any vacation time, and I know that Trina is out of school for the summer,” I express, referencing her best friend, who is a high school history teacher.

My best friend, Alicia, owns a hair salon, so she can get away whenever she’d like. My sister is the VP of sales at her telecommunications company.

“I’ve already been working from home for the last couple of days and haven’t been to the office.”

“So. You’ve still been working. You deserve it.”

“I work from home three to four days a week, though.”

“And? Your vacation is due to you. You can’t excuse that away by saying that you never go into the office.”

She inhales deeply. “Where would we go?”

“I was thinking somewhere quick. Maybe Miami?”

“Party for the weekend?”

“Exactly,” I answer in a sing-song tone.

A small smile begins to form on my sister’s lips.

“I like that idea, Bayleigh.”

“Good. Call Trina, and I’ll call Alicia.”

What I don’t say is that I’ll call Zaire first. I don’t want to rub in her face that she doesn’t have a man to call. At least, I hope that she doesn’t.

I hope that he’s now an extinct species, thanks to my baby.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“What do you plan on doing to him?” Parker asks solemnly.

He’s standing beside me with a wide-legged stance, his arms folded over his chest, as he stares blankly at the man before us.

Kenny’s arms are chained above his head to two iron bolts protruding from the wall. The lacerations across his ribs and back are starting to heal, and I’ve got half a mind to pour salt or alcohol into them.

“I don’t think he’s learned his lesson yet,” I spit.

Kenny glares at me from swollen, puffy eye sockets.

He doesn’t even look like the same man that he once was.

All he’s been fed the last several days have been slices of bread and cups of room-temperature water.

The lack of nourishment has been just enough to keep him alive, but minimal enough that he’s starting to look gaunt with the rapid weight loss.

Stepping forward, I grip his chin in my hand, and he pulls it away from me.

“Yeah, he still hasn’t learned his lesson. The arrogant fuck is just as dumb as he was before. That tells me that he’ll go back and do the same thing if given half a chance.”

“Then why don’t you just finish him off? It’ll be easier just to put a bullet in his brain

and make sure he doesn't repeat the same mistakes."

"He doesn't deserve to get off that easily, Parker. He needs to suffer the same way that he made Riley and all the other women suffer," I disagree.

"Fuck you," Kenny manages to utter through his broken jaw, though it doesn't quite sound that way.

I punch him in his lips and snarl, "You just made up my mind. I think I will let you hang around a little longer to suffer."

I ignore his whimpering as Parker and I walk to the door of the Hovel.

Once we're back in the car and Parker's maneuvering away from the woods, he asks, "When are you gonna tell the team what's really going on?"

I sigh, pulling my fingers through my long, thick beard. "Don't think it's really useful for them to know that, Park."

"It'll make the difference in how they accomplish their missions."

"Not really. They're paid to do a job, and they do it well. I respect that."

"Yeah, but if they knew how personal this was and how you feel about her—"

"Then they might end her before I need them to, especially Janel and Jamal."

He snickers, "Only Malik has any sort of restraint."

"Yeah. I want her to suffer the way that she made our family suffer. I want her to know that I caused her downfall in the end. I'm a patient man, Parker."

“Not according to Malik.”

I glance at him. “Malik talks too much.”

“He knows that there’s more to the story, and he knows that I probably know. He’s only trying to protect you.”

“Loose lips sink ships, Parker.”

“I guess you don’t have to worry about this ship sinking then, huh?” he asks, glancing at me as we pull onto the highway.

I sigh.

“I mean, they’ve been around since almost that long, give or take a couple of years. Don’t see the harm in clueing them in,” he continues.

“To do that would mean I’d have to clue them in on all the rest. Nobody needs to know that. Fuck, if it weren’t for you being around the entire time, you wouldn’t even know it.”

Parker glares at me and shakes his head.

“Trust has always been an issue for you, hasn’t it?”

“Seeing as how I haven’t met anyone who could prove how trustworthy they are aside from you and Bayleigh, yeah, that’s an issue for me.”

Shaking his head, he asks, “What more do they need to do to prove they can be trusted?”

“Not in this game, Parker. You trust no man.”

“Why does it sound like even the trust you have for me only goes so far?”

I glance at him and then back out the window.

“That’s fucked up, Z.”

I snort.

“Do the five at least know what’s going down?”

“They don’t know the particulars, but they do know that she’s running for mayor. They know that she’s looking into Denver’s company and his finances.”

“What are they saying about that?”

“They’re getting worried, of course.”

“Why don’t you let us take her out?”

“It’s not that simple, Parker. You know that. Former D.A. One of the most prominent attorneys in this city is now running for mayor. Comes up missing or dead. That’s not a good look in anyone’s books.”

“Come on, man. You run this town.”

“Even my powers only go so far. Not that I can’t make it happen, but I have to cultivate a plan and work it detail by detail to protect everyone associated with it. When her time comes, it won’t be because she was murdered. At least not on the books anyway.”

Parker nods.

“Besides, it’s an election year.”

“All the more reason to get her out of the way as soon as possible. She’s going to stir up a hornet’s nest wherever she can, including the current mayor’s campaign, connections, and finances.

If she looks too close, and I’m sure that she will, she might find a connection to you.

That’s going to be questionable and give him a shaky chance at being reelected. ”

“Nothing leads back to me, Parker.”

“And at the same time, all roads lead back to you.”

I nod and smile. That’s just the way that I like it.

It gives me the power to run this city as I see fit, unbeknownst to its citizens.

Having sisters who hold the offices of D.A.

and city planner, a brother who owns a real estate firm, another who owns a construction firm, and a brother who’s a lead detective all work in my favor.

At any given time, I can call any one of them up to make something happen or cease to exist, and vice versa.

It works because no one knows of our relationship or ties with each other.

If Essence gets into office, not only will she bring a spotlight on that when she

notices the connection, but she'll also do everything in her power to prevent my father from being released and shake up our current power structure.

“Did you make sure that Aris took care of those initial donations that will fund her campaign?”

“Yep. They're all set, and she's accepted them. Once an inquiry begins, anyone will be able to see that she's received funding from the shell company, Duke Holdings, which ties back to Bryson Gregory, one of the biggest drug dealers in the city.”

Aris created the shell company, Duke Holdings, for Bryson. Bryson works for me, and he appears to be the biggest dope dealer around, but that's because no one knows what I really do.

They're only aware of my umbrella firm, a private investment company, which is the front for my drug money. Under that firm, I also have a strip club, a casino, and a restaurant.

Years ago, when we lost our mother to the state mental hospital, I had no other option but to continue in the game. I stacked my money because that's all I knew how to do. Not having any bills to pay or responsibilities, I mapped out a plan and worked the plan until it worked for me.

Staying with one friend after another and sometimes on the streets enabled me to keep my expenses down. I looked out for those friends along the way, showing my appreciation for all, they'd done.

I have a lot of friends in high places now, and I take none of them for granted. However, because of the route that I took in life, I try to stay as far away from them as possible to avoid tainting their businesses and reputations. But they're always there if I need them, and I'm there for them.

I might have to call in plenty of favors when this is all said and done to eliminate Essence and leave her nothing but a mere, distant, and distasteful memory.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS AGO

“I’m sorry, Zaire. We’ve tried everything that we know how, and I haven’t been able to find a family to place you with.”

“Yeah, I get it. No one’s trying to take care of a seventeen-year-old. It’s cool, Ms. Brew. It’s like I told you; I’ve been holding my family down for a minute now. I don’t need anyone to take care of me.”

“While that may be true, I have a responsibility to place you somewhere so that you’re not homeless. If that’s not with another family, then—”

“Hell, nah,” I say, standing from the table abruptly and causing the chair to fall backward.

“Zaire, honey, please don’t jump to conclusions. Why don’t you give it a chance before you dismiss the idea altogether?”

“I told you I’m not going to some group home like I’m some delinquent or something. I ain’t never been in no trouble.”

“The transition home isn’t for delinquents alone, but youth such as yourself who are transitioning into adulthood. They provide a stable place for you to reside, hot meals, tutoring, and homework assistance—”

“Don’t need that either,” I say, shaking my head as fury runs through me. My parents fucked up royally on this one.

“Just try it. Besides, they also provide college support. I’ve seen your grades, Zaire. While they’re not bad, they’re also not getting you into any four-year traditional college either. The staff at the home can assist you in getting into a good technical school.”

“I can do that on my own, Ms. B.”

“What about housing assistance? Can you do that? When you graduate and are ready to move into the real world, they will help you find a place of your own as well as job placement.”

I think about the eight or nine-dollar-an-hour job, if that much, the home would help me get.

That shit wouldn’t be a drop in the bucket for everything that I need.

With my sisters and brothers spread out around the city, my dad in prison, and my mom in the hospital, the last thing that I need is to be kept somewhere where they’ve got restrictions on me too.

I need to be free to do what I have to so that I can hold my family down. But I’m no fool. I know that Ms. Brew has a job to do, and she’s not about to let me walk out of here freely at the ripe old age of seventeen to do what I need to. I’ll play by her rules . . . for now.

“A’ight, Ms. B. I’ll go with your plan and see what it gets me.”

A slow smile spreads across her brown features. It’s like the sun coming out after a thunderstorm. Ms. B is a pretty lady and fine, too, for someone in her mid-thirties.

“Well, let me make a few phone calls, and then we’ll be on our way. Okay?” she asks

excitedly as she stands and prepares to leave the conference room.

“Okay.”

She pauses in the doorway. “Zaire, will you be here when I get back?” she asks hesitantly.

“I ain’t going nowhere, Ms. B,” I say.

At least not right now, anyway.

The drive to the group home took about twenty minutes, the time spent with Ms. Brew rattling off all the good that the group home could do for me and what I could get out of the program if I worked with rather than against them.

She mentioned once again her sorrow for what our family had gone through and said that she would be praying for my mother. She also promised that she would pick me up once a week to see my mother or my siblings.

I wouldn’t get to see all of them at once because they were in separate homes. Savannah had gone to one home by herself, and Damascus and Cheyenne were in separate ones from Savannah and each other. Only the twins were together but separated from the others.

I hated that shit. They needed each other, especially Damascus. Damn. He was just a baby, and he wasn’t used to not being with his family. I could imagine that he was always crying, Shy, too, probably.

Savvy was too strong to let anyone see her emotions, so she probably kept them hidden until late at night.

That's when she might break down and cry.

At least, that's the way it had been since our Pops was locked up.

Thinking about the twins, I shake my head.

I'm sure they've probably been in one fight after another, and they'd only been placed with a foster family for less than forty-eight hours.

We pull up to a three-story, red brick house with tall glass windows. There is a huge wraparound porch with two porch swings.

Potted plants hang from the ceiling, and rose bushes are strategically placed at the bottom of the porch on either side of the stairs. The lawn is freshly cut, and there's a big oak tree out front that has a tire swing.

Ropes suspend another swing from a large pine tree. The large windows sparkle cleanly like someone just washed them.

Ms. Brew smiles. "Remember, everything's going to be fine and I'll always be here for you," before she presses the doorbell.

Ms. Brew isn't only a caseworker who's been assigned to my family's case, but she's also my former middle school social worker. She worked at the middle school that I attended, and she was always cool, close to my mom, and kept an eye out for me.

At least, if someone's watching over us, I'm glad it's someone that I'm familiar with. I was surprised yesterday after my mom's breakdown when Ms. Brew showed up at the door. I had no idea she no longer worked at the middle school.

I hate that my mom called the police on us. Not only did it fuck with our heads, but it

caused us to be split up. While I didn't know what to do with her having a mental break, I damn sure wouldn't have called the folks.

The minute she did that shit, I'd taken my backpack and entire stash, ran down to Parker's, and asked him to hold onto it until I could clear some stuff up. My siblings didn't need me locked on the other side like my pops.

Parker had walked back to the house with me and sat throughout the entire ordeal with the police, watching sadly with me as Ms. Brew came in and took over.

Before the night was over, she had another worker helping her to divide us up.

When I'd suggested that I stay with Parker, she'd said that couldn't be arranged because they weren't in the system.

His parents and family would have to undergo exhaustive background checks first, and I wasn't about to ask nobody to subject themselves to that bullshit.

The door opens now, and a stern-looking older Black man with grey sprinkled throughout his short afro opens the door. He frowns at me before instantly straightening his face and smiling broadly at Ms. Brew.

"Mr. Pepperdine, how are you?"

"I'm doing pretty well, Ms. Brew, now that you've graced us with your presence. And you?"

"I can't complain. Mr. Pepperdine, this is Zaire, the young man that I told you about over the phone," she explains, gently resting her hand on my shoulder and ushering me forward.

The man steps back from the door, opening it wider, and I step inside and then aside so that Ms. Brew can enter.

I watch as he watches her ass as she leads the way to the kitchen, a place I presume she's been several times before. I follow him and her as she gives him a rundown of what's happened to my family in the last thirty-six hours.

He listens intently as we settle around a table.

The man explains that all the children are at school, as it's the middle of the day, but they'll be back in about three or four hours.

He gives me an explanation of how the program works, introduces me to a few other staff who work in the home, and then provides me with a sheet of paper that has the rules.

I'm told that I have to sign it; it's a behavior contract. I didn't sign up for this shit, but one look at Ms. Brew's hopeful face, and I'm signing that dotted line like a muthafucka. I can't disappoint her. Not right now, at least, but I know that a time will come when I will. It can't be helped.

I owe a bigger allegiance to my family than I do to her.

She stands and smiles at me. "Okay, well, I'm going to leave you two to it for now. You can get to know one another better. Zaire, I'll be back this weekend to take you to see your mother, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," I mutter, forcing a smile to my lips.

She smiles broadly back at me and then pats my shoulder before she's off. Mr. Pepperdine walks her to the door, I'm sure just to be in her presence a little longer

and to watch her ass.

When he returns, he waits until the woman cooking, Pauline, leaves the kitchen before he speaks.

“Look, I know your kind. Ms. Brew might believe in you, but I can already tell that you ain’t gon’ be shit.

Don’t think you’re about to come in my program fucking it up with your street thug ways because I don’t play that shit. You got me?”

“Man, you don’t even know me to judge me already,” I snap.

“I know your kind. I’ve kicked a dozen of them out of my program. If you can’t get with what I’m saying, you might as well walk out those doors right now.”

Laughing, I stand and say, “You ain’t said nothing but a word, big homie.”

Shaking my head, I make my way back down the hallway that I came down.

“Don’t know how you think you’re going to survive on the streets. You can’t even face your challenges like a man.”

“You know nothing ‘bout my challenges,” I say, continuing toward the front door with him on my heels.

I guess he thought he’d call my bluff.

“You’re running at the first sign of trouble.”

“Not running. I had no plans on staying here all along. But seeing as how you’ve

given me every reason not to, I'll execute my plan sooner," I say, pushing the door open.

"Young man, wait!" he shouts.

"Why?" I ask, turning back around on the second step down. "To make sure you that you get that monthly check for me being here?"

His eyes narrow, and his mouth grows grim.

"I'll pass," I say, jogging down the final steps.

When I reach the end of the drive, I pull out my wallet and check it. Not that I need to because I already know that there's three hundred twenty-one dollars and forty-two cents in there. Not enough to survive on, but enough to get me to the other side of town. Parker has my product.

All I need to do is reach him, sell what I've got, and re-up. I'll be back in business in no time with a more definite goal in mind.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

Sun. Beaches. Drinks with tiny umbrellas. Yeah, that's not our reality right now. In fact, it's just the opposite of that.

They're sitting on Riley's bed, and it's raining outside. I have a bottle of water in my hand, Trina's sipping a Diet Coke, and Alicia has tea.

Oh, and Riley? She's curled up in bed. Crying.

That's right. We're here in Miami for a weekend getaway, and my baby sister is crying. What the fuck?

"Z, what's going on?"

"What are you talking about?"

I push the balcony door open and step out onto the balcony, thankful that the tiny roof is covering me from the deluge as much as possible. Closing the door behind me, I glance over my shoulder to make sure that no one is planning to follow me.

"Riley just got a phone call from Kenny. I thought you'd taken care of him."

"The fuck you mean she got a call from Kenny? That's impossible."

"Apparently, it's not. I answered the phone and heard his threats myself. He was talking about hunting her down and fucking her up as soon as he's better. I thought you took care of that problem, baby."

“Hey, let me hit you back a little later,” he mutters.

“What are we supposed to do in the meantime? You don’t think that he’s sent anyone to follow her, do you?”

“No. I doubt that. Y’all stay in the hotel, and I’ll get to the bottom of this. I’ll send some men down there to watch over you.”

“Zaire, this was supposed to be a vacation. A getaway from all of that, not a reminder of how bad things are. Sending men will only reinforce the reminder that she’s in a world of trouble.”

“And not sending them will only reinforce the opportunity of something happening to her. I’m not taking the risk, Bay.”

Sighing loudly, I roll my eyes and shake my head. “Okay, baby. It’s whatever you say.”

“Fine. I’ll get on that right away.”

“Z, I love you.”

“I love you more, babe.”

We end the call, and I close my eyes and groan. We spent the first night down on the beach partying with some other ladies that we’d met. We spent all day yesterday shopping, sunning, eating at a five-star restaurant, and then clubbing all night.

Waking up this morning to a storm of epic proportions was not in our plan, but we made the most of it by having brunch served to us in Riley’s room from the downstairs restaurant.

We had just finished when her phone rang. The moment that her eyes grew wide and my sister's face grew pale, I knew something was wrong. She looked as if she'd seen a ghost.

I took the phone from her trembling fingers and punched the answer button myself, ready to get to the bottom of who had Kenny's phone and why they were calling Riley.

Before I could say hello, I heard Kenny's voice on the line.

He was going off on her telling her that her punk ass brother-in-law would get what was coming to him and that so would that bitch sister of hers.

He had said that he would take care of her first because she deserved nothing but death.

That was ten minutes ago, and we haven't been able to console her since. I just knew that Zaire had killed that motherfucker. To know that he's still walking around makes me sick to my stomach.

I'm not worried about what he plans to do to Zaire or me because that shit ain't happening. I am worried about my sister, though. I'm worried that she might go back to him despite the threats that he issued.

In Riley's tortured mind, she might actually convince herself that going back to him would be best for everyone. That maybe if she returned, he wouldn't hurt Zaire or me and possibly might take it easy on her. None of that could be further from the truth.

I push the door open again and step back inside. Trina looks up first, widening her eyes at me as if to ask what Zaire said. I shake my head, letting her know that we won't discuss it now.

Sitting back on the bed beside my sister, I pull her into my embrace, and she buries her face in my chest and cries harder. I look at Alicia and Trina over her head and say, “Z is sending men down here to look after us until we return home.”

“Thank God for men,” Alicia declares excitedly.

Trina and I both look pointedly at my best friend.

“What? I’m just saying. Since we’ve got to spend the rest of this day pinned up in this hotel might as well have some fine men around. I’ve seen the crew that works for Zaire and ba-bay! Let me tell you. Them grown men look like they can crack the back of a thick chick!”

Trina stares at Alicia in horror and shakes her head while I get ready to say something. But it’s Riley’s response that catches all three of us off guard.

The tears stop, and Riley looks up at Alicia. “My God, you will never stop being a hoe, will you?” she asks and then laughs uncontrollably.

We all start laughing with her. Partially because what she said is true. Alicia is the biggest hoe we know, and she claims it proudly. And partially because we’re just glad that Riley’s found a reason to laugh.

When we stop, Riley scoots to the top of the bed, grabs some tissues from the nightstand, and wipes her face.

“What did Zaire say?” she asks.

“He’s looking into things. I won’t lie. I thought that Kenny ceased to exist, but that’s apparently not what happened. Zaire’s on top of it, and he’s sending men to protect us until we return, like I said before.”

Riley nods and breathes slowly. She reaches out and grabs mine and Trina's hands. "Thanks for being here with me, ladies. All three of you. I couldn't ask for a better group of ladies to spend the weekend with."

"That's fine. But I want to spend my day getting my body touched."

At Alicia's words, Trina and I look at Riley and then back to Alicia before we throw our hands in the air and exclaim excitedly together, "Spa day!"

We fall back on the bed, giggling as we make plans for the rest of our indoor day.

An hour later, after I've finished showering and am preparing to meet the girls again, my phone rings.

"Hey, baby," I greet Zaire.

"Hey. So, the men are already there. They'll be posted up close to your rooms. There are five of them, and they've been asked to stay as low-key as possible."

"That's not what Alicia's going to want."

He laughs derisively and then confesses, "They've been warned not to fuck with Alicia."

"And if she finds out that you gave that warning, you'll be on her shit list."

Laughing full-on this time, he asks, "When am I not?"

"Either way. So, what's going on with the other situation?"

"I've got a mole in my operations."

“Zaire!”

“Yeah. Someone has been by there. Someone who knew where we kept the place and who knew that he must have been there, as well. When we returned, he was gone, and my shit was burned to the ground.”

“Oh, my God! Who do you think it was?”

“I have no idea. I don’t trust shit at this point.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Figure out who’s behind it and make them pay. Before that, though, I have to find Kenny.”

“Why did you spare him?” I groan.

“I didn’t. I planned to make him suffer the way that he’s made her suffer before calling it.”

I know by “calling it,” he means killing Kenny.

“Please be safe, baby. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m good. Don’t worry about me. Worry about the fucker who would dare cross me.”

“Yeah, I know,” I reply softly.

“Listen, you go and enjoy your time with the ladies. Don’t worry about me or the operations. Just have fun, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Love you, Bay.”

“Love you more, Z.”

“Impossible,” he replies, chuckling before he ends the call.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

Parker and I drove by the Hovel no sooner than I received the phone call from Bayleigh, upset this morning. I'd just been by there last night, and everything was okay. Kenny was still chained, still talking shit, and the Hovel was still in one piece.

I'd beaten him last night with a belt and finally resorted to pouring salt into his wounds. His cries had pierced the quiet night, and before we pulled away from the Hovel, Kenny had passed out from his pain.

Somewhere between the time that we left and a few minutes before noon today, someone had freed him and burned my shit down.

I wasn't worried about him getting to Riley or the ladies and doing anything.

His wounds weren't superficial. They were far too serious for him to be able to execute any plan on his own.

Kenny would have to get someone else to hurt her because he was incapable of doing it himself.

My concern was who was working with him and who in my organization would dare cross me up that way. If someone was that low, that untrustworthy, and that fucking bold, I need to execute them immediately, but first I had to find out who it was.

Parker and I sit staring at the computerized whiteboard on the wall before us.

"Janel was watching her sister's kids last night. She never left home," he declares, pointing at the security cameras on the outside of Janel's house that he's hacked.

I nod as he switches to the next camera, which surrounds Malik's home. Shaking his head, Parker comments, "He's still fucking with that girl. He's not going to be happy until shit blows up in smoke."

"She's not the best choice for Malik, but he knows what he's doing."

Malik has been screwing his baby's mother for the last couple of years since her "fiancé" has been in prison. He's scheduled to be released soon, too, and everyone worries about what will happen when he learns that the baby in her belly might not have been conceived on one of their conjugal visits.

"So, we've accounted for Malik, Janel, Ghalen, Madison, Hakeem, Jamal, Kim, and Aris. That only leaves Noble."

"And Marisa."

"Marisa?" Parker asks, staring at me strangely. "What's she got to do with this? She doesn't even know where the Hovel is."

"I trust nothing, Parker."

"Listen, I get the need for caution, but some shit's simple, Z. Marisa? Why the fuck would she do something stupid like that? She knows you pay her well and take good care of her. She wouldn't risk it all on a fuckboy like Kenny," Parker disputes.

"Women have been known to do more stupid shit in the name of love," I disagree.

"Wait." He glances at me sideways before he finishes. "You're saying that you think Marisa's been fucking around with Riley's guy?"

"I'm not saying anything, but I'm also not taking the possibilities off the table. When

you start narrowing things down, that's how you lose sight of what's important and underestimate your enemies."

"Maybe you're right, but maybe you're wrong."

"Just get me what I need. Proof that Marisa didn't have shit to do with anything."

A knock sounds at my door at that exact moment.

"Come in," I call out.

Aris opens the door and walks in. "There's a press conference on TV that I thought you might want to see."

I watch as she walks to the console, picks up the remote, presses the button to power it on, and then surfs to the channel that she's looking for.

Aris places the remote back on the TV stand as she walks to stand beside me, crossing her arms and staring at the TV.

I frown at her and say, "What's the problem?"

The only thing that I see on the TV is an image of City Hall.

Nodding at the TV, she replies. "Just wait."

I sigh impatiently and then glance at Parker, who lifts an eyebrow and then shrugs.

When two minutes pass, I turn to Aris. "What's this bullshit, Aris?"

Pointing at the TV screen, she answers. "They're supposed to . . . look."

I look up and see Essence Hamilton's bright, beaming face on the TV. She's standing at a podium in front of a group of microphones from all the news outlets in the state of Georgia.

The news reporter begins to murmur.

“ We're here at City Hall with former D.A.

and mayoral candidate, Essence Hamilton.

Ms. Hamilton has an announcement to make for the viewers at home.

While we're uncertain what that announcement will be, there has been a lot of speculation about how it might tie into her run for office.

Ms. Hamilton is preparing to speak now . ”

“ Good evening, ladies, and gentlemen. Thank you for gathering so quickly on such short notice. As you may be aware, I recently announced my run for mayor. After serving in the DA's office for several years and spending time on defense counsel, I have sat on both sides of the courtroom.

My experience in the state of Georgia and the connections that I have with other politicians, business constituents, and philanthropists will serve me well in the role of mayor as I strive to serve the needs of those in Chicora Falls . ”

“Is this supposed to be a press conference or a campaign speech?” Parker mutters beside me.

“Shh,” Aris whispers, scowling at Parker, who scowls back.

“Children,” I hiss.

They both straighten up as we tune back to the speech.

“... diligently. Campaigns are often marked as smear campaigns marred by tactics from the opposing parties to make each other look bad. However, what will not be tolerated is outright bullying tactics and threats to either candidate’s life.

Over the last two weeks, I have had someone following me, making threatening phone calls to my house late at night, my tires have been slashed, and most recently, someone broke into my house last evening.

Mayor Brassard and I are working together to get to the bottom of this.

His office has been cleared of any allegations.

He has been very cooperative with the authorities in getting to the bottom of this, and I trust that these attacks are in no way tied to Mayor Brassard.

“I have made many enemies during my time in office and a couple before my time in office. So, we’re looking at every angle and possibility.

While one of those enemies is currently serving time in prison, he is scheduled to be released soon, so we’re not ruling him out either.

Whoever the culprit is, you will be found out, and you will be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

Whether I am mayor or Mayor Brassard remains in his position, one thing remains: we will not tolerate violent crimes or crime organizations within our city.

I will work with the mayor in the next year to bring down any such organizations that exist, both those known and unknown, including those hiding underneath umbrella companies.

We are coming for you, and we know who you are. ”

Essence states the last, looking into the camera wearing a deep smirk with a knowing gleam in her eyes.

Aris walks to pick up the remote as the reporter sums up the speech and begins to speculate what all this could mean.

“What does that mean for us?” Parker asks.

“Shit. We proceed as normal.”

I walk to the small conference room inside my office, and I press a special button on my phone that connects with a private cell.

“Hey,” Cheyenne greets.

“Get in touch with the mayor and have him call me tonight.”

“I guess you saw the press conference.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m on it,” she responds, ending the call without a goodbye.

“You think that she might have been targeting you with that comment about umbrella companies?” Aris asks as I step from the inner conference room back into my office.

It's obvious based on her comment about one enemy being in prison. That was a direct reference to my father and her way of letting me know that she would be looking at me.

“Oh, I know that she was, but I don't give a fuck. What I am concerned about is who's been doing all this shit to her. We don't peddle in playground shit like that. When I touch Essence Hamilton's life, she'll know my fucking handprints were all over that shit,” I growl.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“Zayn, your father asked you to meet me at six-thirty. It’s seven-twenty. Where are you?”

“Sorry, Ma. Shana’s car broke down, and I had to head over there and give her a jump so she could make it home.”

“And what time did Shana get off, Zayn?” I ask, pressing my hand against my forehead.

“Uh, five.”

“When did you go to her job to help her?”

“I think I made it there by five-thirty.”

“I’m sure that it didn’t take you more than twenty minutes to get her going again.”

“Well, I had to follow her to the gas station to make sure she made it, and then I just rolled home with her.”

“Why? Does she need a babysitter?”

“No, Ma,” he groans.

“Then why aren’t you here at the shop like you were supposed to be? You’ve procrastinated all month, knowing that you have the banquet tomorrow night.”

“I can easily grab something old to wear tomorrow, Ma,” he grumbles.

“That wasn’t the plan, Zayn. Besides, that has nothing to do with the fact that you didn’t call me, text me, or say anything. If I hadn’t called you, would you even be on your way?” I demand.

Before he can respond, I hear Shana in the background, “Zayn, baby, you want another slice of cake?”

“Zayn.” I moan in disbelief that he’s still not on his way yet.

“Um . . . no, Shana. I’ve got to go. I’m late meeting my mom.”

“Oh. Hi, Ms. Bayleigh,” I hear Shana giggling in the background.

Rolling my eyes, I say, “Hi, Shana. Zayn, it’s too late to go to the shop now. Tomorrow, you’ll just have to miss a class either in the morning or afternoon, your choice, but we’ll go tomorrow instead.”

“Okay, Ma. Thanks.”

“Zayn.”

“Yes, Ma?”

“I’m not playing with you, boy. Make sure that this is a priority tomorrow.”

“Okay,” he agrees, all too happy to end the call and get back to Shana.

Shana is a sweet girl, a little on the ditzy side, but sweet all the same. Unfortunately, she keeps our son’s head in the clouds, and lately, he’s starting to act just like her.

That doesn't bode well for an athlete.

Our All-A basketball star is starting to look like a dumb jock at times, and that worries me. Zaire says that I shouldn't worry because he once had his head in the clouds when it came to me.

I tell him that his head is still in the clouds, to which he says, "See, that's my point, and I'm doing just fine."

My shop is closed for the day. I'd given the ladies the day off early since everyone had completed the projects they were working on, and I had to leave to help Zayn find a suit for his banquet tomorrow evening.

Full of frustration, I grab my keys and purse, and I lock my office door.

Grabbing my phone, I call Zaire.

"Hey, baby."

"Hey, sweetheart. Did you hook up with Zayn yet?"

"No. His ass is over there with Shana."

"What?"

"Yeah. He said that her car wouldn't start, so he had to give her a jump, follow her to get gas, and then follow her home."

"We're gonna have to talk. Man to man. That shit ain't cool."

"I told you."

“Yeah. Yeah. I know. Look, I’m getting up out of here now. I’ll pick up Zaccai on my way home. He’s at Braylyn’s house.”

“Okay, thanks, babe. Anything in particular you want for dinner?” I ask.

I walk past Georgette’s desk and flick off all the lights in my shop.

“No. You head home and relax for the evening. Zaccai and I can grab some Caribbean from the new place that opened down the street from me on the way home.”

Walking to the security panel, I input the code to set the alarm system and step out of the shop, closing the door behind me.

“Oooh. I’ve been wanting to try that place,” I say, clicking the key fob to unlock my car.

“I know. Be safe, and I’ll see you when I get there. Shouldn’t be no more than forty minutes tops.”

“Okay, Z. Love you.”

“Love you too,” he replies before I end the call.

I shove my phone into my purse just as I hear clapping behind me.

I turn and look over my shoulder, spotting a man roughly six feet even walking up behind me. Three men are walking up behind him, and for some reason, they all look familiar, at least the one clapping does.

Every nerve ending in my body vibrates and lights up with fire. Slowly, I reach my

hand inside my purse, searching for my gun.

Before I can grab my gun or my cell phone, the man in front aims a gun at my forehead.

“Baby girl, I wouldn’t do that shit if I were you,” he advises.

Those cold, piercing black eyes look like they’re looking for a reason to shoot me. In fact, he looks like he’s begging me to.

“Pull your hand out of your purse right the fuck now,” he demands.

My hand isn’t in my purse yet, at least not all the way. I slowly remove my hand as he nods to the fellow to the right and slightly behind him.

The man steps forward and jerks my Hermès bag off my shoulder. Reaching inside, he removes my gun, my knife, and my pepper spray.

“Throw that shit back in there. She’s not getting that purse back,” the first man orders. He does as he says and gives my purse to another man.

Fuck!

If I play it cool, I still have the knife on the inside of my thigh that I can grab at just the right time.

“Who are you, and what the fuck do you want with me?” I ask, unable to cut the attitude out altogether.

“Details aren’t necessary, baby girl,” he states, accepting the phone from the other man’s hand.

“I’m not your baby, nor am I a girl,” I snap.

Snickering, he eyes me up and down slowly with an appreciative glance at my curves that has me vomiting in my mouth.

“Sassy mouth too. Yeah, I can see why he’s so taken with you,” he professes. “What’s your lock code?” he asks, waving the phone around.

I stare at him, refusing to say anything.

“Oh, that’s the game you want to play?”

The man standing beside me who took my purse slaps the shit out of me, causing me to stagger backward. I glare at him, but the moment that I reach my hand up to hit him back, he grabs my wrist and squeezes so tightly that tears instantly pop in my eyes.

“I’ll ask you one more time. What’s the lock code on this phone, li’l mama?”

These guys are clearly younger than Zaire and me. I can tell they’re roughly in their late twenties. That lets me know that they’re more dangerous than most. They have no respect, morals, or values.

These guys don’t come from the old streets that Zaire did. They don’t look out for their own, and definitely not for anyone else.

Sometimes, I find it difficult to control my attitude, but I suspect in this instance that I better get a handle on it, or I’ll get fucked up.

“Three. Nine. One. Eight,” I say, repeating the dates of each of my guys’ birthdays.

Unlocking the phone, he scrolls through it, and I'm sure that he's going through my contacts. I get my confirmation moments later when he looks at one of the other guys, laughs, and states, "This shit shouldn't be so easy."

He places the phone to his ear just as I ask, "What do you want from me?"

"Not you, sweetheart."

That comment scares the hell out of me. Could it be that he's going to get rid of me as soon as he gets what he wants?

"No. Sorry, this isn't your love. But I know where she's at."

The man listens for a moment, and though I can't hear his words, I can hear Zaire's voice through the phone.

"Zaire!" I scream.

The man scowls at me and turns his back on me, just as the man holding the gun on me pulls me close to him. The other two men move into place as a barrier between me and the man on the phone.

"No, you're not in a position to make demands. I simply wanted a meeting with you. But you were too fucking arrogant to make that happen. Turning down my calling card wasn't in your best interest, sir."

He listens some more, and I try to decipher what's being said on the other end.

"It's too late for that. The only thing that I want now is to take you down and take over your empire."

“Zaire!” I scream as the man ends the call, powers my phone off, and pockets it.

“Toss that bitch in the trunk,” he demands.

The man holding me lifts me and throws me over his shoulder. I fight, kick, and scream, but one of the other men moves forward and punches me in the chin.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance.

Those are the five stages of grief.

Guilt. Anger. Bargaining. Regret. Murder.

Those are the feelings that I go through.

Guilt that I allowed Essence's mayoral run and her mere existence to consume me to the point of distraction.

Anger that they dared fuck with my woman and take her from me.

Bargaining with God to please return her safely home to the boys and me, even if it means that I have to give up my life for hers.

Regret that I never married her, thinking that would protect her from law enforcement if they ever came after me, not to mention protecting all the material goods by putting them in her name. Not marrying didn't protect her either.

Murder.

It comes down to that simple word. When I find the dumbasses who took my woman, and I will, there will be no bargaining. There will be no questions because I don't want or need answers.

It will be murder, pure and simple.

I try dialing Bayleigh's number again with no success.

When she called me right back after she'd hung up the first time, I didn't think much of it. We often hang up and call one another back because we forgot to say something.

What I hadn't expected was to hear another nigga's voice calling me from my woman's phone. I didn't instantly suspect something funny was going on.

I knew.

In my heart and soul, I knew there was some fuck shit going on and that my woman was in danger.

I think back on the call now as I head down to the garage.

"Hey, my love."

"No. Sorry, this isn't your love. But I know where she's at."

"I don't know who the fuck you are. But for the simple fact that you're calling me from her phone, I know you've fucked up. When I find you, and trust me, I will, you'll realize that you've fucked with the wrong one."

"Zaire!"

Her scream rips right through me, and my heart roars to life with murder and vengeance at once.

"I don't know what you want, and I don't give a fuck. Let her go, and you can meet with me face to face. We will handle this man-to-man. Let her fucking go now!" I

seethe.

“No. You’re not in a position to make demands. I simply wanted a meeting with you. But you were too fucking arrogant to make that happen. Turning down my calling card wasn’t in your best interest, sir.”

And I know. It’s that cat who eyed me at the club a couple of months back when we celebrated Hakeem’s birthday. The one who sent me the bottle of Macallan.

“Don’t let a hair on her head be touched.”

He laughs.

“You really don’t know who you’re fucking with. You want a meeting? Let’s meet right now. We can meet on your turf, Stage 21, and settle this shit once and for all.”

“It’s too late for that. The only thing that I want now is to take you down and take over your empire.”

“Like I said, don’t let a fucking hair on her head be touched.”

The last thing that I hear is Bayleigh screaming my name, “ Zaire!”

“Bayleigh! Hey! Hey!” I shout into the phone.

Pulling it away, I see that the call has ended.

“Where to, Bossman?” Ghaleen asks when I hop into the passenger seat beside him.

Ignoring his question, I speak into the phone as soon as Aris answers.

“Do you have plates, a location, anything?”

“Not a location yet, sir. I’m working on it, though.”

“What do you have, Aris?” I ask impatiently.

“I have the plates, but they trace back to the same rental company that the limo did earlier this year. The last time we spoke with him, he claimed not to know anything.”

“His ass is gonna know something tonight. There’s no way in hell these guys keep using him, and he’s innocent in all this. If he doesn’t know a muthafuckin’ thing, he knows that there’s some shit in the game. He’s got to give me something,” I grumble as Ghalen pulls out of the garage.

“Ryland’s Rentals?” Ghalen asks, glancing at me.

Nodding, I turn my attention back to Aris. “What now?”

“I’m doing a triangulation on the area around her shop. You did say that’s where she was last, correct?”

“Yeah.”

I had called Aris, Parker, Janel, Jamal, and Malik no sooner than that bastard hung up on me. They were all in different locations, but they instantly dropped what they were doing and went on the move, searching around the city for anything suspicious.

I called Kim and asked her to pick up Zaccai and Zayn and escort them back to the house.

Parker called men in to come and secure the home and watch over my family until I

could return.

He also called Noble to see what he could track down.

I had placed Aris on searching through traffic cams and other data.

My other line rings, and I glance at the phone.

“Let me hit you back, Aris.”

I end the call without waiting for her response.

“Hey, I got your nine one one. What’s up?” Damascus asks.

“They took Bayleigh.”

“Who took Bayleigh, Z?” he asks in disbelief.

“I don’t know who these assholes are, but I know they’re after my business. Malik’s on his way to Stage 21 to check out the scene.”

“All right. Let me check into some things, local gangs, and things like that, to see what I can find out. I’ll hit you back as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, D.”

“Z?”

“Yeah?”

“If you find anyone . . . anyone at all that has her, call me in and let me handle it,

okay?”

“The fuck? You know it’s not that type of party, D.”

“Normally, I’d agree, but it’s an election year, and she’s gunning for you.”

“Essence Hamilton is the last thing on my mind. Fuck Essence if she gets in my way,” I growl, ending the call.

I immediately dial Aris back, and she answers.

“Hey, Bossman.”

“What you got for me?”

“You’re not going to like this.”

“Give it to me.”

“One of the men’s faces was caught on camera.”

“And?”

“He’s a former bodyguard of Essence Hamilton.”

This ain’t a fucking coincidence.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

My head hurts. It's dark, and my body is aching. Like a criminal, when a police flash bang is tossed into a building, all my senses are stunned at once.

I recall everything in vivid detail as though it were happening in this moment up to the point when that monster knocked me out. That's why my head hurts. My body is cramped up in a tiny space, creating the aches and discomfort I'm feeling.

But why is it so dark?

I stretch my arms and legs out, only for my feet to kick into something pliable but firm, and my arms hit something hard. My left hand meets cold metal, and my right hand punches into something furry and warm.

Fear slips inside of me as I wonder what that is, but then I quickly realize there's no room for fear. Not if I want to survive. I need to be focused and clear.

Clarity and quick thinking are the only things that will help me out of my current situation. My body begins rocking, and I listen closely to the sounds around me. The soft hum of an engine and music play around me. The smell of exhaust burns my nostrils.

I'm still in the trunk of a vehicle, and they made the mistake of not securing my hands and feet.

I don't have long, so I have to get busy while I can.

Rolling onto my back, I unzip my jeans. Lifting my butt off the bottom of the trunk

so that I can get my jeans off, I shove them down just enough to reach my inner right thigh.

Carefully unsheathing the knife that I keep there whenever I go out at night on my own, I lay it beside me, pull my jeans back up, and zip them.

I don't often wear the knife, but I knew that Zayn and I would be out and about late tonight.

Without Zaire by my side, I am always careful to protect myself.

My man preferred that I always have armed security with me, but I balked at that idea early on. It drew too much attention, limited my freedom, and made it difficult just to change my plans on a whim.

For the first time in a long time, I wish that I had listened to him. I usually listen to Zaire on most things, but not this one.

Although I'm not sure that would have helped. There were four of those men, and I'm sure that they've been watching me and my place. If they had suspected that I had an armed guard, I'm sure they would have prepared for that too.

I have no idea how long I've been knocked out or how far we've traveled. I slip the knife into the right side of my jeans against my hip and then tuck my sleeveless sweater back around it. I lay still in the confines of the car.

I count the number of times we stop and how long we stop.

I listen to all the sounds around us. We're still in a populated area based on the numerous car engines, the music from other cars around us, and other noises that I hear.

After five minutes, we come to a stop again, but this time the engine shuts off. I remain curled in a fetal position similar to the one that I woke up in.

I hear two men talking, and one of them is the one who held me at gunpoint throughout the ordeal. The other one's voice I don't recognize. I can't hear their words clearly, just their voices.

A second car pulls to a stop, and two doors close and open.

The clicking of a lock alerts me that the trunk is about to pop open.

The light isn't that bright, but it's there.

I can see it through my closed lids. We haven't traveled very far because the sun has the same level of brilliance it had when I stepped from my shop.

Two arms lift me and heave me over someone's shoulder. I pray that he doesn't bump against my hip because, for all the tucking that I did, if he feels me carefully enough, he will feel this knife on my hip.

In the best-case scenario, I'll get injured myself. In the worst-case scenario, I'll get killed.

They laugh and joke about a boxing match that they're about to watch while they walk away from the car. Someone is behind the man carrying me, because I feel his energy, so I don't bother to open my eyes.

We walk up a long flight of stairs, and then I hear a door open.

Someone demands, "Flick on the lights."

No sooner than the lights come on than I hear the lead man say, “I’ll be back. I gotta take a piss.”

I hear footsteps on what sound like metal stairs.

“Hey, I’m about to heat that chicken from earlier. Anybody else want any?” another voice calls.

“Your hungry ass ever stop eating?” the man carrying me asks.

The other guy chuckles and replies. “Fuck no. You ever stop smoking, nigga?”

“Fuck you,” the guy carrying me replies.

“Aye, yo, grab me some chicken, Q,” a third voice commands.

“Where are you going?” Q, the chicken guy asks.

I open my eyes and take a quick peek around. No one is facing me, but I can tell that we’re in a warehouse. There’s a cut- out window that gives me a view of the kitchen. I can’t see Q because he and the microwave are both out of sight.

There’s a set of stairs to the right, which are the stairs the pissing guy must have taken. There’s a door immediately to the right of the kitchen.

“Gotta call Myiesha. Tell her I’ma be late tonight,” the third voice explains, walking away.

He takes the metal stairs too.

The man carrying me takes a few more steps as he shifts me in his arms. Before he

can lower me, my dangling arm shifts, and I grab the knife from my side.

“Oh, you’re—” he begins but doesn’t finish.

I jab the knife into his neck with one hard thrust and twist. The man goes still for a few seconds, and I wonder if I hit my target as I struggle to free myself from his grip despite the blood spewing forth and spraying me.

When his hold on me relaxes, I jump free just as he crumples to his knees and grabs his throat.

“The hell is that?” I hear Q call out.

I race toward a door to my left. Seeing my purse lying on a crate beside the door, I snatch it up and jerk the door handle just as Q calls out, “Yo! Get your ass back here.”

The door slams shut behind me just in time as a gun goes off.

Running and reaching inside my purse, I grab my gun. I have no idea where I’m at, but the parking lot that I can see through the windows to my left is open, and there aren’t any cars around except for two.

I have zero knowledge about hotwiring a car, so that’s out. I take the second landing and then race down the last flight of stairs.

Voices shout out above me as my mind races to plan what my next step will be. Just as I reach the bottom of the stairs, I slam into a body that steps out of the darkness.

“Where you going, bitch?”

I look into the disfigured features of my brother-in-law, Kenny. My blood runs cold as he sneers at me with a swollen jaw and split lip.

Damn.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“What the hell? Who are you?” An obese man grumbles as we push the door to his office open.

“Pull up your security footage. Now!” I bark, walking around behind his desk and towering over him.

“You don’t tell me what the fuck to do. Get out of here now,” he demands.

“I’m not going anywhere until I get the answers I came here for,” I reply firmly.

“I don’t know anything about anything.

Now get out before I call the cops.”

“I don’t give a shit what you don’t know. I don’t give a shit about you calling the cops. Run that fuckin’ tape back,” I snarl at the obese man sitting behind the desk.

We walked back to the owner’s office, to the chagrin of the customer service staff out front a minute ago. We didn’t bother to ask to see him or be let in, because I didn’t have time for games.

I didn’t go to Essence Hamilton right away because I have to tread lightly where she is concerned. There’s too much danger in that approach, and while I really don’t give a fuck when it comes to Bayleigh, I also know that I have to make sure that I get my answers without tipping my hand.

Telling anyone that she’s missing who doesn’t already know it could be like signing

her death certificate. So, I'll get whatever information that I can, in any way that I can, before I go to Essence.

Cameron Ryland is a disgrace to any and everything. His office smells like someone took a dump in here. There are grease stains on his yellowed, white shirt and flecks of food in his beard. The crotch of his white pants is saturated with the red juice he'd been drinking when we barged in.

File folders litter every surface, and books are stacked haphazardly on the two lone chairs.

"I'm gonna tell you one last time, if you don't have a warrant, and you don't because you damn sure ain't no cop, then you can get the fuck out of here with that," he replies.

I punch the obese man in his jaw, knocking him over in his chair. His face instantly splits in the crease between his nose and cheekbone.

"Zaire," Janel warns behind me.

I ignore her in exchange for pounding the shit out of his face. I'm instantly pulled back.

"Let us handle this, G," Ghalen states.

"Not when it comes to her," I say, shaking my head and glaring at the piece of shit who's trying to pick his bulk up from the ground.

"Listen, dude. I suggest that you give us access to your video cameras if you don't want a bullet in the center of your forehead.

A bitch is tired and hungry. I don't have time to beat your fat ass, and my boy ain't really interested in that.

This big ass nigga behind me gon' do the same thing that I am gonna do, except that he might torture you first," Janel warns.

Cameron wipes his lips with the back of his hand and looks up at the three of us in confusion.

"It's on my computer," he answers, pointing at the old, outdated system.

I walk over to the computer and find that it's not locked. I push a couple of keys on the keyboard and then scan for the security system.

"Flight Time. It's that app," he states.

I push the one that he indicates and jab a finger at it. "I need to see your footage from yesterday when the man rented the car."

Cameron runs the video back to the requested date and time for us to review. I recognize the man. He's one of the men from the club the night we celebrated Hakeem's birthday.

I also recall seeing him on TV a few years back as a member of Essence's security detail.

After reviewing the records that he left as a mailing address and job, I ask, "The fuck kind of business are you running here?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Cameron grumbles, rolling his eyes at me.

“At what point did you or your staff realize that one-two-three Candyland Lane wasn’t a real address? Or Parker Brothers on one-one-one Monopoly Way wasn’t a legit job address?”

“The fuck.” Janel snickers.

“You’re lucky I don’t have your business shut the fuck down. Ghalen, let’s bug. This was a waste of time.”

“All right, Bossman.”

“Janel, stay on this muthafucka,” I order, glaring at Cameron Ryland. “Ghalen and I have a very special visit to make.”

“Gotcha, Bossman,” she replies, smirking at Cameron.

He has no idea his ass is in hot water.

The drive to Essence’s office takes less than twenty minutes with the way Ghalen floors it. We pull up to the small firm that Essence has been working from since she left the DA’s office.

Her car is the only one parked in the lot, surprisingly. When we step inside, I don’t even see anyone at the receptionist’s desk.

I don’t have time for niceties or etiquette. I shove the inner door open, leading into her office, and find her on the phone.

Essence spins around and smirks at me.

“Hey, TC, I have to go, but I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

I walk further into her office and stop just inches in front of her.

“Well, well, well. It’s been a while, Zaire Knight. I was wondering what took you so long.”

“Where the fuck is she?”

“Who?” she asks with confusion etched across her face.

“Don’t fucking play games with me, Essence. I thought after you broke our family down by sending my father to prison that you’d be done with us. Are you intimidated? Threatened by our presence?”

Essence walks around me and heads to her desk, sitting down.

“Don’t you dare push a button or make a call,” I say, walking around her desk and spinning her chair around.

She frowns at me and then replies. “You may run the underground element here in Chicora Falls, Zaire, but you do not run me.”

“I’m not interested in running you. I want answers, and I know that you have them.”

She replies with a shrug. “If you say so.”

“Your former bodyguard, Theron James, was involved in an assault and kidnapping today.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” she replies, laughing at my comment.

“I don’t give a fuck if you believe it or not. I’m telling you what happened, and I

want some answers.”

“What answers do you think you’re deserving of, and who did he supposedly assault and kidnap?”

“I didn’t come here to answer your questions, Essence, but to get answers.”

“I suggest that you visit your local police department. I have nothing to do with anything. After all, that’s what our taxpayer dollars are for. To get them to protect and to serve. Unless, of course, you have something to hide, and you’re worried about them finding out,” she teases.

I don’t believe in hitting women, but I swear the smirk on her lips makes me want to smack her lips off.

“I’m going to ask you this question and nothing else,” I say.

Ghalen grunts behind me, warning me that I’d better tread carefully. There’s only so much that I can do to Essence with her in the public eye right now.

When I do make my move, it has to be stealthy and timed to perfection.

“Where can I find Theron James?”

Essence laughs and waves her hand. “Oh, that’s easy. You can find him at the corners of Old Wabash Avenue and Kingston Street.”

Frowning, I say, “There’s nothing there but a cemetery.”

“Exactly. He died of kidney failure last year.”

“Then who the fuck is walking around looking like him?”

“His twin brother, Terran.”

“And where would he be?”

“Not that I give a damn why you’re asking and not that I owe you anything but considering that I did fuck your dad over and never had a chance to fuck you, which I would have loved to do,” she confesses, dropping her gaze to my crotch as she licks her lips.

“I owe you. He works over at Ocean Town Studios on Piedmont Boulevard.”

I turn and glance at Ghalen, who instantly moves to the door.

“Zaire?”

I turn back and glare at her.

“Consider my debt paid. Everything else is open season.”

“Game on,” I snarl, turning to follow Ghalen out the door.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“Kenny?” I whisper in horror.

He slowly smiles at me. “Yeah, bitch. Your worst nightmare. You’re gonna pay for what you did to me. You and that whore of a sister of yours. And I’ll make sure Zaire is forced to watch you suffer.”

“He’ll destroy you,” I croak.

“Not before I destroy him,” he declares, punching me in the face and knocking me backward on the steps.

Pain radiates throughout my face, and I instantly feel my left eye starting to swell. My nose stings, my head hurts, and it seems like the world is tilting on its axis. I blink several times, knowing that I have to overcome this shit if I have any chance of surviving.

I can hear the other men drawing closer as Kenny towers over me again, but this time, I kick him in the shin. I know that he’s in pain from the torture Zaire inflicted on him but evil knows no bounds because he doesn’t stop.

Kenny kicks me down as I try to stand, and when I grab his foot to pull him down, he punches me in the side of my head. The force of the impact of his fist causes me to release his foot, and he stumbles back slightly.

We are both in bad shape. I’m trying to recover from the ringing in my ears and how he rocked the hell out of me with that punch. How my sister withstood this shit, I’ll never know.

Kenny's gripping his midsection and wincing, so I know that he's dealing with bruised ribs and some internal injuries, as well. But when I survive this bullshit, and I will, I expect to have a migraine for days to come.

Reaching down, he punches me in the chest before grabbing my hair and trying to slam my head against the concrete stairwell. I grip his balls and squeeze tightly, forcing him to release my hair and grab himself.

"Put the gun down!" I hear someone shout from one floor above us.

I spin around, shooting up the stairs just as one of the men leans over the railing, looking down on us. I hit him in the neck. The other two scatter as the third man comes tumbling down the stairs.

"Shit," I hear someone cry out just as Kenny wraps his arm around me and grabs my gun-wielding hand.

I try to jerk my hand free, but he's got my hand in a vice grip. Using my free elbow, I jab him in the ribs, and he topples over, bringing me down with him. He cries out in pain; I know that whatever Zaire and his crew did to Kenny, he's still suffering from those wounds.

I struggle to get up as the other two men race down the stairs. I barely make it through the exit door before they shout after me.

"I'ma kill you, bitch!" I hear one of the men shout as a bullet whizzes past my ear.

"Dumb fuck. Don't kill her. We need her," the lead man growls.

"Trying to stop her," the second man hollers out.

I pass the two cars in the parking lot, but I know that it's over for my ass if either of them shoots again. There's nothing for me to hide behind.

I turn around and shoot over my shoulder, but I know that I've missed them.

"That bitch trying to shoot us," the second man shouts as I run around the corner.

I look behind me to see how much of a lead I have on them.

Before I can think of my next move or even decipher if I've run into a dead end, my feet are snatched from underneath me. I feel as if I'm flying through the air before I'm pushed down. A hard body covers mine, and all I can think about is that it's over now.

I have no idea what they're going to do to me now that they've captured me again or that I've shot their men.

I struggle to push the man's weight off me as I shout, "Get off me," but I hear, "Stay low."

"Get off me," I grumble.

"Stay fucking low!"

"Malik?" I whisper, finally recognizing the voice.

He rolls off me quickly.

"Stay here, and don't move, no matter who comes."

I look up in horror at the stinking trash can that he's hidden me behind, and for the

first time, I realize why my fall didn't hurt. Malik had shoved me onto an old mattress behind the dumpster.

Thankful, that I escaped, I try not to think about all the germs and bacteria crawling all over my body right now.

Malik creeps away from me and holds up one finger, telling me to stay put. I watch as he disappears. Fear rushes through my veins as I wait impatiently for him to come back to me.

I search my purse, and disappointment fills me when I realize that my phone isn't in there. They must be holding onto it to reach Zaire.

Several gunshots ring out.

Grabbing my gun, I hold it out, ready to aim at whoever walks around that corner. I may not be a crack shot like Zaire or his men, but I damn sure know how to use a gun.

I hear someone coming around the corner, and my hand trembles slightly before I steady it again. Praying that it's Malik, horror runs through me as I see Kenny. This time, he's holding a gun, and he's smiling at me as blood pours from his side and his shoulder.

"I'm not finished with your ass, bitch. You're going to learn a lesson to—"

Kenny doesn't finish the sentence because right in front of me, his head explodes. My eyes widen, I lose my breath, and panic fills my chest.

I'm prepared to scream.

I want to scream.

I feel it welling up inside of me.

Only it doesn't come out.

I don't know if I'm in shock or if I'm just too afraid to alert someone to my location. But the scream never manifests.

Zaire comes striding calmly down the alley, and when he spots me, that calmness is out the door. My baby rushes to me, picks me up off the filthy mattress, and lifts me into his arms.

Crushing me against his chest, he kisses the top of my head before pulling me back and showering my face with kisses.

Zaire pushes me out of his embrace and looks me up and down as his hands roam from the crown of my head to my ankles, checking me for injuries.

"Baby," he whispers in a relief-filled voice.

"Zai." I cry, finally able to release my emotions.

I shake in his hold, afraid for him to let go, afraid I'll be taken away again, but he holds on tight.

"Shh, baby. You did it. You held your own. It's all right now. You're safe," he whispers.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“How did you find me?” I ask Zaire.

Last night, I was so tired and hurting from the injuries that I sustained that the only thing I wanted was to shower and go to bed.

Zaire insisted I stay awake long enough to allow Dr. Kimbrough to check me out and prescribe me something for the pain. After that, I’d fallen into a fitful sleep, but thankfully, Zaire was here throughout the night to ward off the nightmares.

When I woke up this morning, I found that my three sons had worked together with oversight from my sister to prepare breakfast for Zaire and me.

While I ate, they all sat around in the bedroom, chatting happily.

I’m still resting in bed. Zaire removes the bed tray with the remainder of our breakfast from the bed and onto the dresser. He returns and sits beside me with his arm around my shoulders and a thousand pillows plumped behind our backs.

My boys are all gathered; Zayn and Zaccai sit at the foot of our bed with worried expressions on their faces.

Our oldest, Zechariah, has come home, and he stands just beyond the bed bench wearing a scowl that matches his father’s.

With his arms crossed and taking up that wide stance, he looks just like Zaire.

Riley stands beside Zechariah, and I hate the look of guilt that she wears. None of this

is her fault, but I know deep within she's blaming herself.

"I had men out all over the city searching for you. When they couldn't find you or if people said they hadn't seen anything, they would move on to the next spot, except for Malik.

He went to Stage 21 and remained there. He said that he didn't see anything out of the ordinary when I first sent him there.

But eventually he heard cars pulling up and some men chatting it up. "

"That's probably when I was brought there."

"Yeah, but he couldn't see anything from where he was hidden.

He waited for a while before he started scouting the place out again.

Malik said that he was around back trying to pick a lock when all hell broke loose.

He didn't want to give away his position or the advantage that he had, and he wasn't sure who was shooting or who was taking fire.

By the time he made it around from the second building back to where you were, that's when he spotted you running in his direction. "

"Yeah, I never saw Malik, I must have passed him up."

Nodding, Zaire explains. "Yeah, he had to hide you so that they couldn't see you if they ran by. From there, he ran back out and instantly saw the other two men coming after you. He took one of them down, but not Terran."

“Why you didn’t take his punk ass out, Daddy? ‘Scuse me, Ma,” Zechariah apologizes.

“Terran and I need to talk,” Zaire professes, looking at his watch before he heads into our dressing room.

“Ain’t shi—”

“Zech,” I warn.

“Sorry, Ma, but anyone coming after you deserves to be unalived!” he declares in a thick, emotional voice with no apologies.

“Yeah,” Zayn chimes in.

Zaccai looks quizzically at all of us and then crawls onto the bed. He throws himself into my arms, and I hold him close to me, kissing the top of his head.

“I missed you, Mommy.”

“I missed you, too, baby.”

“Zech’s right,” Zaire admits, returning from the dressing room with a pair of shoes and a suit coat on. “His ass will be decimated.”

“And he will be at some point, I’m sure,” I say, giving my man a pointed look.

We don’t discuss with the boys what Zaire does, but Zechariah knows. Zayn might be aware as well, but we prefer to shield Zaccai from that life as much as possible. He’s still too young and way too sensitive to deal with those types of topics.

He had overheard someone talking about me being kidnapped, and apparently, he hadn't stopped crying until he'd laid eyes on me to see that I was safe from harm. Zayn is holding a lot of guilt too.

Since I came home, he has been apologizing profusely for not showing up for our appointment. He has it in his mind that if he'd been there, things would have gone down differently. He's certain that I wouldn't have been kidnapped, but I fear that my poor child wouldn't be here with us this morning.

"I have a meeting with him this morning, son. I'm sure after our conversation, he'll never think about your mother again," Zaire declares.

"And Kenny?" Riley finally speaks up after clearing her throat. "How did he become involved with them? Do you think that he was behind all of this?"

"I doubt he was the one behind this, Riley. No disrespect to you, but your husband wasn't smart enough to be a mastermind of anything, especially not a coup against my family. I will say whoever is after me knows about the rift in your marriage and saw him as a way to get to us.

"I think they're the ones who freed him too. I don't know who it is, but I'll find out. And you'd better believe that person will suffer for all the hell that they've brought on my family, including you, Riley, and they will pay the deadliest price."

There's something sexy about the way that his voice deepens when he speaks those final two words.

"I know. Thank you," Riley replies softly.

"I have someone who can assist you with making the funeral arrangements," Zaire states.

My sister buckles just a bit as she reaches out to grab hold of the bottom of the bedpost. Zechariah reaches an arm around her to comfort her, but she shakes her head.

She smiles at Zechariah. "I'm fine, Zech. Thanks."

"You sure, auntie?" he asks, rubbing her back.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"All right, boys. You all have somewhere to be. School isn't giving out holidays just because your mother was kidnapped," I try teasing.

Based on the look Zaire shoots my way, it wasn't successful.

"I'm taking Zayn to find a suit after I handle some business, so you don't have to worry about that, baby," Zaire remarks.

"Thanks, Dad," Zayn replies, heading out of the room behind his brothers.

I look at Zaire and as006B, "Can you give Riley and me a minute, babe?"

"Sure," he answers, bending closer and kissing my lips. "I'm about to head out and handle some things. Call me if you need anything."

"Okay. Baby?"

"Yeah?"

"The boys have their security detail on them?"

“They do. Your little ass will keep your team on you at all times now. I don’t care what you feel about it,” Zaire orders the moment that I open my mouth.

“I was just going to say that I do feel safer with them around,” I pout.

“Good.”

He kisses me again, says bye to Riley, and leaves.

“Hey, honey. Come sit next to me,” I say, getting out of bed and heading into my separate sitting room.

We take chairs by the large bay window that overlooks the lake behind our home.

“I know this is hard for you, Rye.”

“No. You’re mistaking my sadness for grief, Leigh, and it’s not that.”

“What is it?” I ask as my heart swells with compassion for her.

“Thinking of all the years I wasted on his sorry ass. And honestly, I was so hurt that I let my self-esteem take such a dip screwing around with him. If it weren’t for Zaire handling him, I’d probably be going right back to him.”

“Even knowing that he had it out for you? I mean, if you went back after all this shit he’d done to you and what Zaire did to him, you do realize he would have killed you, don’t you?”

Riley pulls her fingers through her hair and closes her eyes.

“What am I going to do?”

“You’re free, Riley. I know that it doesn’t feel like it, but you’re finally free.

You’d talked about selling the place and finding something new.

You can do that now. Something smaller and that’s perfect for you.

Take this time to get to know yourself, to heal, and then one day someone will come along who deserves you. ”

“He’s all I’ve ever known, Leigh. I know that I deserve better than him, but it’s hard to accept that he’s gone.”

“Well, according to the news reports this morning, his body was found in a scrupulous part of town, and he’d died of a drug overdose. You have to accept it. They’ll identify him by his dental records. Are you going down there?”

“I’m not. I left that to his mother.”

“How is she holding up?”

“Girl, she’s hurting, but she wasn’t a fan of his either. The way that he used to talk to that woman was shameful. Did I ever tell you that he slapped her one time? Years ago.”

“No, but they say that you can tell what sort of man you have based on the way that he treats his mama.”

Riley sits back in the chair. We’re both quiet for a while until I notice the tears falling from her eyes.

“Honey, I know you loved that man. But you’re better off now.”

“A part of me knows that, but I don’t know how I’m going to do this alone.”

“You’re going to live your life and enjoy—”

“No. I never imagined that I’d be a single parent, Leigh.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m pregnant, Bayleigh. I’m four months pregnant with Kenny’s daughter,” Riley sobs.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

I've been away from my family all day at the office, handling business. I took a two-hour break to see about Zayn's suit, before dropping him off and heading back out again.

I check my watch and see that I have half an hour before I need to be at home getting ready to leave for Zayn's banquet. The sun has already set, and it's dark out.

I step out of the car, followed by Ghalen, and head inside the warehouse through the back door.

Walking inside, I see Kim sitting on a chair, smoking a blunt. Janel is sitting on the floor doing something on her phone.

Malik's gaze meets mine as I step into the room. He's on the far side, standing next to the man sitting bound to a chair.

"Terran James. You've been stalking me for some time. It looks like you got the meeting you've been wanting."

He scowls at me from the one open eye that still seems functional.

"Sorry about that eye. Seems Malik wanted to gouge both out, but I asked him to leave one working eye. You see, I needed you to see the devastation that I was about to rain on your life."

I nod at Ghalen, who steps back out of the room.

“Fuck you, Knight. You’re no-fucking-body to me,” he declares, spitting on the floor.

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be working so hard to take down my organization.”

Laughing, he confesses. “You’ve got problems bigger than me, nigga. I’m just the hired hand. Whether you kill me or not, you’ve got problems, old man.”

“Who is it?”

“Fuck you think I’m about to tell you that for? You gon’ kill me, anyway, fucking idiot. Like I said, you’ve got problems.”

“Your mother should have taught you manners, son.”

“Don’t son me,” he sneers.

Smirking, I say, “That’s fine. Listen...”

I take several slow steps until I come face to face with him. Kneeling, I say, “You fucked with my family.”

“Should’ve fucked that bitch with that fat ass donk,” he snarls.

I see how he tightens his jaw and posture, expecting me to hit him, but I won’t.

“I’m glad to hear that you feel that way.

This little kidnapping business operation that you’re running has come to a dead end,” I say.

“The first thing that I’m going to do is release you from those ropes.

Then I'm going to give you an opportunity to fight me like a man.

Though I doubt you'll be any good at that.

Little boys always overestimate their power.

Finally, after I kick your ass and leave you here mangled, unable to move or anything, I'll burn your studio to the ground.

And when I'm done with that . . . my boys here will fuck your bitch. ”

I turn around and point in the direction of the door as Ghaleen walks in with a woman who's wearing a gag with her arms cuffed behind her back.

I walk to the woman and remove the gag.

“Say your final goodbyes to your man,” I tell her.

“Fuck you, bitch!” She spits at me.

“You know,” I say, removing the handkerchief from my front pocket and wiping her spit off my face. “Someone really should have taught you how to behave like a lady. But I'll make sure that doesn't happen again.”

Turning to Janel, I nod. She pulls a black bag up, walks to me, and sets it at my feet.

“When I was a kid, my mother used to threaten to wash our mouths out with soap if we cursed,” I say, removing a pair of leather gloves from the bag and slipping them onto my hands.

“Bitch should've made you choke on the soap after fucking you up the ass with it!”

she screams.

“I just don’t like the way that you talk, young lady. Such a filthy mouth. I’ll have to teach you a lesson,” I say.

“If you touch her, I’ll fuck your old ass up as soon as I get free,” Terran snarls at me.

I make a clucking sound with my tongue. “Why do fools always gain heart when it’s too late?” I ask, looking at Malik, who shrugs.

Ghalen carries the woman to a chair opposite Terran and forces her into it. Janel moves beside him and tries to bind the woman’s feet. When she kicks at Janel, she ignores Terran’s curses and punches her in the gut.

Satisfied that she won’t resist further, Janel binds the woman’s feet to the chair, then proceeds to do the same thing with her arms behind the chair.

“Open your mouth,” Ghalen commands as I reach inside the bag, removing a pair of leather cutting shears.

She sneers at him and says nothing. Ghalen grabs her jaw, forcing it open, but she clenches it and refuses to open it completely.

“I love you, Angel. Don’t give these bastards shit!” Terran screams as Ghalen struggles with her. He continues offering useless threats but goes silent when he sees my next move.

Grabbing a Karambit knife from the bag with my left hand, I stab her in the thigh, causing her to scream. The moment she does, Ghalen grips her mouth using her top and bottom teeth to pry it further open and prevent her from closing it. I drop the

knife and angle the shears with my right hand.

“No! Fuck no! Don’t do that shit, yo!” Terran shouts as I grab her tongue and cut it out. “Angel!” Terran screams.

Angel’s eyes widen, and I can tell that she’s on the verge of fainting.

“Aigggh! Fuck you, Knight! I’m a kill you!” Terran shouts as spit comes flying from his mouth, and he strains against his restraints.

He becomes violently upset trying to get out of the chair, but the only thing he manages to do is topple over.

Blood pools from Angel’s mouth as she grows hysterical, and tears stream down her face.

“You got any more foul shit to say now?” I ask, staring into her eyes.

She’s straining against the restraints. She looks at Ghaleen with a plea in her eyes, but he keeps his gaze trained on me.

I lift Terran’s chair upright again.

“We gave this bitch one chance to tell us where you were when we found her. She was loyal as fuck. You see, I would’ve left her alone, but she said, and I quote, ‘I hope they gang rape your wife, kill her, and then spit on her grave.’ Those were some harsh words coming from another woman, especially considering she had a gun at her head.

You got yourself a true ride-or-die here.

Since she already rode hard for you, I guess it's about time for her to live up to the latter part of that statement," I say, turning the gun and shooting his woman in the forehead.

Terran's eyes go ice-cold and then blank as they swivel toward me.

"Good, muthafucka. I see you've got murder in your eyes. Malik, free him," I say.

Malik looks uncertainly at me.

"Now," I demand in a low, dark voice.

Malik releases Terran's hands, and he instantly lunges for me, swinging with a powerful left.

Stumbling backward, I say, "That's all you've got?"

He swings again with a hard right and catches me in the ribs. That hit is followed by several hits to my gut, my jaw, and my sides.

"Come on, surely you've got more than that in you," I taunt, swiping the blood from my mouth.

Reaching inside my pocket, I grab the brass knuckles and slip them onto my hands. Terran is blinded by rage, and he doesn't pay attention to what I'm doing.

He hits me harder and harder until I fall. He proceeds to kick me in the side, and when he gets ready to kick me again, I grab his foot, pulling it until he falls on his back. Rocketing up from my position on my back, I straddle him and begin pummeling his face with my brass knuckles.

I've allowed him to get his feelings off his chest. Now it's my turn.

"You came after my family!" I roar. "You came after my woman! The one who bore my seed. What the fuck made you think you'd get away with that shit? Huh?"

Another blow punctuates each word.

I split his eye and jaw open and continue pounding his face as it begins to cave in.

"Z!" Kim shouts through the dark fog that's taken over my brain. "Z!"

I feel arms pulling at me, but I don't stop until Ghalen lifts me off Terran. Malik jumps between us as I go for Terran again, who's struggling to get to his feet.

"Z. You want to make him suffer. You made us promise not to let you kill him but make him suffer," Malik reminds me as Ghalen pushes me away from Terran and over near the bag.

Nodding, I swipe the blood off my mouth as my chest heaves while I wait for my breathing to regulate.

Kneeling, I pick up the bag and begin to zip it up.

"Should've raped her," Terran manages to croak.

Pausing, I look over my shoulder. "What'd you say?"

"You heard me, nigga. I said I should've raped her."

My fingers grip an instrument at the bottom of the bag. Removing it, I hand the bag to Kim, who comes to stand beside me.

“Leave,” I tell my team.

They don’t question my actions but do as I ask. Walking to where Terran is barely standing, I step close to him.

“You’re making sure that I have no regrets tonight, huh? You’re making sure a muthafucka sleeps good as hell,” I rumble in a low voice.

Just as he swings at me again, I bring my right arm up and swing the knife in a wide arc before I bring it down and slice it into his jugular vein.

“That’s the last time you disrespect my family or me,” I rumble as he grabs his neck and falls to the concrete floor.

I kneel beside him and pat his chest.

“You tried it. Thanks for keeping an old man on his toes, though,” I say.

Standing, I pull a pre-rolled blunt from my pocket and light it up. I take a few puffs as I walk to the door and then turn back to see him bleeding out.

“Rest in peace, li’l homie.”

He gurgles his reply, and although I can’t attest to it, I’m sure it sounds a lot like, “Fuck you,” over the blood gurgling up out of his mouth.

Laughing, I say, “Yeah, tell Satan that when you see him, bitch.”

I toss the blunt over my shoulder, close the door, and head out.

I jog out of the warehouse and hop into the car that’s pulled around to the front.

Pulling out my cell phone, I dial Parker.

“Wassup?”

“I need the cleanup crew.”

“They’re half a block away.”

I end the call, and as we pull out of the parking lot, I see two black vans pull in.

“Home?” Ghalen asks.

“Yeah. I need to head to Zayn’s banquet and squeeze my woman.”

Ghalen chuckles. “You a cold muthafucka.”

“Nah. It’s all about protecting my family. It’s all in a day’s work, G.”

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

It's Saturday morning, and I'm tired as hell after the last several hours of losing Bayleigh, finding Bayleigh, and raining terror down on my enemies.

I'm not a fool, though. I've been doing nothing but thinking about Terran's statement since last night.

Terran was a small player, a little fish in the big ocean.

Who the fuck was really behind that assault on my family?

I wake up in a pool of sweat, and my chest is heaving. I never have nightmares, not after a kill or before one.

This one stemmed from Bayleigh being kidnapped. I pull my hand down my face and turn to see her lying peacefully beside me.

I'd take a thousand nightmares if it would give her a peaceful night's rest. I was afraid that she would be plagued by nightmares after what she went through, but she's not.

It was my fear of losing her and knowing that I'd failed to keep her safe that had me having nightmares.

I grab her hip and tug her closer to me.

She rolls over and mumbles something in her sleep. I release her, get out of bed, and start removing the sheets from my side of the bed.

By the time I get to the foot of the bed, she mumbles, “What’re you doing?” in a sleepy voice. At the same time, she reaches toward my side of the bed and instantly draws back, concern showing on her face.

“What’s that?”

“Sweat.”

Confusion etches itself on the planes of her face as I step into our large walk-in, double closets. I pass through the dressing area and head straight for the bathroom. I take a quick shower and come out again.

I grab a set of fresh bedding and head back into the room.

I’m surprised to see that she’s already placed another set of linens on the bed; the old ones have been removed from the room, and the air smells like Lysol.

Her eyes are full of compassion when she asks, “You had a nightmare?”

I climb back into the bed beside her and tug her into my arms. “Go to sleep.”

“Answer my question first.”

I lean closer, bending my head to kiss her. Bayleigh moans her sweet satisfaction into my mouth, causing my dick to stir.

“Woman, you don’t know what you do to me.”

“After almost thirty years together, I’d better know.”

I brush my lips against hers and begin kissing her again.

“Mm-mm.” Bayleigh pulls back.

“What? I can’t have no sweetness?”

“You need to answer the question first.”

Groaning, I roll over onto my back, toss my arm over my eyes, and mumble, “Yes. I had a nightmare.”

“What was it about?”

“Not talking about it, Bay.”

“Fine. I’ll drag it out of you one way or another.” She slides down into the bed.

Bayleigh slides her hands down my dick. They’re soft and smooth as silk. Her lips pause over the head, and she blows short, warm breaths before taking me into her mouth.

“Mm,” she moans, licking around the head with hollowed-out cheeks.

“Baby,” I groan, cupping her head with my hands.

With measured and even strokes, she works her hands up and down my length while slowly twirling her tongue around me and using her jaws to pull me deeper to the back of her throat.

“Ahh, baby, I could stay like this forever,” I say.

She winks at me, and I can’t help but smile. It quickly drops from my face when she pulls back to the top and works down again. She does that several times, taking her

sweet, slow time as she enjoys the taste of me while bringing me deep pleasure and intensifying my yearning for her.

No longer able to take it, I pull myself out of her and reach for her.

“You’re taking away all the fun,” she pouts.

“I’ve got something that’s a lot more fun,” I say, tangling our fingers together.

She climbs up my body and settles herself on my hard dick, slowly working her way down until she’s found her seat.

“That’s it, baby girl,” I coax as she begins to ride me.

Her pussy is wet and hot like warm springs, soft as satin, and tight as a boxing glove on a fist.

“I ain’t gonna be able to take much more of this.” Bayleigh rocks back and forth, sealing her tight fit around me.

My hands hold her in place, and when she leans forward to kiss me, my palms smooth over and then grip her ass. She works me over as she keeps her lips on mine. Whether to cease talking or to intensify the feeling, I don’t know, but I like it.

With slow, measured moves and vast control, Bayleigh slowly chases the nightmares away. She’s all that I need and everything that I am. She’s all-consuming, and there’s no one else that I would rather walk this journey with.

When we finally release almost twenty minutes later, she rolls off me, heads to the bathroom, and turns on the water. I listen as she washes herself, and I try to fall asleep again.

I'm just drifting off when she returns with a soapy washcloth and hand towel.

She washes me off and then dries me before returning the items to the laundry basket.

This time, when she slips back in beside me, I hold her close, kissing her forehead, her closed eyelids, her nose, and then her mouth before I say, "Rest, sweet baby."

"I am. As long as I'm right here in your arms, I'm safe from harm and worried about nothing."

Bayleigh yawns, stretches, and cuddles closer to me.

No more than half an hour passes, as I lie awake staring at the ceiling and thinking about what's happened before I hear a buzz. I ignore it until it happens again.

I turn sideways and notice that my phone is lighting up. It's my personal phone, which is usually on do-not-disturb through the night. It automatically turns on at midnight and only allows calls from Bayleigh, the boys, and Parker.

I know my boys are all here safe, and Bay is sleeping peacefully in my arms. Stretching, I grab the phone as I glance at the clock on my nightstand.

It's three-thirty in the fucking morning.

Why the fuck is Parker calling me at this time of the morning? I pull the phone closer. Whatever he has to say isn't good. I ease myself from around Bayleigh and get out of bed. She shifts and mutters something sleepily but continues resting.

The phone has stopped ringing by the time I make my great escape. I head into the sitting room with my phone, looking out into the darkened night. The lake is so black that you can't see anything. It doesn't even look like it exists, but I know that it's

there.

I dial Parker's number.

"Z."

"Yo, wassup?"

"I just got a call from Dazz, and he says the Gentleman's Garden has been raided. The cops received word that there was a prostitution ring operating out of there. If that's not bad enough, Chivalrous Knights burned down," Parker declares of my strip clubs.

"The fuck you just say to me?" I grumble loudly.

Quickly, I look over my shoulder and see that Bayleigh hasn't stirred in her sleep. I make my way to my dressing room as he repeats what he just told me.

"You've got to be shitting me," I grumble, getting dressed.

"I wish I were, Z, but . . . wait, this is Malik calling now."

"The fuck you mean wait, nigga?"

"He's been calling me since I've been on the phone with you. My guess is he's calling about the same thing. I'm on my way to Chivalrous Knights now."

"I'm calling Frances and Marc to meet up with me. I'll head over to the Garden now."

"All right. I'll see what's up at CK and keep you posted."

“You do that.”

I end the call as I grab my keys and make another one.

“Hello?” Ghalen answers.

“We gotta roll.”

“I’m already out front, Bossman.”

I end the call and walk back to the bed. I hate to fucking do this to her, but I don’t have a choice.

“Baby?”

“Hmm,” she mumbles.

“I gotta go make a run. I’ll call you as soon as I get a chance.”

“Is everything okay?” she asks, waking up and frowning at me.

“Yeah, baby. It’s all good. Go back to sleep. I just need to check on some things.”

I kiss her lips, and she turns back over, burying deeper under the covers.

I have no idea who’s out to get me, but I’ll burn this city down before I allow my family ever to feel unsafe again.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

I'm tired as fuck, but this is some bullshit.

"What's going on?" I greet Parker when he calls me.

"The arson investigator has cleared us of arson. They're saying that it was started by faulty wiring that had gone unnoticed."

"That's bullshit. We just had that wiring installed two years ago, and it passed inspection three months ago."

"Yeah, that's the other thing," he blows out a long breath.

"What?"

"They're not saying it, but there are insinuations made like maybe we paid somebody off or some shit like that, to pass us for inspection."

"Fuck that. Have Marisa call the insurance company to get shit started. Now that we know they're not claiming arson, we need to get this shit going as soon as possible.

I'm losing money, Parker. I can't have that shit.

I'm calling a connection I have so that he can get someone over there right away to look at the property and give me an estimate on what we're looking at for a rebuild. "

"Yeah, okay. I'll get back to you as soon as I hear something from the insurance company. How's shit going over there?" he asks.

“This bullshit. They’re interviewing the girls right now. They are still on this old prostitution ring shit. I’m not having that. None of my girls are being prostituted, and if they are fucking these niggas in these streets, shit ain’t got nothing to do with the Garden.”

“What’s Frances and Marc saying?”

“I haven’t spoken with them since the cops started interviewing the girls. They sat in with me on my interview. They’re taking the girls back two at a time, so Marc and Frances are back with each girl representing them.”

“You spoke with Bayleigh yet?”

“Nah, why?”

“She’s been calling Kim and Janel since she couldn’t reach you. They’ve called me several times because Bayleigh’s blowing their phones up. This shit’s on the news.”

“Fuck!”

I knew Bayleigh had been calling me, but I sent her a text several times telling her that I was busy and I’d get back to her as soon as I could. She never asked what was going on, nor had she said anything about the news.

“She’s probably worried as hell.”

“She is.”

“A’ight. I’ll call her now and then hit my realtor guy up.”

Ending the call, I call Bayleigh.

“Hey, baby.”

“Zaire Bryshere Knight, what the hell is going on? You’ve got one business burned to the ground and another being raided for an alleged prostitution ring, and your ass hasn’t said boo to me or called me!” she snaps.

Sighing, I reply, “Baby, I need you to calm down.”

“Calm down, and we’re under attack, and you haven’t told me? How the hell am I supposed to calm down?”

“Listen, I’m not calling you just to worry you. There’s nothing that I have to tell you right now.”

“You could’ve let me know that you were okay. I wasn’t sure if they were trying to press charges against you or something.”

“For what? I ain’t did shit!” I snap back.

She breathes and remains quiet for several seconds.

“Zaire Bryshere Knight, I know that you’re upset, and I’m not trying to make it worse, but don’t talk to me like that again.”

“Baby, you’re right. But I need you to give me that same respect.”

She sighs. “You’re right. I apologize, baby. It’s just that all this is coming at once. What the hell, Z?”

“Someone’s out to get me. We can’t let this bullshit come between us, though.

This is when we stand ten toes down, not letting anything get in our way.

This is when we become the stronger, better versions of our best selves.

What we just went through, that lightweight argument we had, that's what they want to see. You and me weak and crumbling apart."

"Well, shit, they might as well hold their breaths because that's not how we roll."

"Right. It ain't a good look on us."

"I'll tell you what else isn't a good look on you, baby."

"What's that, Bay?"

"You having to humble yourself after snapping at me. Knowing you can't wait to get home and get in this wet-wet."

Bayleigh laughs and makes me laugh too. She sounds more relaxed than she has since our call started.

"You damn sure right about that. The cops are interviewing the girls now on this prostitution ring shit."

"You have Frances and Marc there?"

"Yeah. They're back there with them now. Listen, I'll call you as soon as I know something. I got Parker on CK, and I'm over here at the Garden. I need to make a call to see what the rebuild is looking like."

"Okay. Keep me posted."

“A’ight. Baby, I need a huge favor from you.”

“What’s that?”

“I know you ain’t gonna like it, but I need you to stay home today. Keep Riley there with you too. Just until I get a feel for what’s going on in the streets.”

“But I have my detail, baby.”

“I know, but I’m not trusting shit right now. You and Zaccai stay home. I’ll get with Zech and Zayn.”

“Okay, baby. Be careful.”

“Always, love.”

“Love you.”

“Not half as much as I do you,” I say, ending the call.

Shit’s been hard on my mind lately. I have to wife that woman.

I make another call.

“Z, what’s up, big bro?”

Parker didn’t know who my real estate connection was, but it was my little brother, one of the twins, Aspen.

“You saw the news?”

“Yeah. What the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t know, but I’m getting to the bottom of it. In the meantime, I need a favor.”

“Let me guess. You need an estimate?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll wait until everyone clears out before rolling through.”

“Aspen, you don’t have to do this yourself. You can send someone to roll through for you.”

“You’ve got me fucked up. You’ve sacrificed so much for us, Z. I can never begin to repay you. But when small favors like this pop up, I’m always happy to drop in and do my part.”

“Thanks, my guy.”

“Any time. I’ll holler at you when I get ready to head over.”

“Thanks.”

We end the call, and I call Zechariah.

“Hey, where are you?”

“At the ball court with Zayn. Getting ready to get some hoops in with a few friends.”

“Listen, I need y’all to play some shit close.”

“Wassup, OG?”

“I need you and Zayn to head back to the house. Call a few of your cats over and shoot some hoops there. Roll shit by me before you make any moves.”

“Word? It’s like that?”

“Yeah.”

“A’ight. You know that whining ass middle son of yours is gonna complain.”

“Put his ass on the phone.”

“Aye, Zayn!” I hear Zechariah shout. “Phone.”

I wait a few seconds before Zayn comes on the line.

“Hey, Dad. What’s up?”

“We’ve got some problems in these streets, and I don’t know where they’re coming from. I need you and your brother to head to the house. Make sure your mama, li’l brother, and auntie are good.”

“Their detail is there, Dad.”

“Yeah, but I don’t trust shit the way I trust family. Besides, y’all can shoot hoops at the house.”

“A’ight, Dad.”

He sounds frustrated, but his little ass knows not to pull that whining shit on me that

he tries on his mother and big brother. I'll break my size thirteens off in his ass before I allow him or my other two sons to come crying to me about shit. That's not how we roll in this game.

"Put your brother back on."

"Hey," Zechariah's voice comes through.

"Y'all good. Roll on back to the house and keep me posted when y'all arrive."

"A'ight."

We end the call, and I instantly turn my attention away from family matters to business, as my phone immediately rings again with Parker's number.

"Wassup?"

"You ain't gon' believe this shit."

"What?"

"The police are raiding Knight Auto Sales as we speak."

"Fuuuckk!"

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“...since early this morning. Chivalrous Knights and Gentlemen’s Garden, both gentlemen's clubs in the upscale community of Davenport, owned by Mr. Zaire Knight, founder and CEO of The Knight Group, a leading investment firm on the East Coast and the South region, were the focal point of police investigations early this morning.

CK, as its patrons know it, burned to the ground around three A.M. Investigators are looking into whether this could be a result of arson.

His other club, the Gentlemen’s Garden, was raided in the early morning hours because of allegations of a prostitution ring being run out of there.

These are just two issues the businessman is facing.

According to our news desk, reports are just in that there is a raid being conducted at Knight Auto Sales as we speak.

This is another business under the businessman’s umbrella. Do we have any details on that, Cara?”

“No, Dale. Not at this time, but we do have news trucks on their way to that location now.”

“These mounting problems are not looking good for Mr. Knight.”

“No, Dale, they aren’t.”

“What does all this mean for the businessman? Will he be facing charges?”

“We’re not certain of that right now, but we do know that this will have a significant impact on his businesses and his reputation. All three of these businesses are in the upscale community of Davenport.”

“Well, it’s sending a message that the community doesn’t want him there any longer. Residents are outraged, and as you can imagine, with the upcoming mayoral election, it will draw significantly more attention than it normally might.”

“Indeed, Cara. Mayoral candidate Essence Hamilton has made her stand clear about criminal activities in the city of Chicora Falls. One can only imagine how she might weave the details of this into her campaign.”

“Turn that shit off,” I demand, walking out of the kitchen and into the kitchen suite.

Just beyond the island and the breakfast nook, our kitchen flows into another living room, separate from the larger one. We have a TV, a couch, a table, two armchairs, and a fireplace in this space.

I had been at the sink rinsing vegetables for our lunch when the news report came on about Zaire’s businesses.

“Leigh—”

“I said turn it off!” I snap. “I can’t take any more bad news.”

Riley powers the TV off and turns sideways on the couch to face me on the other side.

“Honey, you have to calm down.”

My hands tremble, and tears prick my eyes as I shake my head.

“I haven’t spoken with him since earlier this morning,” I say.

“He’ll call. He promised that he would,” Riley asserts.

“What if he . . .”

“Don’t.” Riley stands and walks toward me.

She pulls me into a hug. “Shhh . . . he’s not being arrested. They didn’t say anything on the news like that. They would have told us if that happened.”

“What if that hasn’t been released yet, Rye?”

“Honey, you have to calm down. Stay cool for Zaire. He doesn’t need you like this. You’ve always been so calm and in control when it comes to him facing troubles, and this isn’t the first time. You need to remain that way now.”

“I can’t. I don’t understand what’s happening, Riley,” I cry.

“You’re on edge because of what happened to you. Maybe when this is over, you should talk to a therapist.”

I quickly shake my head.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of or afraid of. It will help you.”

Pulling back and holding her hands, I look at my sister and say, “Only if you do.”

She glances away from me for several seconds before turning back to me and

nodding. “Okay. I will.”

Hope blossoms in my heart but then worry rises again as I think about how I haven’t heard from Zaire.

“This is just what Zaire said it is, Leigh. An attack from someone trying to take his empire down. He has a lock on this city, and someone doesn’t like it.

I just think it’s awfully ironic that it’s happening at the same time that Essence is running for mayor.

Shit was running smoothly before she stepped back into the spotlight. ”

“You’re right,” I say, walking around the couch to take a seat.

My sister comes and sits beside me.

“All of this just to keep his father in jail. I don’t know, Leigh. I think there’s more to the story than we know.”

Shrugging, I say, “It could be. But if it is, Zaire doesn’t know what it is.”

My sister smiles and stares at me for several seconds before turning around and placing her hands on her knees.

“Thanks for letting me stay here too. I know that has to be added pressure on you all with everything that’s going on. I’m planning to return home tomorrow.”

“No. There’s no rush. Besides, we were prepared for you to be here. And now, with everything that’s happening, with the baby on the way, it’s more important than ever for you to be here so that you can be safe. We have no idea where these attacks are

coming from.”

“Well, Mama and Daddy will be home tomorrow. We need to go check on them,” Riley suggests.

“We do, but we also need to put a team in place for them, as well.”

“You think so? This is about Zaire, not our family.”

“He’s taught me to trust nothing, Riley.

And I’ve found that he’s always right. People know that he loves his family, and while they may not know every part of his family, they are aware of the boys and me.

As an extension of that, they know about the members of my family.

We haven’t hidden away from the world and been sheltered the way that his family has. ”

Nodding, she agrees. “I guess you’re right. Still, it’s scary to imagine that we could walk out of the house tomorrow, and someone might snatch one of us up because we’re linked to him no matter how distantly.”

“This could have easily been me caught up in this bullshit, Rye.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They mentioned the used car lot, saying that was another business that he owns. Although most people don’t know who owns Reed Used Cars, if that were common knowledge, those people could have come after me too.

Zaire bought that car lot for me and put it in my name, not just in the title, but ownership as well.

Reed happens to be a common last name, so they may not have associated it with me but with someone else.

All I'm saying is they could have set me up had that been common knowledge. ”

“This does all seem so personal. Do you think they'd come after you, though?”

“To get to Zaire? Absolutely. Whoever is doing this isn't caring, and they're trying to hurt him in all the ways that matter. Kidnapping me was just the tip of the iceberg. I don't think that they're finished yet, and who knows what's next.”

“Or maybe they did know that you're the owner and felt that you suffered enough.”

“No, I doubt that. When enemies come after you, they don't give a shit how they hurt you, and they don't have mercy on certain areas of your life. I honestly believe that if they had a chance to, they would have killed me.”

“Then why didn't they?”

“They were waiting on orders. The order didn't come quick enough, I guess.”

Sighing, I drop my head back and close my eyes.

“I just want my life back, Rye. I want us to be happy and healthy, and everything to be going well.”

“And it will be. Patience is what Daddy always preached when things became overwhelming.”

“Thanks for being here for me, little sister.”

“No place I’d rather be than with you, big sister.”

She leans in, kisses my cheek, and then rests her head on my shoulder, reminding me of how important our sisterly bond is.

God, how I miss my man.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“Hey, Parker. Let me call you back. The cops are coming my way.”

“A’ight. I’m heading over to GG now. Shit’s wrapped up here at CK, and there’s nothing else we can do until you get that estimate and the go-ahead to start building.”

“All right.”

I end the call. No sooner than I’d received the call that there was a raid on the car lot, I left the Gentleman’s Garden and rushed over to the car lot with my attorney, Frances Kay, in tow. My other attorney, Marc Silver, remained behind at the other location, wrapping things up.

I glance around as a detective places the drug-sniffing dog back into the SUV.

“Whatever they’re about to say, Zaire, I need you to keep your cool. Do not lose your temper on these assholes because we’ll drag them in the end. You understand me?” Frances asks.

I give a brief nod.

“Remember, don’t say anything unless I clear you. No matter what the threat is.”

“All right,” I mumble.

“Can you meet us downtown? We’d like to ask you a few questions,” Detective Coronado states as he walks up to me.

“You can ask me whatever you want to ask me right here. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Frances slants a gaze my way.

“Fine, if you’d like to do it here. We can do it that way,” the detective replies, sniffing.

“We’ve finished investigating here, and we have some questions that we need answers to. Would you like to answer some questions?” his partner, Detective Moton, asks.

“I’m listening,” I reply after Frances nods.

Detective Coronado reads me my rights first before they begin speaking about their investigation.

“We received a tip that drugs were being sold from this location. We set up surveillance for the last week and noticed a lot of suspicious activity happening after hours. Yesterday evening, we received another tip directing us to exactly where the drugs could be found. Mr. Knight, we secured a search warrant to search the premises. While we did not locate anything in the cars that we’ve been searching, we did find three bags of coke and one bag of heroin for an ounce each bagged up inside of a leather bag in your office,” Detective Coronado informs me.

Detective Moton stares at me when I say nothing. Leaning a little closer, too close for my comfort, he asks, “Do you know anything about it?”

“We have no statements,” Frances states. “Is my client being arrested, or is he free to go?”

Detective Coronado smirks as he undresses Frances with his eyes.

“Mr. Knight, you’re under arrest for possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute and trafficking,” he advises. “Please place your hands behind your back.”

Frances steps away as she pulls out her phone and begins pushing buttons. I watch as she pulls the phone to her ear.

I glance back into the building and see my staff all seated in the lobby, handcuffed. Customers, other business owners, and their customers are at the edge of the lot with their cell phones held in the air, recording.

As the cuffs click into place around my wrists, Jerome, the manager from the gas station next door, hollers out, “This is bullshit! Y’all know that man has been set up.”

I look across the lot and see two cops ushering Mitch Dade, my manager, out of the building and to a car. He glances my way, shakes his head, and then allows them to place him into the back of the car.

That sets off another series of rumblings as bystanders begin to draw closer to us, almost forming a circle. Detective Coronado’s punk ass issues a command. “Back up and keep your distance.”

Another officer declares, “Don’t make us haul your asses in for obstructing our investigation.”

Everyone begins to back up, but that doesn’t stop them from voicing their opinions.

A little short, feisty, flirtatious Puerto Rican woman named Guadalupe, the bank manager from across the street, walks a little closer.

“Why y’all punk asses always out here picking on Black men, huh? I swear you bitches can’t stand to see a minority rise!” she shouts.

“Aye, yo, Lupe! We ain’t the minority, no mo’ sis. Their asses are. That’s why they’re scared as fuck of us and always trying to take us down,” another business owner declares.

Some of the other officers who are on the scene instantly rush over when they see the commotion and the growing crowd of onlookers and customers. They begin to work to control the crowd, and Coronado’s supervisor commands, “Let’s get these men out of here.”

We all know that the news media will twist things their way, but the people will get the truth out there.

“Y’all didn’t have to do this shit, though. You could’ve asked that man to meet you at the station, and he would’ve gladly gone,” Arterius, another employee from the bank, chimes in.

“They only did that shit because the news van pulled up,” another man interjects.

I glare at Detective Moton as he rests his hand on my head to help me into the backseat of the patrol car.

“Aye, don’t touch me. I can do this shit on my own. It’s not the first time, and damn sho’ won’t be the last time as long as my black ass got breath in my body,” I sneer at him.

He grabs my head and shoves me inside anyway.

“Zaire, I’ll meet you down at the station to post bail,” Frances promises.

“Frances, call Bayleigh and make sure she’s good. Let her know that I’ll be home in a little bit, and don’t fucking shed a tear,” I say.

Frances nods, heads to her car, and hops inside. She pulls out of the parking lot before the door even closes on me.

This shit is fucked up. I know my baby’s going to shit bricks. This is exactly what she was worried about. I have no idea who’s behind this, and while it’s easy to blame Essence and look her way, I don’t trust that either.

This shit is happening too easily, and it’s too convenient for it to be her. At this point, I trust nothing and no one. Maybe it is her, but most likely . . . it’s not.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“Mr. Knight, your bail has been posted. You’re a free man,” Dennis Crumbley announces as I get off the bench in the holding cell.

“Aye, Z! Hold it down, man,” a man named Deuce calls out.

“Hey, if you see my baby mama, Sandy, tell her to come down here. She ain’t answering my calls and shit,” another dude named Mike Broshe admits.

“If I was her and you’d beat my ass the way that you did her, I wouldn’t answer your calls either, nigga,” a tiny dude named Big points out.

I know Deuce and Big from the streets. I just met Mike Broshe while locked up. His dumb ass was bragging about fucking up his baby’s mama for stealing from him, claiming that she needed the money for diapers.

I listened but didn’t say a word. That nigga had no clue who I was, so I let him ramble on at the mouth. There was no excuse for him fucking up that girl the way that he did. I’m not worried about it, though. Men like him and Kenny get exactly what they deserve.

I’ll put the word out, and I doubt he’ll even make it to county.

“I always knew you had pull, Knight, but damn,” Officer Crumble admits.

Dennis was a street cop whose beat was the neighborhood where I used to sling dope in my earlier years. We’ve known each other for some time, but we have never had a reason to cross paths other than just in passing.

“It’s been a whole fucking hour and a half. That shit’s not working for me,” I say, shaking my head.

“Looks like life’s catching up with you, Knight.”

I glare at him and say, “Wasn’t me.”

“Listen, some of these dudes have been sitting in here since three o’clock this morning. They probably won’t get a bail hearing until Monday. It’s Saturday, and your black ass made it out, must be nice.”

“Take it easy, Crumble.” I pat his shoulder and smile as I lay eyes on Frances standing at the sergeant’s desk.

“Yeah, you stay yo’ black ass out of here, Knight. You’ve got too much potential,” he warns.

“Yeah, I do, don’t I? But I’m not that kid anymore, Crumble. Not that kid.”

He nods knowingly, and I turn to face Frances. We both quickly walk out of the jail and jog down the steps to where her car is waiting.

“Are you okay?”

“Frances, that was light work. I didn’t like sitting there as long as I did, and I never like having my ass locked up for any reason, but the only thing that I was worried about while I was in there was my baby and my boys.”

“Here,” she states, handing my phone to me. “I’ve spoken to her no less than six times since you’ve been in there. I promised her that I would have you call her the minute you stepped foot on the other side of those doors,” she declares, jerking her

thumb over her shoulder.

“Thanks,” I say, powering my phone on and waiting for it to start.

“Listen, they’re going to have to do an investigation. You already know the drill. In the meantime, don’t leave town. Don’t associate with any felons. Keep your nose clean,” Frances warns.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“On the back end, Marc and I have our people investigating to see what we can learn. We’re canvassing the area to see who slipped into your shop without authorization. Anyone we can pinpoint who might have set you up.”

Scratching my beard as I approach my SUV, where Ghalen is standing by the rear door waiting for me, I say, “At this point, Frances, I have a feeling it’s someone in my inner circle.”

Frowning, she asks, “What makes you think that?”

“Just a sneaky suspicion.”

“All right, well, whatever you come up with, let me know, and in the meantime, I’ll be doing the same thing on my end.”

I nod, slip into the back of the SUV, and wait for Ghalen to close the door.

When he does, I instantly dial Bayleigh.

“Baby!” she cries.

“I’m good, Bay. I’m heading home now.”

“What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know right now, but you’ll know when I do. I’m trying to get to the bottom of this shit. Someone’s setting me up, and I’m not going down without a fight. Right now, the only thing that I want is to come home, see my woman, dap up my young men, and rest my head in my safe space.”

“Come on, baby. We’re all waiting for you,” she replies. “I love you, Z.”

“Not as much as I love you, B.”

We end the call, and I lay my head back to rest. Ghalen pipes some soft jazz through the speakers and allows me to have my quiet space.

By the time Ghalen pulls up to my estate, war is in my heart.

I barely have the door open before Bayleigh comes running down the stairs. She looks so beautiful and graceful in a yellow, sleeveless sheath that flows down to her bare feet.

My baby is constantly changing her hairstyle, but today, her hair is free. She throws herself into my arms, and I swear that I’ve never seen a more beautiful sight.

I kiss her lips, not giving a damn who’s watching as she jumps up and wraps her legs around me. I hold her close as she slips her tongue inside my mouth. Only after I’m satisfied with the sweetest taste of my baby do I let her go, and she slides out of my arms.

Tears flow down her face, and she hisses, “Don’t you ever keep me out of shit again.

I'm not fragile, Zaire. I can kick ass with the best of them."

She makes each of those pronouncements with a fist to my chest.

When she finishes, I grab her hands and say, "I will never allow you to run these streets. You are a lady, and you're my safe space to come home to. Those young men need you at home making shit right."

I point at our sons on the stairs behind her. She turns and looks at them, and when she turns back to me, she presses her fingers against her lips and stares into my eyes.

I reach up and wipe the tears from her face.

"I will do whatever I need to do to protect you. Do you understand me?"

Nodding, she whispers, "Yes, baby."

We head up the stairs and into the house. The kids follow us to the family room. They have a million questions, all of which I attempt to answer at once. I'm tired, but never too tired for this.

Zechariah's girlfriend, Marika, is here with us, and she's wrapped up in his arms. Zayn's girlfriend, Shana, is also there, sitting beside him.

He kisses her temple and whispers to her on and off throughout our conversation.

"Listen, things have changed. As y'all can see, I've stepped up security around the home, including camera surveillance in and out of the home and at our businesses. You each have an additional two men on your detail.

"Nobody leaves this house without checking with me first. Zech, we've already

worked with your professors to attend classes online until we get shit straightened out. Same for you, Zayn, and Zaccai. Baby, your staff will have to take on your clients for a little while.”

I see the disappointment in Bayleigh’s eyes, but she knows that I’m not budging on this.

“Riley, you’ll be here with us for the foreseeable future, so I hope that we don’t get on your last nerves.”

Riley smiles at me and nods.

“We have to be on our toes, and I’ll do whatever I have to do to protect you all at all times. I trust no one right now, so you have to keep your eyes open at all times. Bayleigh and Riley, I know you’re adults, but I need you both in sync with me and trusting that I’m making the right calls.”

They both nod in agreement.

“Can I have a friend over?” Zaccai asks.

“Not right now, little G. We’ll work something out. Be patient with me. Okay?”

He nods.

“You’ve got us, little G,” Zechariah declares, rubbing his brother’s unruly curly hair.

Zaccai rewards him with a big grin.

“Glad you’re home, Dad,” Zayn expresses.

“I’m glad to be home. I wouldn’t want to be anyplace than right here with you all.”

“We’d rather be no place else either, OG,” Zechariah admits.

“We’ve got the best family,” Zaccai declares from his place on the floor.

“And it’s still growing,” Shana replies happily.

“Still growing?” Bayleigh asks, with a frozen smile on her face.

“Yes. Zayn and I are having a baby. You’re going to be grandparents,” she announces proudly, causing Bayleigh to faint.

“Bay . . . Bay.”

“Lei-Lei!”

“Mommy!”

Zaire. Riley. Zaccai.

I hear their voices, but when I open my eyes, it’s Zaire’s face that I see up close and personal. I blink rapidly, and he slowly pulls back so that he’s not as close to me, and his features start to even out.

“Where’s Zayn?” I ask, frowning and placing my hand over my forehead.

“He’s right over there,” Zaire answers, pointing behind him.

“Zayn, baby?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Come here, sweetheart.”

“Bay, now listen . . . ”

I shoot a glance Zaire’s way and dare him to say another word. Zaire’s face is replaced with my middle child, the one who’s always been the most challenging.

I reach up and cup his face, smiling at him.

Zayn's worried expression slips off his face, and the cloud in his eyes dissipates. He smiles back at me, and I say, "Baby, help me sit up."

He does. I reach up and hold onto his shirt collar. Then I jerk him close to me, so close that our noses are touching.

"Boy! What the hell is wrong with you?" I shriek.

Zayn's eyes grow wide and wild, and I hear someone shriek in the background. I'm certain that must be Shana. I pop him across the back of the head as hard as I can manage.

"Are you stupid or something?"

"Ouch! No, Ma," he answers, rubbing the back of his head.

"Boy, you'd better watch your tone," Zaire warns.

"I know your daddy taught you about safe sex, and I've worked with you on it too. What the hell is wrong with you, boy? Have you lost your damn mind?" I rage, grabbing his shirt collar so tightly that he begins to choke.

I don't let him go even as he grows red in the face.

"Bayleigh!" Zaire barks, but I don't listen.

Riley is on one side of me, tugging my arms, and on the opposite side is Zaire, trying to free Zayn from my hold. Refusing to let go, I keep holding on until I rip the collar of his shirt, and Zaire frees Zayn from his shirt altogether.

I hop up from my seat on the couch, and Zayn backs away.

Placing my hands on my hips, I say, “Boy, with all we’ve been going through lately, you have the audacity to forget that you have a brain and some damn common sense and think with that tiny, little head in your pants rather than the one that God blessed you with on your shoulders? ”

“Baby,” Zaire states. “I need you to calm down. You’re going to run your blood pressure up,” he warns.

“I don’t give a shit. I’m about to kill his ass. And you.” I turn to face Shana. “Didn’t your mama teach you to keep those legs closed or at least protect yourself from diseases and babies?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then why the hell are you up here letting this nigga or anyone else run up in you raw?”

Her eyes widen.

“Ma!” Zayn and Zechariah exclaim at once.

“Zech, take your brother out of here,” Zaire warns.

I’d forgotten about poor Zaccai in here.

“Come on, dude,” Zechariah comments, taking Zaccai and pushing him from the room. Marika follows him and closes the door behind her.

Riley stays in place, and I’m sure that she thinks she’s going to help Zaire keep me

under control, but there's no such thing today.

“Your little ass is nineteen, on a break from school, still living with your parents just like Zayn. You hop from one job to the next, your mother's mentally unstable, and you treat life like it's a game of Monopoly.

And you, Zayn, you walk around here with your head in a bubble like you can't hold a solid thought.

Shit. Since you've been with Shana, you act like you can't even spell the word thought.

Both of you deserve to have your asses kicked, and neither of you deserve to be a parent.

You're not ready, you're not responsible, and you're not capable of taking care of an infant. So, what does that mean?

“It means that it falls on your daddy's and my lap.

And because he's out here running an entire organization and dealing with assaults from every angle of the world, he damn sure doesn't have time to take care of a baby.

You thought I'd be the one doing it?” I ask, pointing at myself and glaring at them.

“No, ma'am.”

“Well, I've got news for you. I'm not doing that shit either. I've raised my three boys.

And I'm still in the process of teaching, nurturing, and fostering you.

I'm not doing it again. I have a business that I'm proud of, and I'm living my life with your father.

You will give up all extracurricular activities. ”

“But Mom. What about basketball?” Zayn whines.

“Listen at your ass whining. Man up, son,” Zaire interjects.

“His ass can't because he's spoiled as hell.

When you screwed her,” I say, pointing to Shana.

“You screwed the game you love so much. You're going to get a full-time job while you're working and going to school, so that you can take care of this kid.

It's not my responsibility, your father's, or Shana's mother's. It belongs to the two of you.”

My chest is heaving because I'm so upset. Riley comes to stand beside me and tugs my hand. “Take a seat, big sis, and calm down.”

I do as she says as Zaire asks in a calm voice, “Does your mother know, Shana?”

“Yes. She's happy about it,” Shana explains.

I notice the tears in her eyes. A part of me feels bad, but I can't. They're not ready for this, and they're both playing games.

“How long have you two been together, son?” Zaire asks.

“Thirteen months,” Zayn replies proudly with a big smile.

“And yet, you’re already ready to commit the rest of your life to her,” Zaire points out.

“I haven’t asked her to marry me yet, Dad,” Zayn admits.

“Whether you choose to marry or not, it doesn’t matter. Having a baby means that both of you are committed to this life together forever. You have to co-parent with her even if you don’t marry.”

Zayn and Shana both look stupidly at each other. I want to bang their heads together. Shaking my head, I say, “Lord help us now.”

“We want to keep our baby, Mom,” Zayn confesses.

Widening my eyes, I ask, “Did you think that you had any other option?”

He looks guilty and ashamed as he shakes his head.

“We’re going to work hard to make things right, Mom,” Zayn promises.

“I need you two to work together to make things right for this baby,” I demand.

They both nod, and Zayn moves to where Shana sits and sits on the arm of her chair. He links his fingers with hers and agrees. “We will. We really love each other, Mom.”

“Your mother’s upset right now, but she knows that you two will need us. We’ll be here for you, but you’re both about to learn a lesson about growing up,” Zaire warns.

Zayn and Shana shake their heads eagerly, smiling at Zaire and then looking at me hesitantly.

I stand up and hug them both. I whisper a little prayer over their heads before I kiss the tops of them.

I glance at Zaire, and strangely enough, I see him and me in Zayn and Shana.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“The hell was li'l G thinking?”

“I don't know, Parker. This shit couldn't have come at a worse time. With the police on my back, somebody fucking up my business and taking a hit on our income the way we have, not to mention all the shit his mother and aunt have been going through, this was the last thing we needed.”

“You gotta knock some sense into that boy's head. He can't be out here having babies that he can't take care of.”

“I know.”

“Li'l spoiled ass nigga assuming his daddy's gonna come through for him. That's what it is.”

“Nah, that's Bayleigh's show.”

“Nah, the way I hear it, Bayleigh 'bout kicked both their asses.”

Frowning, I stare at him and ask, “How do you know that?”

Shrugging, he answers, “Think I heard Zech say something 'bout it this morning when I came over, and we were kicking it.”

I recall that he was talking to Zechariah when I came outside to meet him this morning before we left. We had some business to handle out of town, and he rolled over to my place to ride out with Ghalen and me.

We stopped back at my place around one when we got back in town this afternoon so that he could pick up his car. Then, we rolled to my building to meet with the team.

“Yeah, she was pissed as hell. But she’ll get over it in time. Her ass will be the one spoiling the hell out of this kid. Shayna and Zayn might not even get to see their baby by the time Bay lays her hands on the kid.”

Parker laughs with me.

“You gon’ make him quit school? Get a job?”

“Nah, that li’l nigga gon’ finish school and then get a job.”

“He still got three more years of that, though.”

“I know, man. But this is why I hustled hard all those years. So that my kids wouldn’t have to struggle the way we did, and they wouldn’t have to worry about their pops getting taken away from them. Not just the drugs, but the legit businesses made that shit happen.”

“You did have it rough growing up.”

“For a while, I did. But I worked that shit out in my favor. He ain’t got that weight on his shoulders, so he doesn’t know what it means to hustle and hustle hard. This only confirms for me that he’ll never be the one that’s sitting in my seat running this empire.”

“Can’t blame you on that one, boss. Besides, I don’t think Zechariah would go for that shit, anyway.”

“Nah, that li’l nigga be bossing up,” I agree, heading out of the building.

“He’s planning on running your shit one day. You know you’re getting up there in age, OG.”

I laugh at him calling me the nickname my oldest son has been calling me since he was three, after hearing one of my homies call me that.

“Forty-six ain’t that bad. It’s the new thirty-six.”

Parker slants his eyes at me and then laughs. “Who told yo’ dumb ass that corny shit?”

Laughing, I say, “It’s true.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Then that would mean yo’ old ass need to be out of the game too. You’re a year older than me,” I reply, staring at my phone.

“What’s up?” he asks, nodding his head at my phone. “Everything good?”

“It’s a call I need to take. Give me a minute.”

Parker nods, pulls a joint from his pocket, and lights up as I walk away to the edge of the parking lot.

“Hey, Damascus. What’s up?”

“I’ve been looking behind the scenes at a few things. We need to talk.”

“A’ight. I’m finishing up a meeting now. When and where?”

I glance around and see Parker still smoking while texting something on his phone.

“I need to finish up a couple of things down here at the station. I should be free in about an hour and a half. Can you roll by my place?”

“Yeah. I gotcha.”

“Make sure you come alone, and don’t tell anybody you’re coming.”

“Everything good?”

No, big bro. It’s not good at all, but we ain’t chopping it up right now.”

“A’ight.”

“Aye. Watch your six, Z.”

“Cool.”

I end the call and head back to Parker.

“You good on everything you need to do?” I ask him.

“Yeah. I’ve been meaning to tell you but didn’t want to say it in front of the others because I know you didn’t want them to know you’ve been checking into them. But Marisa checked out good. She ain’t got shit to do with none of this.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Okay.”

“I’m not so sure about Noble, though, Z.”

“Why?”

“Spotted him leaving Essence’s office yesterday.”

“Why the fuck I’m just now hearing about it?”

“You were with the family yesterday, and I told you everybody else was around this morning. Didn’t want to kick it with you then. This is the first chance we’ve had to talk.”

Fury rolls through my veins because I don’t trust that bitch, and everyone knows it.

“Let me find out that nigga in collusion with that bitch, and I’mma fuck up his life!” I roar.

Parker nods. “Yeah, I’ll keep looking into it, but it’s looking like him more and more.

Also found out that a cousin of his is on the police force.

Your boy might’ve been the one who dropped a dime on you.

After all, he is the one who works on your systems. It would’ve been easy for him to hack into their database and send files their way about what’s going on in your business. ”

My fists and jaws are clenched so tightly that they both hurt. I feel pain and fire blazing throughout my body. But I can’t make a move off emotion alone. This could be why Damascus wanted to meet with me.

“Listen, get me some proof before I move on this thing, Parker. You feel me?”

“Yeah.”

“A’ight. I’ll holler at you later. I’m about to roll out with Ghaleen.”

“Okay, Z. Watch yourself out in these streets,” he warns, dapping me up and looking over my shoulder.

My phone rings. A smile tilts my lips when I see that it’s Bayleigh.

“Hey, baby.”

“Hey, sugar. I know that we’re keeping a low profile, but do you think you can pick up some Ricci’s on the way home? I have a taste for Italian tonight, and I don’t feel like cooking. And since we can’t go out . . .”

“Anything for you, baby.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.”

“Will I be rewarded for going off the beaten path?”

“Of course. I’m about to get in the shower now. I want to get it all prepped for you.”

“Damn, woman. You keep my dick at attention.”

“Just doing my job, sir,” she replies with a sweet giggle.

I can’t wait to head home. We chat a little longer before I turn back to see Parker’s car pulling out of the lot across the street.

“All right, keep it wet and warm. I’ll be there shortly.”

“Love you, baby.”

“I love you the most, Bay.”

“You ready?” Ghalen asks, stepping out of the building as soon as I end the call.

“Yeah. Let me run back up there and grab my laptop. I’ll be right back.”

“A’ight. I’ma go grab the SUV from across the lot.”

Our parking lot is getting restriped and repaved this week, so everyone is parking in the lot across the street. My car is the only one remaining in the lot since everyone else has left for the day.

Nodding, I head back into the building to grab my laptop.

I hadn’t planned on doing any work from home tonight, but with this new information, I have to get focused.

I know if I leave my laptop, I won’t be able to work from home because the files on my office work laptop aren’t the same as the ones on my home work laptop.

I step out of the building just in time to see my SUV across the street explode. It takes only a few seconds before the adrenaline hits, my laptop crashes to the ground, and I’m racing across the lot.

I barely dodge cars going down the street as my arms and legs pump furiously, drawing me closer and closer to the nightmare.

“Ghalen!” I shout.

“Honey, talk to me, please.”

Shaking my head, I reply, “Every time I close my eyes, the only thing that I see is my SUV going up in flames. He wasn’t even supposed to be with me that day, Bay. He was supposed to have the day off. I called him in at the last minute. That was supposed to be me in that car.”

A slight hand moves from my shoulder, and strong arms wrap themselves around me, pulling me closer.

“Don’t talk like that, honey. You’ve been saying that for the last couple of days. I’m sorry that Ghalen is no longer with us. I loved him like a big brother, but don’t talk like that.”

I drop my head into my hands.

“How the hell are Pam and the kids going to survive this? Who will take care of them?” My voice breaks.

Clearing my throat, I sit up in the chair, remove my hands from my eyes, and stare sightlessly ahead.

“You will provide for them. You have given them excellent insurance and benefits. They won’t want for anything.”

“They will want for their husband and their father! I can’t give them everything they need!”

Bayleigh jumps a little. It's seldom that I raise my voice at her.

"I'm sorry, Bay. I'm so sorry." I apologize. I reverse the hold and take her into my arms.

I kiss the top of her head. "It's okay, babe. I know that you didn't mean it."

"I was walking out of the building, and it just happened. Right in front of my eyes."

"I know, and I'm so sorry that you had to see that."

We sit together silently in the seating room of our master suite. It's been two days since my partner, my other best friend, lost his life. I haven't left this bedroom since I arrived home around midnight after staying with the police and the fire investigators.

They didn't suspect me of anything, but they damn sure had a lot of questions for me with everything else going on in my life.

A knock sounds at the door, and I look at Bayleigh and then clear my throat.

"Sit here. I've got it. It's probably one of the boys." She stands and presses her hands down her sides.

I watch as she walks into our bedroom, through the living area, and disappears to answer the door. I can hear soft voices at the doorway.

"Z, baby. Zech says your brother is here."

Damn! I forgot all about Damascus wanting to meet with me. I stand up and head for the door.

“Are you okay?”

“I am. Thanks, baby.” I kiss her forehead. “Go check on your sister.”

“Okay,” she replies before she heads down the stairs.

I walk slowly behind her with Zechariah. Riley’s been feeling a bit sick lately, and Bayleigh’s been trying to keep a close eye on her. Too much stress could be harmful to both her and the baby.

“Dad, you gotta get it together, man,” Zechariah says as we walk down the steps together.

“I know, dude. I just needed a minute. Shit be too much for a G sometimes. When it gets like that, you gotta take a knee. Sometimes, even taking a knee won’t help; you gotta climb up into His arms. That’s what I’ve done the last couple of days since we lost him.”

“I know, Dad. It just doesn’t seem right without Uncle G around, hanging in the kitchen, eating up Mama’s food, and then lying to Aunt Pam that he ain’t ate all day.” Zechariah reminisces with a soft chuckle.

My kids were close to Ghalen. He was like an uncle to them, and truthfully, they were closer to him than they are to my siblings. That’s only because we have to keep a distance between us.

“I’m worried about her.”

“I know. Mama said she is too. She went with her to make the funeral arrangements this morning, and Mama had to do everything. She said Aunt Pam couldn’t remember simple things like his birth date.

It's gotta be hard. Makes you not want to get married if loving hurts like that.

I see why you ain't never marry Mama, and as much as I love Marika, I probably won't ever marry her either.

Can't stand the thought of losing someone like that. ”

We stop on the second-floor landing, and I grab my son by the shoulders, turning him toward me.

“Listen here. Maybe I fucked up, and I've sent you the wrong message. I didn't avoid marrying your mama because I was scared to lose her. Hell yeah, I'm scared of losing her and y'all li'l asses too. But whether I marry her or not, one day, one of us is going to lose the other. That's just a fact.

“I didn't marry your mama because I never wanted her to get caught up in my shit.

When you live a life like I live, if I take on a wife, she's now attached to me.

If anything goes wrong, they're coming after her too. In today's superficial world, data is not your friend anymore, especially in my situation.

The best way to protect her is to be married to her in the spirit, but not on paper.

I've never not been married to your mama, just not according to society's rules. You feel me?”

“Yeah, OG. My bad.”

Zechariah reaches his hands out and grips my shoulders.

“I love you, man.”

I pull my son closer and pound him on the back. “I love you too,” I mumble before I kiss the top of his head.

I clench my jaws to hold off the emotions that want to manifest in tears. I ain’t with that shit. We pull apart and head down the rest of the stairs.

“Where’s your uncle?”

“In your office.”

“A’ight. I’ll holler at you later.”

“I’m heading out. Call me if you need me, OG.” I watch my oldest disappear down the long hallway before I turn and head inside my office.

“Hope you don’t mind.” Damascus greets me with an upheld snifter in his hand.

“It’s all good, man. Sorry ‘bout the meeting the other night,” I apologize, walking to my desk and taking a seat.

He tosses the whiskey back and shakes his head. “Nah, it’s all good. As soon as I heard what happened on the police radio, I knew you wouldn’t be coming. I came to you, though.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“I started to come over to you, but I didn’t want to raise any suspicions. So, I stayed at the edge with the other officers.”

“You did well. We should keep shit on the low. We stick to the same plan. We’re safe as long as nobody knows that y’all are my siblings. It’s the only way we keep the power in the city the way that we do. The only way that we can maneuver and run the city the way that we do.”

“Except someone’s trying to cripple your ass from the inside.

Trying to bring down this entire empire.

You cut off the head of the snake, and you weaken the rest of the enemy.

I kept thinking about shit, and it didn’t make sense.

Small attacks to the Fab Five, but major attacks on you.

Only someone who knew about the Significant Six could go for the jugular the way they’ve been doing. ”

The Significant Six was what our mama had called us back in the day. Everyone wasn’t privy to that information; only those close to us were. When we were separated, I had taken to calling them the Fabulous Five.

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, Z. Someone put Essence back into the running for the race, knowing that if she gets elected mayor, Savannah is out of the DA’s office.

Aspen and Denver’s business has come under scrutiny.

They were recently audited and fighting against people who wanted to cast aspersions on them about insider trading. ”

“Damn, that’s right, I’d forgotten about all that shit with my shit going on.”

“Right. Your hands were tied, trying to make it difficult for you to come to their rescue, but it was just talk. Luckily, no actions have been taken, but talk is all you need to take a hit in the stocks, and their stocks are down. Then you’ve got Cheyenne, who’s encountering blocks on every proposal that she puts before the council lately.

Taking the city planner out, the DA and the CEO of the largest construction and real estate companies in the southeast ain’t nothing to sneeze at. ”

“Then there’s you,” I say.

“Right. Then there’s me. That bullshit investigation they tried to start earlier this year into police harassment and corruption was all to get me tied up in my shit so that I couldn’t focus my attention where it needed to be. Other than our family, who knows about us? Who knows, we’re siblings.”

“Essence.”

Damascus sneers. “She didn’t remember all of us. Only you, Cheyenne, and I. Savannah wasn’t around when she was, and neither were the twins. So, that leaves who, big bro?”

My mind doesn’t want to turn over what he’s saying. The wind leaves my chest, and I feel like I can’t breathe. “He’ll fucking die!” I shout, throwing a glass paperweight from my desk at the wall, leaving a hole there.

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“Hey, just checking in to see if you are good. Y’all need anything from me?”

“Nah, I’m leaving Ghalen’s place now. Bay’s going to help with the funeral planning because Pam isn’t capable of doing any of this shit right now.”

“That’s fucked up. I can’t imagine what she’s going through.”

“Yeah, she and the kids are going through hell right now.”

“I’m a roll through there later. I’m about to make a run right now. Just finished up over on Clayton and Reeves Street. I’m heading to Adam’s now.”

“A’ight.”

“I’m only five minutes out.”

Adam is Adam Vietti, an Italian tailor here in town. He makes all my suits, as well as the suits of several other wealthy patrons. He also has some suits he’s designed but didn’t create himself for patrons who can’t afford the custom-made ones.

We run drugs through his place, Adam’s Closet, a high-end fashion store that offers custom suits and casual attire. We have a pickup and drop-off at the store on the first of every month.

“Holler at me when you finish, and I’ll let you know if we got some other shit shaking.

My source inside the police station says they're still chasing down leads on Ghalen's murder, but that shit ain't going anywhere.

You and I will have to put our heads together and shake some niggas down for information. ”

“That’s what’s up, Boss. Been telling you we need to hit the streets and find out what these niggas know.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking you’re right. Gon’ and handle that business and get back at me later.”

“A’ight.”

We end the call, and I turn to Jamal in the seat beside me.

“He’s heading over to Adam’s now.”

“Let’s roll,” Jamal states, pulling out of Ghalen’s driveway.

It takes us ten minutes to get to Adam’s Closet.

Jamal and I both climb out of the car and head into the store. It’s not that busy for a Wednesday afternoon, which works in our favor.

The bell over the door tinkles as we walk in, and a little cutie behind the counter calls out, “Welcome to Adam’s Closet.”

“Wassup, Liyah!” I greet.

“Hey, girl,” Jamal greets.

“Hey, Z! Hey, J!” Aaliyah, Jamal’s little sister, greets eagerly. She runs from behind the counter, wearing an Adam’s Closet uniform of black slacks and a black shirt with a white collar. The words Adam’s Closet and her name are stitched in gold over the pocket.

“Why did he get greeted first? I’m your brother,” Jamal complains, patting his chest.

“He spoke first,” she says, sticking her tongue out at her older brother before she throws her arms around me.

“Hey, girl.” I hug her and kiss the top of her head.

If Bayleigh had it her way, this is who our son Zayn would be dating, but the two are just good friends and nothing more.

Aaliyah moves from my arms to Jamal’s and hugs him.

“Must be payday,” Aaliyah declares, pulling away from his hug.

“Why did you say that?” I ask.

“You came through, my brother came through, and Uncle Parker’s back there with Adam,” she explains, pulling her phone from her back pocket.

I chuckle and send her five hundred on Cash App, and Jamal moves to send her some money, also.

Whenever we come through this store, we hook her up. She’s Jamal’s little sister, but I consider her the daughter I never had.

“Thank you, Uncle Z. You need to learn from your bossman, J. You reap what you

sow. When you sow little seeds, you get flowers. When you sow big seeds, you get trees,” she teases, sticking her tongue out at him again.

“Gon’ with that corny ass shit. Besides, I happen to like flowers.”

“How much is he short, Liyah?” I roll my eyes at Jamal.

“Two-fifty.”

I turn around and glare at Jamal before he sucks his teeth and pulls out his phone. Her face lights up when he sends her another two-fifty.

I head to the back office where Adam and Parker are while Jamal continues shooting the shit with his sister.

I walk up to Adam’s office just as I hear Parker say, “I run this muthafuckin’ town!”

“Nah, nigga. I run this mutha’ fuckin town,” I proclaim in a quietly controlled voice.

“Aye, yo, Z! Wassup?” Parker asks, laughing and turning around with surprise written all over his face.

“Zaire! I didn’t expect to see the top man today. What’s up?” Adam asks, standing and walking from behind his desk.

“Nothing but inflation, cat,” I reply, dapping the Italian man up and giving him a one-armed side hug.

“Is everything okay?” Adam asks.

“We’re heading through on our way somewhere else. J wanted to see Liyah, and I

came to holler at my right hand,” I explain, nodding at Parker. “Everything good, G?”

“We cool,” Parker confirms.

“Take care, Adam.” I turn to walk back down the hall.

“It’s always a pleasure doing business with you, Zaire,” Adam expresses, following us to the front of the store.

“Deuces, Adam,” Parker calls out, holding up two fingers and heading for the door.

“A’ight, Liyah. You be good, girl. I’ll see you around,” I comment.

“Okay, Uncle Z.”

I hear her mumbling something to her brother as I follow Parker out of the store.

“What’s up?”

“After I got off the phone with you, I got word about some nigga who was beefin’ with Ghalen. Malik hemmed his ass up, and I’m ‘bout to roll over there. Come on, roll with me.”

“Cool! I wanna see who this li’l nigga is running around bodying a Knight,” he remarks.

“I’on know, but his future seeds gon’ wish he’d never crossed me up.”

Jamal steps out of the store and asks, “You ready, Bossman?”

“Yeah, let’s roll.”

“Where are we heading?” Parker asks.

“To the Hovel.”

“Damn. Wish we had our shit built back up,” Parker mutters.

“I’ on need that shit. We good,” I assert, lowering myself into Jamal’s car.

“A’ight, meet you there,” he replies.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

We will survive these attacks that are coming. I'm tired as hell, and I know my man is. I don't have time to be down and out, though. Right now, is when I'll have to be the strongest. This is the time for me to stand up and hold things down.

Zaire's been on the go since Damascus' visit the other day. He's been an essential player in Zaire's claim to power, and he always helps keep my man on his toes. I respect and love Damascus greatly, so I hope that whatever that meeting was about will help us get back on top again.

Zaire and I haven't spent much time together, but I did just see him at Pam's place while I was helping her with the funeral arrangements.

He said he was about to roll out and handle some things, but I have an eerie feeling that something's about to go down.

I've headed back home to chill with my sister. She's been sick a lot lately, and I need to check on Riley.

I honestly think that most of what's going on with her, as it relates to her sickness, has more to do with her grieving Kenny than anything. I think she doesn't want me to know that she's mourning him.

I knock on her bedroom door and wait. When I get no answer, I knock again. Worried that she might be in need, or maybe she's just sleeping, I turn the knob to her door.

I step inside, and when I don't see her in her bed, I call out to her.

“Riley!”

She doesn’t answer, but I hear water in the bathroom. She must be showering.

“Riley!” I yell.

I get no answer.

My heart thuds loudly in my chest, and I pray that she’s okay. She told me this morning that she’s been feeling faint lately.

I see that the bathroom door is partially open.

I peek my head in and see that she’s showering and she’s okay.

I turn to walk back out of the bathroom, and as I head past the bathtub and the linen closet, I see something odd.

On a towel shelf next to the door, I see what appears to be a bodysuit, but it looks misshapen.

I walk toward it, unable to ignore the feeling that pushes me forward. Warning bells are ringing in my head, and I have no idea what they’re trying to tell me, but I can’t turn away.

I reach out to grab the bodysuit and find that it’s silicone. It’s a fucking fake pregnant belly bump!

Anger fills me, but not stupidity. I leave it lying where it is and slip out of the bathroom while my sister continues showering.

I should go to Zaire, but he has his hands full with everything else. Besides, it's my sister, I can handle her little ass.

What the hell was she thinking? Lying about a pregnancy? What does she even have to gain by lying about that? I mean, Kenny's dead, and he's not here.

Unless . . . I'm the only one who her pregnancy would impact. But if she just needed to come and stay with me for a while, then why not just say that? It can't be that simple.

There's some shit in the game.

I take a seat in the chair beside her bed and wait patiently for five minutes before she comes out of the shower, singing. She has a towel wrapped around her head and one around her body. She's holding a couple of body moisturizers in one hand, and the body suit is tucked underneath her arm.

"Bay? What are you doing in here?" she asks.

"I think that I should be the one asking the questions."

"Am I missing something?" she asks, staring at me in confusion.

"You are. Like a baby?" I say, gesturing at her flat stomach.

Her eyes widen, and she looks down, recognizing her mistake.

"Sis, I—"

"Uh-uh. No excuses! What the hell, Riley?"

“It’s not what you think,” she pouts, pulling panties and a bra from a drawer and slipping the panties on.

“What I think is that you lied about your pregnancy. What I think is that you aren’t pregnant. Both of those variables are true. Clearly!” I point in exasperation at her, the bodysuit lying discarded by her feet.

Riley has the decency to hold her head down in shame, but when she looks up again, there’s a fiery passion burning in her eyes.

“You always sit in the seat of judgment, don’t you?” she accuses, pulling her bra on and fastening it.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, Riley. I don’t judge you.”

“Yes, you do! You’ve always been Daddy’s favorite. You don’t understand what it feels like to be the one who always comes up short. I was never good enough.”

“That’s not true. Daddy doesn’t have favorites, and you’ve always been his baby,” I declare as she grabs a T-shirt and pulls it on over her head.

“You wouldn’t know that, now, would you? You’ve never been compared to me, Quin, or Chase!”

“I’m not doing that with you right now. That has nothing to do with this fake pregnancy.”

“It’s got everything to do with it!” she shouts.

“How, Riley? How?” I demand.

“You have a large, beautiful home, a man who worships the ground you walk on, three amazing kids who adore you, and a successful business. You’re not struggling the way I am with finding someone who loves you unconditionally!”

“What the hell does that have to do with pretending you’re pregnant?” I ask as she dresses in a pair of navy blue leggings.

The look that my sister turns on me makes me wonder if I ever knew this heifer at all!

“It was the only way to get what I needed!”

“Which is what?” I ask, standing as she starts walking toward me.

“Information, Bayleigh. Information is priceless,” she hisses as her face contorts into a caricature of herself.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Zaire. He rules the city. There is too much money running through here for him not to be willing to share with everyone else!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about finally finding a man who loves me, wants me, and who I have something to offer. My man and I are gonna be on top of the world. We’re going to dominate this fucking city and take control from Zaire’s hands.”

Fury runs through me, and I step closer to her.

“Riley, if you cross Zaire up, you know he will dead your ass!”

“No, he won’t. We just want a piece of the pie,” she states solemnly.

“Who the hell are you working with?” I ask.

“That doesn’t even matter.”

“What the hell did Zaire or I ever do to you for you to want to betray us, Riley?”

“You took my kid! You took Zayn!”

“Riley, you were sixteen-years old, suffering a mental breakdown, and wanted to abort the kid when you were six months along! Your crazy ass tried to do that shit too!”

“I’m not crazy! You had no right to take my kid!” she cries.

“I did what was best for you and Zayn!”

“You did what was best for you!” Riley screams, grabbing her keys and purse.

“Where the hell are you going?” I ask, stalking behind her.

“Away from you! Some place where I can get some peace!” she shouts.

I watch her run down the stairs, and I stand at the top of the second-floor landing, listening until the door slams closed.

When Riley calmed down in the hospital from her mental breakdown, she insisted she did not want the baby. When I suggested that Zaire and I could adopt him, she was ecstatic. Our entire family was overjoyed with that suggestion, especially my parents.

Not once had a word ever come up about it being a problem in all these years. We told Zayn the truth when he was nine. He took it all in stride, still loving Riley, and still loving us.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

Jamal and I get out of the car, passing Malik's car. I know that Janel rode over with him, and I know that wherever the fuck they're hiding right now, they've got us in their sights.

Parker gets out of his car, placing his gun in the back of his waistband. He's looking around suspiciously as we all step up toward the former site of the Hovel.

Charred wood and scraps of metal are all that remain of the former shack.

Jamal kicks what looks like to have been a doorknob and asks, "Thinking about building on this same site?"

"Nah. I've been talking to a couple of architects and a project manager over at Gray Construction Management. We're looking at another property on the outskirts of town. It'll be a useful place for business and handling business," I explain, referencing Denver's construction firm.

"Where's everybody?" Parker asks as we pass up the rubble and debris from the Hovel.

"Right back there." I point to where a bonfire has been set up.

From where we're standing, we can see the fire and see Malik standing and facing a chair. A large board has been erected behind the chair, but we can't see who's in the chair.

Parker walks past Jamal and me, eager, I'm sure, to meet whomever we've got

hemmed up for questioning about Ghalen's death. The moment that he rounds that large board and comes up on the chair, he stops and stares at Malik, before looking back at Jamal and me.

"The fuck's going on here?" he asks, pointing to an empty chair as Jamal and I approach.

I see the minute when recognition dawns in his eyes that this is a setup. He quickly reaches for the gun in his waistband. There are three guns aimed at him: Malik, who is standing behind him; Jamal, who's stepping away from beside me; and Janel, who steps from behind a tree.

"Zaire?"

"Nah, chief. You big dog in town. Tell me what the fuck you thought you were doing, setting me up the way you've been doing all year. Not to mention my family. You see, I can handle most shit, but when it comes to my family and the Fab Five, you know that shit hurts deep. So, what's up?"

"I don't know who you've been talking to—"

"Nigga, I don't need to talk to anybody to know your bitch ass behind the attacks on me, my family, my businesses, and my friend. How you gon' do some shit like that, dawg? Ghalen, nigga?"

Parker's jaw clenches before he responds to me. "That was meant for your bitch ass. You don't run shit, nigga."

Removing the cufflinks from my sleeves, I roll them up before I remove the Patek Philippe watch from my arm.

“Hold this.” I hand my watch to Jamal, who takes it and steps back a little bit.

“If you plan to kill me, nigga, then do that shit. We ain’t gotta have no long discussion or peace talks. This ain’t the UN, and you ain’t the fucking president of the United States. I know you wanna believe you run shit,” he seethes, reaching toward his waist.

I hear three distinct guns cocking.

“Nigga, before you pull that gun from your waistband, these niggas will blow your head off and leave brain matter on my Stefano Ricci shirt Bay bought me. I wouldn’t want to explain that shit to her, so I suggest you remove your hand from your waistband.”

I can tell his bitch ass doesn’t want to, but he does.

“The fuck you want, Zaire.”

“I’mma tell you what I don’t want. I don’t wanna know why my boy of thirty-three years betrayed the fuck out of me, not when he’s my right hand and making bank alongside me. I don’t wanna know why he thinks I’m holding shit back when niggas around here feel like they owe me their lives.”

“You think this city is your fucking kingdom,” he sneers.

“Nah, I know this was a city that needed leadership. I came and did that shit. I’m the one who has flooded this place with jobs, established businesses in my name and my girl’s name, and loaned business loans without interest to other people who needed someone to believe in them.

Me! I did this shit, not you! And you want to take it away from me?

” I ask, dialing my voice and tone down a bit.

I step so close to Parker that the tips of our Italian loafers are touching.

“I treated you like my brother, Parker. You didn’t have to do that shit. Turn shit over to the cops to fuck with my businesses, have my woman kidnapped, have my boy killed. What the fuck is your problem?”

“Your dumb ass fucked over one of the most powerful women in this town. It was a no-brainer that people were going to get behind her for mayor. Your ass should have been looking to have her in your pocket, but you didn’t.

I stepped up where your ass tripped up. You’ve settled for a kingdom here in Chicora Falls, and I was about to build a fucking empire along the Southeastern coast.”

I move my gun from inside my jacket and shoot him in the shoulder, the right arm, and then in the thigh before he can move a muscle.

“Fuck!” he screams, writhing on the ground and trying to get up.

I extend my hand, and Janel hands me a syringe.

“Parker, this is succinylcholine. It’s a neuromuscular blocking agent that’s gonna paralyze your muscles. Can you guess what I’m gonna be doing while you’re paralyzed?” I ask, injecting the syringe into his arm that’s been shot.

“Fuck you!” he grits out.

“I’ll be sitting here checking my email and making more money moves. I’m gonna be signing contracts and expanding my legitimate operations. That’s what bosses do. Niggas run around talking big shit and not doing a goddamn thang!”

“Fuck. You!” he grits out again.

“And you . . . well, you’ll be burning alive in that nice big bonfire our team has built.”

I see the fear and panic in his eyes as the drug begins to take hold.

“Your dumb ass has no idea you’ve got a traitor in your own damn house. Helping me to take over your shit.”

“The fuck? What you just say to me?” I demand.

Parker starts shaking just before he stops. “Ri . . . Riley,” he coughs out.

“Toss his bitch ass in the fire!” I shout, jumping up.

I pull out my phone, taking several paces away from him, while Malik and Jamal lift Parker from the ground and toss him into the fire.

“Janel, call Lucian and tell him to get my house on lockdown and keep a close eye on my boys and Bayleigh!”

“Gotcha, Bossman!”

Parker’s shrill screams fill the air, followed soon by the acrid smell of burning flesh. There’s only a four to six-minute window during which the drug will keep him paralyzed. When it begins to wear off, I’m sure he’ll be dead or close enough to it.

“Bay!”

“Hey, baby. I need to talk to you. There’s—”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, but Riley—”

“Is a fucking traitor! Is she there?”

“No! She was talking crazy about her and somebody taking over your empire, and then she left.”

“Parker. She’s fucking around with Parker. Did she say where she was going?”

“Parker? Is that who’s behind this?”

“Lock the house up and set the alarm. Get the boys in, and y’all stay your asses there. You hear me?”

“Yeah!”

“I gotta go. Lucian is about to put y’all on lockdown, so chill ‘til you see me.”

“Okay, you’re scaring me.”

“Bayleigh, I love you. I ain’t gon’ let shit happen to you or those boys again.”

“Okay. I love you too.”

I end the call and turn to watch that muthafucka die while I smoke a blunt. When he’s finished, I’m finished, and I head to the car.

“Janel! Malik! Y’all got this shit?”

“Handle your business. We’re holding it down here,” Malik answers as Jamal comes to join me.

“Where to?”

“Essence’s office.”

Page 43

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“How many times do I have to tell you that you don’t show up at my home? And you don’t contact me, I contact you,” I seethe, standing in the doorway.

“You’ve been ignoring my calls,” she cries hysterically.

“Because I have been very busy. I don’t have time for handholding or coddling,” I explain impatiently.

“I can’t reach Parker. I’ve been calling him for the last hour, and he’s not responding to my calls or text messages.”

“Maybe he’s busy with some work for Zaire, or maybe he’s caught up in . . . something else,” I answer suggestively, eyeing her up and down.

“What are you trying to say?”

“Sweetheart, I have not said anything directly. Take from it what you will,” I reply, turning my back and walking to the dining room table where my laptop is set up.

“Listen. Something’s happened to Parker, and I need to get in touch with him,” she hisses desperately.

I turn back to comment and then tilt my head sideways. Tapping my chin, I shake my head and reply. “Aren’t you forgetting something very important, darling?”

“That’s why I’m looking for Parker. My cover has been blown!”

Shaking my head, I throw my hands up in frustration. This dimwit is so damn simpleminded. I told him that I didn't want her involved and that his plan wouldn't work.

"How could you screw up something as simple as being pregnant?"

"My sister walked into the room while I was showering! How was I supposed to know that she would do that?"

"It's your sister. You're supposed to know everything about what she would or wouldn't do. Otherwise, why would you even bother to get involved? You've only made a bad situation worse. You should just return home, lay low for a while, and steer clear of me and anything concerning me."

"What about Parker?"

"What about him?"

"Don't you want to find him?"

"I'm sure Parker will be found when he's ready to be found," I reply scathingly.

She walks toward me with her fists clenched at her sides and her face scrunched up.

"I swear if you have something to do with his disappearance, I'll—"

"You'll what, Riley?" I ask, stepping closer to her. "Hmm? Are you threatening me? Because I don't have time for your little games. I have to go work on a few items for this campaign."

"Let me make myself clear. If you don't take me seriously and help me find Parker,

or if you had anything to do with his disappearance, there won't be an election to work on.

I promise you that every resident of this town will know what you're up to.

And I'll personally make sure that Zaire comes after you with everything he has! ”

This heifer is fourteen-karat crazy. Does she not realize that she's crossed her sister's man up in a way that he will never forgive? Does she really believe that he'll be on her side or care about her now that they know she's not pregnant?

I laugh and shake my head. “Not before he handles you. Now get the hell out of my house, and don't you dare step foot on my property again, or I promise you'll regret it, Riley Montrose.”

She laughs, shakes her head, and replies.

“You think you have all the power, don't you, Ms. Essence Hamilton?

Well, you know something. I'm the one with the power.

Mm-hmm . . . I have more power in my little pinky finger than you do.

I have knowledge, and knowledge is key. I can ruin you with what I know. ”

Yes, this bitch is a certified nut. Did she really just threaten me?

I watch as she walks toward the door and heads out of my home. The moment she closes the door, I return to the dining room table, pick up my phone, and request an urgent meeting.

I step out of my house thirty minutes later after receiving a text message.

A driver opens the back door of a black Lincoln Town Car with tinted windows. I slip inside and sit opposite a man with tawny skin, broad shoulders, and chiseled arms.

I find myself wanting to run my hands through that shock of jet-black hair.

As he slowly lowers his dark sunglasses, he reveals a faint scar under his left eyebrow. I hold my breath until those thin, firm lips turn upwards into a half-smile.

Derek Sawyer was, at some point, a very handsome man.

He's of mixed parentage, Hispanic and Caucasian.

I don't know if the heartache of life or the evil perils that he's witnessed have etched a permanent downturn between his eyebrows and a pinched expression at his eyes and lips, or what, but he looks menacing.

I guess anyone would in the line of work that he does.

"Thank you for coming to meet with me at the last minute, Derek."

"Any time, Essence. How may I be of assistance?"

"I recently had a guest arrive at my home unannounced and uninvited. I need you to pay her an unannounced and uninvited return visit and immediately dispose of my little visitor. I'm pretty sure she's heading back to this address." I hand Derek a slip of paper.

He takes the paper and glances at it.

“Do you know how many people reside at this address besides the mark?”

“She now lives alone. She may or may not have a guest tonight. I’m not sure. But let me make one thing clear: Riley Montrose is no longer to be breathing by sunset tomorrow. Is that understood?”

“Understood.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. When you route the amount that I have sent you via encrypted email to the number supplied in the email, then the job will commence. You will pay the final balance upon receipt of proof that the job is complete.”

“Thank you,” I repeat. “Are you busy this evening?” I ask before reaching for the door handle.

“Essence,” he replies, making it personal now. “We’ve discussed this. No more mixing business with pleasure.”

“Too bad. You were such a good lover,” I state, and grab the door handle. It’s pulled from my hands before I can open it.

The driver reaches inside, takes my hand, and helps me out of the car. Before I make it to my front door, the car has pulled away from the curb and is down the street.

I look around before I slip back inside and head to my computer. I don’t waste any time finding the email and routing the money to Derek’s account.

Derek was a damn good lover until a year ago. When I first asked him to do a job for me on Theron James, my former bodyguard, who was blackmailing me, Derek took

the job and ended our affair. He did an excellent job of making it look like the poor boy died of kidney failure.

It was a big loss, but I've found others who compete.

Take Parker Jones, I think, smiling. I collapse on my couch as my head begins pounding from everything that has transpired in the last hour.

I refuse to allow that simple-minded imp to ruin the future of this city or my career.

It's bad enough that Zaire Knight is trying to stand in my way; I won't let his whore's sister do the same.

He's still holding a grudge after all these years because his father's failure to keep his dick in his pants or stand up to his demented wife cost him a few decades in prison.

It's the least he deserved for screwing me over.

I need to secure the position of mayor before Isaiah Knight is released from prison.

I told him a long time ago that if he didn't leave Nora Grace for me, he would never see the light of day again. I meant every word.

Forty-five minutes after I've wired the money to Derek Sawyer, my doorbell rings again.

I jump up and head to the door, jerking it open.

"What?" I hiss.

"Where is she?"

“Who?”

“Riley. Where is she? I’m sure she came to visit you, Essence.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I don’t know anyone by the name of Riley, and the only visitors that I’ve had are you and this thug beside you,” I state, gesturing at the tall, brown-skinned man with tattoos on his neck and a sinister look in those light caramel eyes that make me shiver.

I have no idea if he does it on purpose or not, but Zaire Knight, the fine young man that he is, surrounds himself with some of the most handsome, sexy, make you want to take your panties off and throw them aside, fine ass men I’ve ever laid eyes on, including Parker Jones.

That foolishly ridiculous girl. She honestly believed that Parker Jones was in love with her. Parker was in love with his ego and his long stroke and nothing more. As for me? I was simply drunk off the things that kid could do with his tongue.

A tingle shoots straight between my legs when I think about what he did to me last night. I’ll call him later when things die down this evening. Maybe we can meet at a little hotel on the outskirts of the city.

“Listen, I know what you’ve been up to and who you’ve been up to it with. Your little reign of terror behind the scenes is coming to an end soon. You and your little partner’s shenanigans are over,” he threatens.

“I should hope not,” I reply with a smirk, clutching my pearls as I think about Parker’s head between my legs again tonight.

There’s a reason why a woman should take good care of her body. At sixty-six, my body rivals that of women half my age, including Bayleigh Reed and Riley Montrose.

“Don’t fucking play with me, Essence. You’re not even ready for the battle, let alone the war,” Zaire warns.

“Good night, gentleman. Oh, and Mr. Washington, if you’re looking for a respectable job where you can put in hard work and really get your back into it, you know where to find me,” I state, eying Jamal Washington up and down before winking at him.

Satisfied with the way this night is going, I close the door and return to the couch to watch TV. You never know who might turn up on the news, alive . . . or dead.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“Good morning. Good morning.” I greet the people who have joined me on Inflogram Live.

The comments continue flowing through.

“I’m out for my morning jog. Trying to get some fresh inspiration going in my life. I’ve run into some issues and some disappointments over the last couple of days, but I’m not letting that stop me, y’all.”

I look through the comments as they tell me that my skin is glowing and how beautiful I look. I smile and reply, “Thanks, y’all.”

Some more people join my live, and finally, I get to the heart of my message.

“Listen, I’m not here to fuck up your morning, but I’ve got something to tell y’all.

People aren’t always who they seem to be.

People who claim to love you and have your back really don’t.

They do that shit for selfish reasons. Then you have those who you know they’re not shit, but you know you need them in your life, so you keep an eye on them.

But then you realize you underestimated their power. ”

I glance down at the viewers who are hopping on my live with me and read some of the comments.

“Hey, Tasha. Nah, my family ain’t shit either. I know y’all think I got a good family, but it’s not even them who I’m talking about.”

I glance at the screen again. “Jason, no, I’m talking about that new mayor y’all are so crazy about. She’s not who you think she is. When everybody goes running to the polls in a few weeks to cast their ballot, I promise, if you vote for her, you’ll wish you’d been listening to me after all.”

I catch a glance of a car turning down the side street that I’m walking along in the park. I turn my gaze back to the phone as I read the comments.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to get emotional on y’all, Rochelle. What I’m trying to say is, I’ve gotten in bed with the wrong people, literally and physically.”

I sniff, take a right off the main path, and slow my jogging down to a fast walk.

“No, Bonnie. Kenny and I aren’t together anymore. My husband was the worst of them all. He broke my heart repeatedly, beat me when I didn’t agree with his opinions, and cheated on me with any and every woman who passed by,” I explain.

“Rochelle, yeah, I’ve been seeing someone since Kenny and I broke up. I love this man.”

I watch the comments rolling through a little longer, and then I respond to Rochelle’s comment. “No, he’s not anybody we work with, girl.”

I laugh, and she replies: “ Glad I could make your ass laugh .”

“Thank you, boo. I needed that.”

I read another comment, and then I respond.

“No, Bonnie, I don’t get down like that.

I know men ain’t no good, but neither are these bitches out here either.

They’re the first ones to cross you up. Again, a prime example is Ms. Essence Hamilton.

For every one of y’all who votes for her, she’s gonna make you bend over, grease you up with some Vaseline, and then fuck you raw! ”

The comments start flying. I’m not a celebrity or anything, but for me, having seventy-one viewers is large.

“You’re right, Bonnie. I’mma chill on that shit.

I’ll call you later, girl. Or maybe you, Rochelle, and I can take an extended lunch at work.

” I sniff again and state, “I’m getting off this live.

I need a few minutes to get my head together.

But remember what I said, don’t vote for Essence Hamilton. She’s not to be trusted.”

I end the Inflogram Live, hang up the phone, and think about my sister and her family.

Fuck Bayleigh and Zaire , I think to myself. They’re haters.

I think about Parker and wonder where in the hell he is. I try to call him again. His phone rings and rings until the voicemail picks up.

“Parker, please call me. I love you. I’m scared, and I miss you. Please.” I sob and end the call.

We played a game, but in the end, the joke was on me. I’d suspected something was off yesterday when I left Bayleigh’s house. After leaving Essence’s house, I’d gone by the drugstore and picked up a pregnancy test, which I’d taken last night.

I’m waiting to hear back from Parker so I can share the news with him.

I really am pregnant now. What started as a lie to get the information I needed turned out to be true. I’m just nowhere near as far along as I pretended to be. And this isn’t Kenny’s kid; it’s Parker’s.

Parker, who I’ve been shamelessly flirting with for years. Parker, who wouldn’t give me the time of day until a few months ago. Parker, whom I had fallen helplessly in love with, and who I knew didn’t feel the same about me, but he had strong feelings for me.

This was our chance to get it right. My chance to have the family I always wanted. Parker, the kid, and me.

More people are coming into the park now, and I don’t want to be bothered.

My emotions are all over the place, and I don’t know if it’s the pregnancy or something else.

I know my mom has been begging me to get back on my meds lately, but I don’t want that shit either.

I hate the way my meds make me feel. Now that I know I’m pregnant, I’m glad I didn’t start taking them again.

I walk up the steps leading from the main trail to a less-traveled walking path.

If I hadn't been in my emotions when I left home, I would have been paying attention and seen that a car had been following me since I left.

If I hadn't been on Inflogram Live while walking, I would have noticed that same car following me throughout the park.

If I hadn't had my head down and been focused on trying to call Parker and so deep into my emotions, I would have noticed someone following me.

But as it stands, I don't notice anything until it is too late. The snap of a twig, as I walk further down the walking path and away from the street, causes me to turn my head.

The moment that I do, I look up to see a tall white man following me. He's wearing a running suit, and when I see his hand move around in his jacket pocket, I take off running.

But no sooner than I do, someone steps off the path ahead of me. I slam into a hard body and look up into the cold, menacing black eyes of a dark-skinned Black man wearing a hoodie.

He grasps my shoulders to keep me upright and from falling. I almost thank him, but then he leans down, smiles, and whispers, "Run!"

When he releases my arms and steps out of my path, I take off running.

My feet aren't fast enough to outrun a bullet.

I have no idea if it's the white man in the tracksuit or the Black man in a hoodie and

jeans who shoots me in the back of my head.

I just know that I'm going down at an alarming rate, and everything ends before my face slams into the concrete.

I never had the chance to get it right. My baby never stood a chance, and Parker will never know that we created a beautiful life together.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

“ Police found a body in the southwest corner of Addison Park early this morning. It was discovered just off the south loop entrance of the walking trail by a couple out for their morning jog a little after six-thirty this morning. Police say that the body hasn’t been identified.

They’re not releasing any details at this time, and we’re unsure if it’s a male or female, age, description, or how the victim was dressed.

Authorities say the body has been deceased for a few days and may have been up on the hill that looks down on that section of the park. They believe the recent torrential rains shifted the earth, causing the body to slide down with the mud that washed down the hill ,” the reporter explains.

I click off the TV.

“It seems that every time I watch the news, there’s more bad news,” I mutter.

“Ms. Bayleigh, it’s going to be okay. They’ll find Riley soon, I’m sure,” Shana reassures me, smiling and patting my hand.

I close my eyes, grip the edge of the island, and squeeze it tightly.

“Come on, Shana, baby. Let’s go watch TV,” Zayn states, pulling Shana away from me.

I count to twenty before I open my eyes and release the edge of the counter.

“Ma, c’mon, give the kid a break. I don’t think she means any harm. She just says all the wrong stuff at the wrong time,” Zechariah inputs.

“She shouldn’t say shit at all. Nobody said anything about that missing person in the park in relation to Riley.”

“You didn’t have to, Ma. Everyone knows how on edge you’ve been since Aunt Riley left.”

“Is Aunt Riley gonna be okay, Mama?” Zaccai asks, looking up from his chicken strips and iPad.

“Yes, baby. Everything is going to be just fine.” I feel like I’m lying through my teeth.

Even if we find Riley and all is well with her, nothing will be just fine. My sister has ruined our bond, our relationship, and my trust in her. I will always love her, and in time, I might even come to forgive her, but trusting won’t come that easily. She damaged me as far as I’m concerned.

The house phone rings, and I quickly answer it, praying for some good news.

Riley has been missing for four days, and no one has heard from her.

My parents and brothers, like me, are going out of their minds with worry.

They were devastated when I told them what had happened and how she’d been lying about her pregnancy.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Bay. It’s me, Alicia.”

“Oh, hey, girl.”

“I was just checking in to see if you guys have heard anything.”

“No, honey. I wish that we had. I’m assuming you just saw the news too.”

“I’m sorry, girl. Yes, I did. I just got off the phone with Trina earlier before I saw the news, and she said that she still hasn’t heard anything. That’s not like Riley. She always calls Trina.”

“I know. I wish that I’d known that she was on that damn Inflogram Live that morning. I’d have called her and begged her to come back over here if I’d known just how distraught she was.”

“I know you would have. Hell, if Trina or I had seen it, we would have called you.”

“Have you seen the video?”

“Just the snippets they’ve been playing on the news since they’ve been looking for her. But someone at work said they’d seen the entire thing and said she was talking crazy about Essence Hamilton,” Alicia shares.

I press my lips together to keep mute on the subject.

“Well, you know I’m praying for you guys. I saw your daddy and mama yesterday.”

“She’s getting sick with worry, and I’m worrying about her, Licia.”

“I know you are. I just hugged her and told her to stay positive that Riley’s probably

having one of her depressive moments where she shuts the world out,” Alicia states.

“Yeah, that’s the same thing I told her when I saw her yesterday afternoon. It’s not getting through to her, though. I don’t think anything will until she sets her eyes on her and sees for herself that Riley is okay.”

Zaire walks into the kitchen with a grim look in his eyes, a firm jaw, and his shoulders back. Damascus is walking into the kitchen behind him. I see the dread and the compassion in Damascus’ eyes and the pain etched on Zaire’s face.

“No . . . no. Noooo!” I scream, breaking down as the phone drops from my hands and clatters to the floor.

Zechariah is behind me, instantly lifting me as I fall. My sweet baby boy holds onto me as my world crumbles. His father pulls me from his embrace and lifts me into his arms, even as I continue screaming.

“Dad, please,” Zechariah says behind me as his voice breaks.

Zaire buries his face in my hair and shakes his head, and I keep screaming. He holds me tighter to him, and I hear Zaccai crying behind me.

“C’mon, little man, let’s go for a walk,” Damascus tells Zaccai.

“Nooooo,” I continue sobbing.

“What’s going on?” Zayn asks from somewhere behind his father.

“Ohmigosh! It’s Ms. Riley, isn’t it?” I hear Shana ask.

The rumbling of feet has me pulling from Zaire’s arms. I look over his shoulder to

see my sweet, sometimes thickheaded middle boy running down the hallway with Shana on his heels.

“Oh, God. Zayn! Go see about him,” I tell Zaire.

“No. I’m not leaving you, baby.”

“I got him, OG,” Zechariah replies, clearing his throat.

Zaire’s arms wrap tighter around me, but no matter how tightly he squeezes, he can’t keep my world intact. There are too many empty spaces and too many broken pieces for him to keep me whole.

Maybe someday, but not today.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

THREE MONTHS LATER

“Aris and Noble, did you get that information out?” I ask, looking around the table.

“Yes, sir. Aris tied up the final strings, and the information should be on the twelve o’clock news right . . . ” Noble glances at his watch and finishes his comment. “About now.”

“Good,” I reply as Marisa flicks the remote and the large-screen TV turns on to the midday news.

She turns the volume down a little while they do their intro, and I look around the table at each of my team members.

“We took a major blow, but we’re rebuilding and coming back stronger than ever.”

“I’m still fucked up about the part Parker played in this game,” Malik professes, shaking his head.

“Yeah, he was your day-one homie. If you can’t trust them, who the fuck can you trust?” Kim mumbles.

“Y’all. I trust y’all. I trust the eight of y’all to keep it real with me, to have my back, to hold it down when I’m not able to, and to always be true and loyal to me and this organization.

If you can’t do that you walk your asses out the door now,” I demand, jabbing a

finger into the marble table as I glance around at Kim, Aris, Hakeem, Jamal, Janel, Malik, Noble and Marisa standing by the TV.

No one budes, and Marisa smiles at me.

“It’s still hard to overlook that sort of betrayal, sir. Hard to heal from that, so make sure you take time out for yourself,” Marisa suggests softly.

“Yeah, well . . . it’s a new day,” I declare, clearing my throat and looking at the TV screen.

I spin my chair around and stand from my seat. Shoving my hands into my pockets, I walk toward the seating area as Marisa increases the volume on the TV.

“. . . investigation into the funding of her campaign. Financial documents leaked to the mayor’s office, KGTV, and Chief David Haralson’s office late last night show that mayoral candidate Essence Hamilton has been accepting money to fund her campaign from Bryson Gregory, CEO of Duke Holdings.

“Gregory was indicted on charges of racketeering, prostitution, and drug trafficking eight years ago, but was only found guilty on the drug trafficking charges, of which he served four years before being released on parole.

He founded the company Duke Holdings two years ago, which is the parent company for two telecommunications companies and a capital funding company.

“The mayor’s office will be holding a press conference at one o’clock this afternoon. KGTV tried reaching out to Ms. Hamilton’s office for comment, but she was unreachable at the time. Nate, turning it over to you . . . ”

Marisa turns the TV down and leaves the room, as I return to the table, but I don’t

take my seat.

“Frances and Marc have gotten all the charges against me dropped, thanks to the assistance from Detective Malone and Noble. My businesses have been cleared, and we’re working behind the scenes to rebuild the reputation of my gentlemen’s clubs and the car company in those communities.

Whenever a company takes a hit the way that mine did, even if only to its reputation, there will be a financial blowback to follow.

“As a result, we’re pumping more funds into marketing the companies, funding promotions that benefit the communities each company serves, and on PR campaigns to help rebuild our image.

As it relates to what happened with Parker, you all know that shit will never fly with me.

If you cross me up, you may as well be prepared to pay with nothing less than your life.

I don’t give a fuck who you are,” I snarl.

Everyone around the table nods eagerly.

“With that being said, there are a few changes or additions I’d like to announce.

But first, here’s a little appreciation for your dedication and loyalty to me.

Treat yourself to something nice,” I state, handing each of them an envelope with their name scrawled on it, holding ten grand in cash and a check for fifty grand each.

Shouts, whistles, and applause go up around the room, including Malik, who's normally the reserved one of the crew.

Kim jumps up and starts twerking, and Janel smacks her on the ass, to which Aris blushes.

I shake my head at their shenanigans and wait for a few seconds.

Eventually, all eyes turn in my direction.

"The next announcement is that Noble will be your new VP of Security."

"Damn, what type of increase does that come with?" Hakeem asks, causing everyone else to laugh and Noble to shake his head.

I smirk. "You ready to forfeit your job, Hakeem?"

"Nah, Bossman. I'm good on all that. I don't even want to know what type of shit Noble's gotta be responsible for."

"Good. Now these next two changes are near to my heart, so don't fuck shit up where this is concerned."

Everyone scowls and looks around at each other before glancing back at me.

Nodding toward the other end of the table, I blow out a heavy breath. "I know y'all have been wondering why Zechariah is at the meeting when he's never here."

They all murmur their agreement.

"As you know, he just graduated from Morris Brown last year and started his first

year of law school at Emory this year. With that being said, he'll be working closely with Frances Kay and Marc Silver to learn the inner workings of the business, as well as with me, while attending school.

He'll be our future Chief Legal Counsel. ”

“That’s what’s up, young genius,” Kim shouts.

“I always knew that nigga had a big head for some reason,” Malik jokes.

Zechariah puts up both middle fingers to Malik and then shakes his head. Everyone congratulates my firstborn, hugs, or daps him up, and then returns their gaze to me.

I press the button in the middle of the table, and the doors behind me to my private inner office open.

Bayleigh steps forward as I make another announcement. “Meet your new VP of Operations, Bayleigh Reed.”

“Oh, my God! Lady Knight! Yes, wear your crown, sis!” Kim screams.

“I think it’s a sword that dubs you a knight, Kim,” Aris corrects.

Janel jumps from her seat and throws her arms around Bayleigh, and all the men nod their approval or say, “That’s what’s up,” before they rise and hug her.

It takes a minute before their congratulations are completed. When they finally are, Bayleigh takes a seat beside me to my right. Looking at her, I declare, “I couldn’t ask for a better partner to be my right hand.”

“Thank you,” she replies graciously.

It took a lot of convincing for her to agree to step into this role.

When she agreed to accept it, I encouraged her to take all the time she needed to settle into it.

She'd said that she needed to get to work right away to keep her mind off things.

The week leading up to and immediately after Riley's funeral was rough on my baby.

Once everyone settles down again, I reply, "Now, this next announcement won't be easy for any of you. It wasn't for me either when I learned what I did. It was necessary, though."

I press the intercom and speak into it. "Marisa, I'm ready."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Knight."

Everyone mumbles around the table and then leans into each other to whisper. They're all staring at me, including Noble.

The doors open, and Marisa steps in and steps aside.

"Sir," she states, nodding.

Ghalen walks into the room to gasps and screams.

"Oh shit!" Kim shrieks, slumping to the floor and just sitting there breathing hard.

"Your big ass better not faint. All that twerking you do, your ass better not faint now," Malik warns.

“What the fuck?” Jamal mutters.

“Man, you’ve done my heart a lot of good,” Janel cries as she walks up and hugs him.

“Big Poppa! You're alive!” Kim shouts, popping up from the floor, jumping up, and wrapping her legs around him after Janel releases him.

Bayleigh clears her throat. Kim jumps down again and straightens her shirt. “My bad, Big Poppa. I forgot you got a whole wifey, with yo’ fine ass. Thanks, Ms. Bayleigh, for keeping me in check.”

“No problem, Kim,” Bayleigh comments sweetly beside me.

“What the fuck yo! Why didn’t y’all tell us this nigga was still alive?” Malik asks.

“It was necessary for the investigation. Parker was being followed in his last days, unbeknownst to me. So, someone saw when he rigged my SUV. Remember when we had that meeting here the day the car exploded?” I ask the team.

They all mutter “yes.”

“Was it when he said he needed to make an emergency call and stepped out for like twenty minutes during the middle of the meeting?” Janel asks.

“Yeah. That’s what he was out there doing. The way that my SUV was parked, you really couldn’t see him from the street unless you knew what to look for. An off-duty officer was watching him the entire time and phoned Ghalen to let him know what was up,” I explain, referring to Damascus.

“So, G, you weren’t in the car?” Aris asks.

“No, I wasn’t. I walked toward the car, but once I was on the other side, where you couldn’t see me from the street, I ran along the wall that divided the parking lot from the highway.

Once I got to the end of those bushes that covered them, I was far enough away that I was safe.

At that point, all I had to do was use the key fob to start up the ignition, which ignited the bomb,” Ghalen explains.

“That’s fucked up, yo!” Jamal exclaims.

“Did your family know you weren’t dead?” Hakeem asks.

“Nobody knew except Detective Malone and a couple of other detectives working the case. It was hard as fuck on my family, though.”

“Yeah, I can imagine it was,” Malik agrees.

“Shit, nigga. This makes me wanna pull yo’ big ass up and kill yo ass all over again,” Jamal professes.

“Yeah, had niggas like J shedding thug tears,” Malik confesses, mugging Ghalen.

“Yo’ punk ass too,” Jamal reveals. “Had us niggas up here fucked up, and yo’ ass was alive! This is fucked up.”

Changing the subject, Noble comments, “Parker’s traitorous ass got off too easy in my opinion.”

“Nah, that muthafucka suffered,” Janel counters quietly with a distant look in her

eyes.

“When did your family find out?” Aris asks.

“This morning. After they . . . well, can I say anything?” Ghalen asks, looking at me.

I look to Bayleigh, and she nods, closing her eyes.

“So, they finally got concrete evidence against Essence Hamilton for killing Riley. The man she paid to kill her, Derek Sawyer, agreed to turn state’s evidence against her.

Sawyer got immunity because he recorded their conversation with Essence when she ordered them to kill her.

He turned the recordings in as well as handed over a key to a storage unit.

“That sick bitch wrote down everything she’d been plotting against Zaire, his family, his businesses, even how she got Parker involved, and her detailed plans to kill Riley and Parker when she finished with them. She didn’t kill Riley the way she’d originally planned, but she still had her killed.

“Not to mention that she had journals going back thirty years. In one of them, she wrote that she had set Z’s daddy up by planting drugs in his house to take him down, all because he wouldn’t leave their mama.

She even had information about concealing evidence in some of the cases she worked on over the years.

And it was all right there in black and white in a journal in that storage unit,” Ghalen explains.

“What the fuck!” Kim mutters, shaking her head.

“We ain’t seen that shit on the news yet,” Malik declares.

“The arrest just happened this morning. They haven’t released it to the media yet. But when they do, there will be a frenzy in this city like nothing we’ve ever seen,” I explain.

“Yeah, they contacted my wife this morning and had her and the kids brought to the station before they told them.”

Ghalen gets choked up for a minute, and I take over.

“Detective Malone visited me at the same time they called Pam. He came to my home this morning and told me what was going on.”

“You had to think that nigga was lying,” Noble states.

“I did at first, but I know that he wouldn’t fuck with me like that. So, I went down to see what was what, and my big homie here was standing there smiling at a nigga,” I profess, looking up at Ghalen and smiling at him.

That shit was emotional this morning. I almost didn’t make it here to the office for this meeting, but too much shit had to be taken care of. Ghalen’s been my big homie almost as long as Parker.

“Damn, that nigga was ruthless,” Malik huffs.

I press a button in the middle of the table again.

“Yeah, he was. But like I said before, it’s a different day.

We've talked about that shit for the last few months.

Now we gon' dead that shit right along with that dead nigga.

Essence Hamilton was nothing more than a gnat in the big scheme of things, and she's been squashed. Who's ready to rise?" I ask, standing.

"We are!" Their voices rise in unison in an ecstatic shout.

Marisa opens the doors again and rolls in a large cart with four bottles of champagne on ice and a catered lunch.

"Boss Lady, what about your business?" Kim asks.

"I'll still own it, but I have two very talented designers who will take on the work. I'll spend most of my time here getting to know the business better and building a different relationship with you all than the one I enjoy currently," Bayleigh explains.

I pop a bottle of champagne and give my big homie, Ghalen, a side-armed hug. Malik, Hakeem, and Noble follow suit.

While Janel and Bayleigh pop the other bottles, Jamal's the last of the guys to come up to Ghalen.

He mugs Ghalen. "You know that shit was fucked up, don't ya? I ought to body your ass."

"Nigga, shut up. You know I had to do that shit to catch that nigga and that bitch. 'Sides yo ass cheesin' inside at seeing a nigga."

"Damn straight," Jamal agrees, breaking out into a smile and giving Ghalen a side-

arm hug and pounding him on the back.

This shit feels good, seeing my crew whole and complete.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:35 am

TWO MONTHS LATER

I was able to get attorneys on my father's case immediately. He was already expecting to be released, but with the newfound evidence of Essence's entrapment, we were able to get his release expedited.

He's spending time in California for three weeks with some of our family members he hasn't seen in a while. After that, he'll return to our home.

Essence is being held without bail because her access to certain money and people creates a flight risk. Her trial won't be happening anytime soon. It could be years before she goes to trial. I'm cool with her sitting her old ass in jail rotting until then. Hell, she made my Pops do it.

There was also evidence that no one was ever attacking her home. The attacks were created between her and Parker to bring more attention to her campaign and to try to set me up to take the fall. She is facing conspiracy charges on that, as well.

As they continued going through the storage unit, they found more evidence of her murders for hire. She'd apparently been responsible for having Theron James, her former bodyguard, killed. The man had made it look like Theron died of kidney failure.

Theron knew too much about her dealings and had been blackmailing her. We probably never would have known any of this if someone hadn't spotted Derek Sawyer, the man who killed her on the jogging trail.

They didn't actually spot him in person, but apparently, some kid who'd been doing a science project on birds had a camera set up in one of the trees. He'd been filming for a couple of days.

He was supposed to get the camera a couple of days later, but with all the storms, he hadn't returned to the area. Apparently, he and his family had then gone on vacation for two weeks, and it wasn't until he returned that he recalled the camera in the tree.

When he finally returned, he still hadn't looked at it right away. But when he had, boy, he struck paydirt. He'd taken it to his parents, who in turn had taken it to the police. That's how they'd been able to track down Derek Sawyer, who, in order to save his ass, gave up Essence Hamilton.

I wish that there were a way to charge her with my mother's death. She'd finally died four years ago in a mental health institute from a heart attack. But there's no way that we can, so I'll just keep memorializing Mama in my heart.

A soft sigh from plump, subtle lips drags my attention back to the present.

My sunshine, Bayleigh, has been struggling with her sister's death, as expected.

She holds a lot of guilt sometimes about their argument, but her mama and daddy are quick to reassure her that it wasn't her fault.

They explained that they had been working to get Riley back on medication for her depression, but she had refused.

I love on her to make her tears subside, and I try to comfort her heart, but I know the best thing for her is to let her go through the emotions. Only time will heal her wounds. That and my love.

The boys are coming along fine, but Zechariah and I have been paying more attention

to Zayn, trying to comfort him. He's taking things better than expected, but that's in part because he was never close to Riley, and in part because he has his hands full with the baby on the way.

I still can't believe Bayleigh and I are going to be grandparents, but she's excited about it now. She's embracing the idea and building a better relationship with Shana. This baby is going to be a healing balm for all of us, especially for Bayleigh.

She lifts her hips from the bed and then descends slowly. My mouth opens wider as I groan my satisfaction. Bayleigh's sweet little hum floats like music in the air as she rolls her hips in tight circles.

I suck at her labia before circling her clit with my tongue and then sucking it between my lips. When she cums she releases a cataclysm of tears, screams, and a violent orgasm.

I press my hand on her belly, lowering her hips to the bed again before I pull back, resting on my knees. I lick my lips before I lean down and kiss her softly.

"You want me?" I ask, wiping the tears from underneath her eyes.

"I always want you, baby," she purrs softly.

"Just want to make sure you're really good. It's been a rollercoaster these last few months."

"But I always want you, Zaire, especially tonight."

I pull her hand into mine and kiss the ring finger of her left hand. No one knows about our decision except for our three gentlemen, because they were there supporting us.

Neither of us is wearing wedding bands; Bayleigh's decision, not mine. She says that she's not ready for the world to know yet, and she's satisfied staying in our little cocoon.

Inside of both of our ring fingers are tattooed today's date, 10.05.24, the date of our wedding.

In a small ceremony in a little church in Atlanta, Georgia, a friend of mine married us. We traveled to Atlanta yesterday. The five of us went out to dinner and saw a play at the Fox Theater. This morning, we all had brunch before heading to the church where Bayleigh and I were married.

After exchanging our vows, we headed to a tattoo parlor, and our boys watched us have our fingers tattooed as a representation of our street love. From there, Zechariah drove us to Hartsfield-Jackson airport, where Bayleigh and I flew out to Ojo Spa Resort in Ojo Caliente, New Mexico.

"You think these walls are as secure as the ones back home?" I ask when I plunge into her.

"Ohhh! I don't give a shit, Z!" she screams as her warm pussy cloaks me like a leather glove.

The tight feel is enough to make me want to cum alone, but I'm not going out like that. I slide back out, and she sucks me back in.

This time, Bayleigh wraps her arms around my back, pulling me closer to her.

I kiss her closed eyelids and whisper. "Thank you."

"For?"

“Waiting on me and never leaving. Most women would give up when their demands aren’t met on their timeline.”

“You had your reasons. I understood and respected them. No need to explain or justify to anyone else as long as you and I had an understanding.”

I lift again and sink. We go on that way for several seconds until I roll onto my side, and she rolls onto hers. Lifting her leg over my hip, I ease gently into my wife, loving the way that she feels around me.

We rock and roll back and forth, giving to each other all that we have and all that we are, same as we have for more than thirty years now.

I regret nothing. I’ve loved her without reserve. Every mistake, every heartache, every disappointment, and every victory, she’s been on this journey by my side. I’d do it all again as long as I could do it with her.

People have tried to take us down, but their attacks have served one purpose and one purpose alone: to make us stronger.

Together, we are a powerful, unstoppable force.