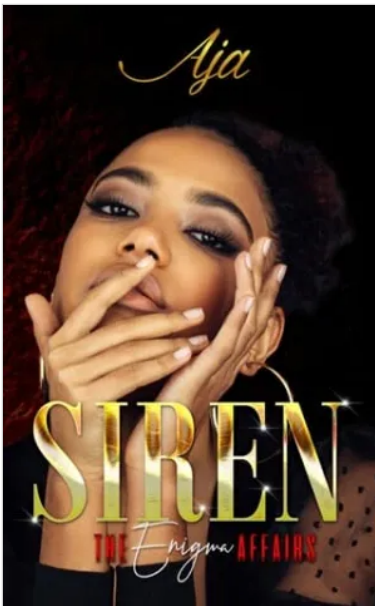




Siren (The Enigma Affairs #1)

Author: Aja

Category: Romance

Description: What begins as a calculated partnership ignites into an undeniable inferno. Taraj, a reclusive RB star with a soul full of secrets, faces a life-altering decision: cling to his solitary existence or surrender to the spellbinding beauty with a voice that shakes his very foundation.

Their arrangement was supposed to be temporary—a means to an end—but every shared moment blurs the lines between need and desire. With hearts on the line, love is proving to be the fiercest contender, waging a war neither is prepared to fight or willing to lose.

The Enigma Affairs are CONTEMPORARY STANDALONE ROMANCE stories.

This series leans into the heat that lingers after the smoke clears. These stories follow those who orbit the empire—adjacent but undeniable. Their power isn't on the block. It's in the bedroom, the studio, the spotlight... where love is currency and desire doesn't play by the rules.

These aren't gangster tales. They're about what happens when you inherit the weight of a name, but chase the fire of your own making.

Sensual. Complicated. Bold. Still Enigma. Just a different kind of flame.

Total Pages (Source): 37

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ONE

The morning light in Philly hit different.

Soft somehow—even in early spring, when the air still held a chill but the breeze carried the promise of bloom.

It slipped through the bay windows of my West Philly rowhouse like it belonged there, casting gold across the hardwood floors and warming my bare feet as I moved from the kitchen to the front room, coffee in hand.

I'd lived everywhere—hotels, rented lofts, even a house in L.A. that looked good on paper but never held any peace. I'd walked through spaces full of marble and mirrors and still felt invisible. But here... here felt like mine.

Cedar Park didn't try too hard to be anything it wasn't. You could still hear kids playing on the block, the vibration of the trolley a few streets over, someone's uncle watering his porch plants in a do-rag and house shoes. It was real. Steady. Familiar.

And this house—the wide windows, the iron grates, the creaking stairs that had lived through somebody else's love and loss before I ever found it—it held me. Quietly. Without asking for anything back.

This was the place I came home to when I needed to remember who I was. Before the stylists and the strategies. Before the press junkets and the algorithm audits. Before I learned how to smile through exhaustion and keep my voice warm even when my heart was cold.

This space didn't need Sienna, the brand. It only needed me.

The phone was already buzzing, lighting up with texts and threads and scheduled calls. I ignored them. If it was urgent, Brielle would call. And I knew better than to open group chats before caffeine.

I curled into the couch and pressed the mug to my lips. Black. No sugar. No cream. No nonsense. That's how I liked my coffee... and, lately, how I preferred my life. Stillness had become its own kind of luxury.

A notification lit up my lock screen. A photo—Mariah, all cheeks and joy, flashing that gap-toothed grin like it was her superpower, holding up the glittery T-shirt I sent from Paris.

Her frizzy curls were pulled into two puffballs, one slightly crooked like always.

She was my goddaughter—one of two— my baby girl without the birth certificate.

Fierce and funny, soft around the edges, sharp when she needed to be.

She and her sister Savannah kept me whole when the world punched holes in me.

I tapped out a reply with a smile tugging at my lips:

You wear it better than me, baby. Tell your mama I love her.

I didn't have kids, but I had love, and I'd made sure of that. Because in this industry, if you didn't fight for softness, you'd forget what it felt like.

Outside, Philly was shaking itself awake—horns, delivery trucks, the rhythm of somebody yelling up the block. I could see the corner store from here, the mural on

the side faded from sun and time, but still bold. Still beautiful. My spot. My heartbeat.

I set the mug down and ran a hand over my hair—pulled up high today, curls soft and wild at the crown. My voice felt good this morning. Rested. I'd woken up humming one of the old ones— “ His Eye Is on the Sparrow ”.

“I sing because I'm happy... I sing because I'm free...”

That line used to carry me through nerves back when I was eight, trembling behind the mic on Youth Sunday. Singing it wrapped around my chest like armor and light—like I had a right to take up space. It still did.

Funny thing about nerves. You don't outgrow them. You just learn how to lace them in gold.

There was a time I was afraid I'd lost my voice. Not just the sound—the center . That part of me that knew why I sang. Why it mattered.

I'd gone so long letting other people shape the sound, I forgot what it felt like when the melody came from somewhere real . Somewhere raw . But I was finding it again. Not in arenas. Not in charts.

In these quiet mornings. In Philly light. In the beat behind my ribs that still belonged to me .

My phone buzzed again.

Brielle: You up? Label needs us at 10. Don't be late.

I smirked. She knew I was never late. Being early was respect.

For the engineers. The background vocalists.

The interns. My mother taught me that. Don't let them call you a diva unless you're paying their bills, she used to say, laughing as she kissed my cheek.

Then, baby, be the best damn diva they ever met.

I rinsed my mug, padded back to the bedroom, and stood in front of the closet.

Velvet. Silk. Worn denim. Designer everywhere.

Flashy—muted—casual-chic. Stacks of sneakers.

A career's worth of reinvention. I chose soft black jeans, a cropped orange jacket, and gold hoops big enough to say don't try me.

No shows today. No soundcheck. Just another strategy meeting, where people in suits would explain how to make my music "trend" again.

Like five albums and two world tours could be undone by a slow quarter on Spotify. I didn't let it get to me.

Not too much.

But I carried my boundaries like armor. No drugs. No alcohol. No pretending I could run on fumes and love from strangers. I'd seen too many girls I started with lose themselves trying to stay seen.

The industry would drain you dry if you let it.

I laced up my boots, grabbed my phone and keys, and walked out into the buzz of the

city. The air kissed my face like a blessing—cool, rich with the scent of roasted coffee, rain-slick pavement, and somebody burning incense in an upstairs window.

It smelled like survival. Like home.

I drove to NYC in silence, no music playing. Just humming melodies that I couldn't escape. Melodies of untold stories.

The VoxRitual conference room was already buzzing when I got there—glass walls, matte black furniture, the soft thump of some unreleased instrumental bleeding from a speaker in the corner.

Brielle was pacing by the window, phone to her ear.

Tailored pants, vintage tee under a hot-pink blazer, chunky gold chain and new kicks—she was always half music exec, half culture curator.

Her hair was pressed bone straight, swinging as she talked.

She hung up as soon as she saw me. “You’re early.”

I dropped into the chair next to hers. “Always.”

“Good. I don’t need you mad at me this morning. These people...” She trailed off, rolling her eyes. “You want coffee?”

“Already had it. Black.”

“Of course.” She smiled—real, not just label-deep. “You look good, Enna. Paris agrees with you.”

I shrugged, tugging at my curls. “I’ll take Philly over Paris any day. You know that.”

Brielle nodded, glancing at the glass wall as more suits filed in. “We’ll make this quick.”

She was lying. But I let her. Not because I believed her—because I believed in her. She was one of the few who could sit at the table and still have a spine. And when it came to protecting me, she didn’t blink .

People talk about loyalty in this business like it’s a punchline. But Brielle? She’d bled for mine.

The white guy in the navy suit sat across from me, tapping an iPad like it owed him something.

Greg Sellers, SVP of A&R. Been in the game longer than me, slick hair and a reputation for signing acts he didn’t understand and dropping them the second the heat cooled.

We’d clashed before. Quietly. But I knew how to keep it professional.

A woman from marketing—Charli, young, eager, always smiling too much—slid in beside him, talking engagement rates and “cross-demo buzzwords” before I even settled in.

Another chair scraped nearby. A third man. Bald, mocha skin, well-cut suit. He didn’t speak right away. Then I saw the badge clipped to his lapel. Jalen Ross.

Then a fourth voice entered the room—calm, measured, unmistakably in charge. Barry Holmes, the label’s VP of Strategy and Branding. One of the few who didn’t waste words. Behind him, Keesha Atkins, Creative Director of Visual Content,

followed with a tablet already glowing.

They didn't need introductions. Not to me. Because if Greg was the one who moved the machine, Barry and Keesha were the ones who decided how it looked and sounded while doing it.

Brielle leaned in as the room's volume rose. "Label wants to do something different this cycle. Shake things up, bring in a new energy."

I crossed one leg over the other. "Define different."

She exhaled, careful. "You've been holding it down. A household name. But the market's shifting. They want younger ears."

I arched a brow. "Translation: I'm getting old."

"You're getting seasoned," Brielle shot back. "Icon status. But the suits don't know how to sell that unless you're dying or doing Vegas."

I didn't laugh .

Didn't even blink.

Because part of me had already felt this coming. The quiet pull of the tide rolling back without me in it. The way meetings had been postponed, the sudden lack of press coverage, the strange hush that fell after my last single—no push, no calls, just silence padded in politeness.

Honestly, I was more surprised they greenlit the mini tour to Paris and London. Maybe it was a final gesture. A slow bow out dressed up in glamour. Let her shine one last time.

I let the silence sit a beat too long, then said flatly, “Cute.”

Charli’s voice cut in, a little too eager. A little too rehearsed.

“You still trend—especially post-tour. And the Paris drop gave us great metrics. We just need to convert that buzz with a more active, visible rollout. Keep you in the cultural conversation.”

I didn’t turn to face her right away. Just blinked.

So they’d been listening.

Of course they had.

This wasn’t just a side conversation. It was bait. They’d let Brielle soften the field, lull me with honesty, only to swoop in with their curated next move.

I tilted my head slowly, gaze steady. “Am I not already in it?”

Greg cleared his throat like he’d been waiting for a cue. “You are. But we have to sustain that visibility. With streaming, visuals, social?—”

“Say the rest,” I cut in, voice even but sharp. Eyes locked on him like I already knew.

He blinked. Hesitated.

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“We’re pairing you with someone. A collab. Something visual-forward. Possibly viral.”

I exhaled. Slow. Already bracing.

“Let me guess. A barely legal rapper with his tongue out on the cover art? ”

“Actually,” Brielle said, stepping in like she was smoothing the edges, “it’s Taraj Ferrell.”

I paused.

Let the name settle. Taraj. The mystery man. Quiet. No gimmicks.

That track— Night Things —had lived in my chest for weeks when it dropped. There was pain in it. Not the kind you fake for Spotify playlists. Real ache. Layered. His eyes in those promo shots had said everything he didn’t. And that voice...

I remembered the way it curled around a lyric like smoke.

“He even do collabs?” I asked.

Jalen finally spoke. “He doesn’t. But he’s open to this.”

His voice was calm, even. Professional. But there was curiosity behind it—like he was watching to see if I flinched.

I didn't.

I looked at Brielle, who made the introductions.

"Jalen is Taraj's manager, and he wanted to sit in during this meeting to make sure Taraj's interests were aligned with ours."

"And his interests are?" I tried desperately to keep my cool, but I felt as if I were being railroaded.

"To grow as an artist while maintaining his authenticity."

"If that's the case, why would he want to work with me?"

"Because he's talented and wants to work with the best in this industry."

"He's talented," I said, slowly. "But what's he doing for me?"

Greg jumped in again, smooth. "He brings new energy. Younger fanbase. Relevance."

I locked eyes with him. "I am relevant."

"You are," Jalen cut in, almost apologetic. "But the timing lines up. Your album's in early development, and his numbers are climbing. We've got a window."

"And you want me to crack it open."

Brielle leaned in closer. "He's got the heat. You've got the catalog. The pairing makes sense. Real music heads will love it. And if you play it right? So will everyone else."

Charli jumped in, voice too cheerful. “We’re thinking behind-the-scenes content. Studio snippets, a few visuals. Maybe even some... spontaneous moments. Keep it organic but, you know... curated.”

My jaw tightened.

I sat back slowly, folding my arms. “Spontaneous.”

Brielle’s smile thinned, but she didn’t break.

“You want to say it, say it,” I said, eyes locked on Charli now. “Y’all want them to think we’re fucking.”

The room stilled.

Even Greg shifted in his seat.

“I’m not stupid,” I said. “I know how this works. A few close-up shots, a little leaning in, maybe a candle-lit performance where the lights are low and our mouths almost touch. Let the internet do the rest, right?”

Brielle tried to cut in. “Enna?—”

“I’m not mad,” I said, standing now. “I’m insulted.”

Because this wasn’t just strategy—it was calculated. Another repackaging of a woman like me. Not just an artist. Not just a voice. But a body. A fantasy. Something to make numbers move.

And it cut deeper than I wanted to admit. Not because I couldn’t carry the moment. But because I’d been carrying it for years. Alone.

Every award, every late-night flight, every tear-streaked makeup wipe and press junket smile—I'd given this industry everything. I'd missed birthdays. Grieved losses in greenrooms. Sacrificed so much of myself in the name of art. And now?

Now I was being told I needed help to be seen again.

“You think I got here by accident?” My voice was quiet, but it cut. “You think I gave up relationships, holidays, my damn twenties, just to become a trending topic tied to some man's jawline? ”

Nobody answered. Jalen looked like he wanted to. But he didn't. Smart man.

I reached for my bag. And then Brielle stood too, fast, hand out like a stop sign.

“Enna. Wait.”

I paused.

Her voice dropped to a whisper only I could hear. “I would never sell you like that. And you know it.”

I stared at her.

“This isn't about making you his. It's about making sure the world doesn't forget you.”

My throat burned. I didn't want it to. But it did.

“He's not the story,” she said. “You are. He's just the spark.”

I stayed quiet.

Brielle stepped closer. “You don’t have to fake a thing. Just show up. Do the work. Let the energy do what it does. Whatever the internet wants to believe, let them.”

“They always do,” I muttered.

“Exactly. So let it work for you this time.”

I looked around the room again. Greg was already pretending to read something on his screen. Charli was biting her lip. Jalen’s expression was unreadable.

I sat back down, slow. My body stiff, heart still thudding.

“I’ll do the music,” I said. “But I won’t be paraded.”

“You won’t be,” Brielle said. “I promise.”

A beat passed.

Then she slid her phone across the table, the contact open.

Taraj “Raj” Ferrell.

No emoji. Just a number.

“I’ll let him know you might reach out,” she said.

I didn’t reply. Just stared at the number like it might reveal something.

The meeting wrapped quickly after that.

The suits retreated with smug nods and silent back-pats. Marketing buzzed on about

virality and rollout strategy. Jalen gave me a nod before slipping out, his expression neutral—but not cold. Just... cautious. Like he knew I had fire sitting just behind my teeth.

When we stepped into the hallway, Brielle reached for my arm.

“You’re going to kill this,” she said, low and firm. “Don’t let them box you in.”

I gave her a look. “They never could.”

But my jaw was tight.

Too tight.

Because part of me still felt cornered—scooped and served like a product instead of a person. And I hated that Brielle had let them lay the trap that way.

Still... I couldn’t forget what she did for me that night in Houston.

When the label wanted me in latex and auto-tune. When their rep threatened to pull the set. And Brielle stood flat-footed in the green room and said,

“She’s not your puppet. Fix the lighting or we walk.”

We walked. They scrambled.

And she caught hell for it after—but she never flinched.

So yeah. I was mad now. But I knew where her loyalty lived.

Still, I didn’t breathe right until I was in my car. Until I made it back to Philly and the

buzz of my city wrapped around my shoulders like a favorite coat.

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TWO

The beat was rolling low—thick bass, chopped guitar, nothing too polished yet.

Amir stood behind the board, nodding slow, head tilted like he was listening to something the rest of the world hadn't caught up to yet.

Myles was half-asleep in the corner chair, hood up, tapping his pen against the edge of the soundboard like a metronome.

I leaned back on the leather couch, one leg stretched out, water bottle sweating in my hand. The room was dim, the way I liked it. No distractions. Just sound and space.

The track looped again.

Amir glanced over his shoulder. "You hear it now?"

"I been heard it," I said, my voice low. "You finally caught up."

He smirked and cut the sound, rubbing a hand over his beard. "So that's what we on today?"

"You asked." I twisted the cap back on my bottle. "I told you it needed something dirty. Some soul. You tried to fight it."

Amir grunted. "Man, whatever."

The studio settled into our kind of quiet?—

Not silence, just sound nobody needed to name.

My phone buzzed in my hoodie pocket.

Jalen's name flashed across the screen.

Amir clocked it with a tilt of his chin. "That your manager?"

"Yeah," I said. "Solid dude. Doesn't blow smoke."

I stood and slipped out of the booth, walking slow down the hallway toward the small lounge. I hit answer, let the silence breathe a beat.

"Yo," I said.

"Raj," Jalen replied, voice as upbeat and polished as ever. "You got a minute?"

"You already got it."

"Cool, cool. So, update on that intro we discussed."

I didn't say anything.

"It's on for this weekend," he said. "Gallery event in East Liberty. Nothing flashy—just art, a little press, and a quiet introduction."

A pause.

"Sienna Ray," he added .

I didn't say anything right away. I couldn't. If they were pulling out Sienna for this collab, then they wanted more than good music out of us. She was huge...

"She's game to meet. Just a conversation. If the vibe's right, we move forward with the studio collab."

I looked out the window, jaw set. I thought this was just music.

No need for warm-ups and roundtables just to get in the booth. I was ready to work. Always had been. And if Sienna Ray was who I knew her to be, she'd show up, hit her marks, and leave the mic smoking. Same as me.

"I thought this was only about music," I said flatly, already clocking the angle.

He exhaled like he'd been waiting on that. "It is. But you know how this goes. Perception feeds attention, and attention feeds everything else. This ain't a media circus. Just chemistry. Organic moments. You do what you do. She does what she does. And if it clicks?"

I sighed, pacing slow.

I'd seen it before. Labels setting up little love story illusions to push the project. Add a few curated visuals, some smirks across the studio, and boom—everybody eating off a narrative that wasn't even real.

But this time something about it felt different.

Maybe it was her name.

Sienna Ray. The kind of name you didn't just hear—you felt it. Like a hook that stayed in your chest long after the song ended. She was the Sienna Ray. A voice that

could break a man down to the bone, all wrapped in honey and hurricane. She didn't need a storyline. Neither did I.

So why now?

"Raj," he said again, voice dropping like he was trying to speak to the part of me that still gave a damn, "it's a powerful pairing.

Two real artists. Both private. Both respected.

It's not about pretending—it's about letting people wonder.

That curiosity creates gravity. And the music will speak louder because of it. "

I didn't answer right away. Because as much as I hated the game, I understood it. And if there was one person I might be willing to walk that line with, it was her.

"This meeting is just the warm-up. You good?"

A beat passed.

"Yeah," I finally said. "I'm good."

He hung up.

Back in the studio, Amir looked up from the board. "All set?"

"Gallery meet-up Friday. Studio Saturday."

He raised an eyebrow. "With who?"

“Sienna Ray.”

Amir let out a low whistle. “Well damn.”

I dropped back onto the couch, elbows on my knees.

“Thought you was gonna clown it,” I muttered.

“Man, I was—if it was one of those TikTok acts with two singles and a brand deal,” he said, adjusting the fader without even looking. “But Sienna?” He nodded slow, like the name alone grounded the room. “She’s serious. Legendary.”

“I know.”

And I did. Knew it in the way her voice hit like scripture. Knew it in the way her lyrics carried weight and heat and ache.

And yeah—knew it in the way her presence stayed in your bloodstream long after the screen faded to black. But this wasn’t about being starstruck. This was about finally meeting someone who moved through music the same way I did?—

Like it was blood.

Like it was breath.

Like it was prayer.

Still, my chest was tight. Not from nerves. But from the pressure to deliver .

To match her energy. To be worthy .

“This the kind of thing careers pivot on,” I said quietly.

Amir looked over. “Yours already pivoted. This just widens your options.”

I didn’t respond right away.

He grinned. “And you already think she fine, don’t you?”

I didn’t say a word. Because yeah. Of course I did.

What man in his right mind didn’t?

But it wasn’t just that. Her beauty didn’t smack you in the face—it lingered . Stayed in the corners of your memory, soft and unbothered, like the last note of a chord that still vibrated through your chest.

And that voice? It wasn’t just her gift—it was the way she looked when she sang, like something holy passed through her.

So yeah, I’d struggle not to look at her. But I wasn’t here for that.

Still... I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t already pictured what it’d be like to hear her voice live, close enough to feel it in my bones.

Later that night, I was in my apartment with the lights off—except for the soft glow under the kitchen cabinets. The city buzzed through the windows in pulses—distant sirens, the roll of tires on wet asphalt, someone’s laugh breaking the stillness, then fading.

I sat at the edge of the bed, laptop balanced on my thigh, scrolling through old clips of Sienna.

One caught me.

A stripped-down set from six, maybe seven years ago. Small venue. Tight frame. Just her, a mic, and a stool.

She wore all black—fitted pants that hugged the curve of her hips, a cropped knit top that clung to a body slender but thick in the right places. Not overdone. Natural. Like she was carved from honey and heat.

Her curls fell around her face in loose, full spirals, brushing her collarbone, gold hoops catching the low light as she moved.

And her eyes...

Closed at first, like she had to shut the world out to pull the truth from wherever she kept it.

Her voice was raw. Gut-deep.

Not pretty for pretty's sake—but powerful. Like she bled with elegance. Like the pain had been distilled into song.

But then...

Then she opened her eyes.

And it wrecked me.

Dark, milk chocolate—rich and endless, framed by thick lashes and soft smoky eyeshadow. She didn't look at the camera. Didn't have to. But something in the way she saw the room—how still she was in those final notes—landed deep in my chest.

I felt my dick harden before I even noticed the tension in my shoulders. Had to shift in my seat. Had to shut the laptop fast like it hadn't just baptized me in want.

I dropped back on the bed, one arm over my forehead, her voice still curling in my ears like smoke from a fire I hadn't meant to start.

She was too much. Too real . Too damn good. And I was supposed to meet her tomorrow.

Couldn't walk into that gallery stiff and fully affected.

So I laid there in the dark, trying to get my heart and body to calm down. That didn't work. Her voice stayed with me.

So did her mouth. And that body. And those eyes.

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THREE

The city was just waking up when I stepped out the house—hoodie half-zipped, pockets full of cash I didn't need to flex, headphones slung around my neck. No team with me. No stylist. Just me. On foot. That's how I liked it.

First stop was the old corner bakery in Larimer.

They barely made it through the pandemic—same handwritten signs, same old-school heat trays—but they still served the best sweet rolls in the city.

I bought two dozen, dropped a fifty in the jar, and nodded at the wide-eyed teen behind the counter.

Didn't say my name. Didn't have to. Some things didn't need to be explained.

Next up was a street vendor off Penn Avenue.

She had shea butter in mason jars and bracelets threaded with copper wire and love.

I picked out three and dropped two bills.

"Keep the change," I said. Her smile said thank you.

Her eyes said she knew. Still, she didn't name me. And that made me like her even more.

Last was the secondhand vinyl shop near the busway. Old soul records. Crates that smelled like dust and genius. I slipped a hundred into the tip jar while the owner argued with someone about the difference between Marvin and Luther. I didn't stay long. I never did.

I didn't do this for praise.

I did it because it felt like mine. Because when the checks started clearing, I promised I wouldn't forget where I came from. Not the labels. Not the playlists. But places like this. People like them.

And truth be told, I stayed low for a reason.

The industry kept trying to bait me into the spotlight.

Always pushing for a moment. A photo op.

A soft launch of some woman I was supposed to parade around, pretend we were blissed out for the cameras.

I wasn't even dating like that—but the few I had seen since signing the contract?

Most of them wanted the perks. The exclusives.

A picture with the plaques. A front-row seat to the illusion.

But I'd already learned the hard way what came with being too visible.

I almost died behind a bad deal once. A handshake turned handcuff. A late-night meeting that ended with a man's brains splattered on the floor across from me .

It wasn't just contracts and clauses—it was survival.

So yeah, I moved quiet. I let the music speak louder than my mouth. And I was damn grateful to be with VoxRitual that got that... mostly.

By the time I pulled up to Kingsley, the sun was climbing and my hoodie clung to my back.

The center sat where East Liberty kissed the edge of Homewood—right on that seam where two worlds met and tried to hold each other up.

A heartbeat between histories. Basketball sounds echoed through the walls, sneakers squeaking over old hardwood.

Somebody's playlist spilled out of a cracked window—Pittsburgh soul, warm and familiar.

I stepped inside, duffel in hand.

The gym was already alive. Rico was halfway through a rant about missed calls, talking with his whole body like always, Iverson jersey clinging to his chest. Dre and Tay were near the scorer's table, arguing over which one of them had a better high school record—again.

And Deuce was at half-court, taking lazy shots like he hadn't been winded since 2019.

“Look who finally remembered where he came from!” Dre shouted, his voice booming like an uncle on the grill.

“Y'all act like I moved to Mars,” I laughed, dropping my bag by the bleachers.

“You might as well have,” Rico called. “The whole city been waiting on a callback. We thought you traded us in for the blue check crowd.”

I dapped them up—Rico’s slap-and-hug always came with a headbutt threat, Dre pulled me in deep like he needed to feel my heartbeat, and Tay hit my chest like I still owed him for a barbershop bet.

“Working,” I said, stretching. “Nonstop.”

“Working?” Tay raised a brow. “You mean staring into the distance and looking poetic for album covers?”

“Man, shut up,” Deuce laughed. “That’s a brand now.”

We ran full court for two hours. Trash talk turned scripture.

Elbows and fouls blurred into rhythm and muscle memory.

Rico talked more than he moved. Dre still hustled like the NBA was watching.

Tay coached the whole game like he forgot he was playing.

And Deuce fouled out twice, dramatic every time.

And me...

I played the way I used to—before the contracts. Before the boardrooms. Before they started dressing my trauma in branding and asking for vulnerability on demand. I moved like I remembered myself. And for a while, I did.

We collapsed on the sideline after the second game, soaked and breathless.

“You still got it,” Tay said, panting. “Barely.”

I grinned. “Still faster than you with that busted dad-knee.”

Laughter rippled. Not the fake kind. That under-the-ribs, back-in-time kind.

Deuce cracked open a Gatorade and tossed me one. “Alright, be honest. Is this some warm-up for a big rollout, or you just needed a reminder that you still got us?”

“Little of both,” I said, wiping my face. Let the bottle rest against my neck. “Label’s plotting. They want a collab. A narrative.”

“With who?” Rico asked, leaning in.

“Sienna Ray.”

A beat of silence. Then Dre let out a slow whistle.

“Shit,” Tay muttered. “Not them tryna throw you into the deep end of the algorithm.”

“Man,” Deuce said, sitting up, “you bagged the Sienna Ray? That’s like dating a Grammy and a centerfold at the same time.”

Rico fanned his face like he was catching the Holy Ghost. “That woman fine in real life or Photoshop fine?”

I smirked. “She fine-fine. Like, stop breathing for a second fine.”

“She can sang, too,” Dre added, voice suddenly serious. “Ain’t too many left like that.”

“She got presence,” I said. “But they’re not talking about music. They want smoke and mirrors. Fake chemistry, visual rollouts. They want the illusion.”

Dre leaned forward, elbows on knees. “And what do you want?”

I paused.

“To make something honest,” I said. “To not be a headline in somebody else’s rollout. I spent too long building this lane. Quiet, maybe. But it’s mine.”

They all nodded. Not fast. Not performative. Because they knew.

“You ever feel like you’re watching your life instead of living it?” I asked.

Deuce passed me another Gatorade. “Only every damn day.”

We sat in that.

These weren’t just my boys. These were the ones who knew what I sacrificed. Who heard the early beats. Who remembered the late nights stacking sounds—not sleeping in basements, I had a bed—but still grinding like I didn’t.

They saw me. Not the name. Not the streams.

Me.

My phone buzzed.

Jalen: You’re confirmed for the gallery tonight. 6PM sharp. She’ll be there.

My stomach tightened. Not nerves. Not exactly. Just... something real shifting under

my skin.

She hadn't reached out since this collab had been set up. I hadn't expected her to.

But now it was real and my name would be beside hers.

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FOUR

The plane touched down in Pittsburgh just after noon.

I didn't unpack—because I wasn't staying long—just long enough to lay the vocals down. Or longer, if I felt like pretending to care about the city beyond this meeting. I'd lived in places like this before. Cities that dressed like underdogs and moved like they had something to prove.

It reminded me of who I used to be. Before the award shows and the playlists. Before people knew my name but still knew my lyrics by heart.

I checked into the hotel, took a hot shower, and sat in silence for twenty minutes—robe on, hair pinned, legs folded beneath me on the edge of the bed. I wasn't nervous.

But I wasn't still, either.

I'd called my mom the night before. Jasmine too. Two different kinds of wisdom, same message.

Jasmine was warmth and honesty, always coming at me like a mirror I could trust.

“Don't overthink it,” she'd said, voice soft with pride. “You're the moment. You've always been. Walk like it.”

My mother—who used to stand at the foot of the church stage mouthing every lyric

back to me—had that quiet steel in her voice.

“You know how to evolve, baby,” she said. “Just don’t forget who you are.”

She never let me forget it. The early morning rehearsals, the studio nights she sat through with a paperback in her lap. The times she shielded me from small-minded critics and reminded me, “Your voice is an inheritance. Use it well.”

I wanted to believe what they both saw in me.

I wanted to walk into this opportunity like it was just another track, another session, another step in a career I built with intention and sacrifice.

But part of me knew... this was more than that.

This was the beginning of something new.

But the truth was... I was thinking about legacy more than I’d ever admit. Maybe because I didn’t have children. Maybe because I didn’t know if I ever would. But the music? That was mine. The one thing I’d leave behind.

I needed to be proud of it.

By the time I stepped outside again, the sun had shifted—lower now, warmer, sliding between the buildings like it knew something I didn’t.

My driver waited at the curb. Six-foot-two, solid, quiet—the kind of man you hired when you didn’t want questions, just presence.

His name was Dre. He’d been with me for the last year.

Always my driver stateside—sometimes he flew ahead, sometimes with me—but no matter the city, he was the one behind the wheel.

Drove like he'd been born behind tinted glass and could spot a threat three blocks out.

He opened the back door before I reached it, nodded once, then settled behind the wheel without a word.

The ride to the gallery was smooth. Silent. My kind of peace.

When we pulled up, he stepped out first, scanned the sidewalk, then gave a subtle nod toward the door. I followed. No paparazzi. Not yet.

Just the quiet click of my heels and the weight of the moment waiting for me inside.

The man at the door was waiting—dark suit, earpiece, gallery face. I didn't ask questions. Just handed over my coat and let him usher me into the space like clockwork.

It smelled like fig and leather inside. Not strong—just subtle enough to feel expensive. Like time and quiet and something deeper happening beneath the surface.

Brielle glanced up from her seat near the bar and gave me that look. The one that said, Don't kill me yet.

"Private gallery," she said, gesturing to the empty room. "Owner's a friend of Jalen's. We've got it for the hour."

The lighting was low and golden—the kind that kissed your skin just right, like you were already being photographed.

I wore high-waisted black trousers that hugged the curve of my waist, a deep olive corset top with delicate boning and thin straps, and a cropped leather jacket that hit right above the hips.

My heels were pointed and sharp—same shade as my lip.

Hair swept up but soft at the edges. Gold hoops.

One gold ring, thick and heavy on my right middle finger. Everything else? Skin.

Intentional. Effortless. Like I had somewhere better to be but chose this instead.

Brielle stood and gave me a quick hug. “You look good. Like you’re about to host a press conference and ruin somebody’s career.”

I smiled. “That’s the energy.”

“You ready for this?”

I lifted a brow. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

I’d been telling myself it was just business. That the setup didn’t matter. That I could navigate anything if the art was honest.

But still... there was this pull inside me.

A low, restless thrumming I couldn’t silence.

And I had no idea where it came from.

Before Brielle could respond, the door opened behind me.

And I felt it.

Not the air shift. Not the sound.

Taraj Ferrell didn't walk in—he arrived . Like the room bent to make space for him. Like silence followed him on instinct.

All black. Jacket, jeans, hoodie layered underneath.

A single gold chain caught the light at his collarbone.

His skin was a smooth, deep chestnut—rich and warm even under the gallery lights.

Tall. Lean but strong, like his body was carved for rhythm.

That kind of quiet athleticism you only noticed if you paid attention to the way a man moved.

His hair was braided back, neat and sharp. His jawline clean. And his lips...

Full. Soft-looking. Kissable. But it was his eyes that got me. Dark brown, deep-set, and soulful. The kind of eyes that looked like they'd seen something real—and never forgot it.

Our eyes locked. Not flirty—not invasive.

Just... present .

Like he saw me. All of me. Like he was patient enough to wait for the rest.

I hated that I noticed.

I told myself it didn't mean anything. That chemistry was just proximity and projection. That I'd felt attraction before. But not like this.

Never like this.

And definitely not with someone I was about to collaborate with—under cameras, under timelines, inside a narrative someone else designed.

Jalen, his manager, stepped in behind him and gave Brielle a quick chin nod. The two of them walked forward, launching into the pitch like we hadn't all rehearsed this in different rooms with different words.

"This is just a vibe check," Brielle said, placing a hand lightly on my back. "No pressure."

"Just some face time," Jalen added. "Let y'all feel each other out. See if it makes sense."

"Figuratively," Brielle said quickly, when Jalen glanced between us. "Not literally. Y'all grown."

They both laughed. That light, easy kind of laugh people give when they're already syncing up.

I didn't.

Neither did Taraj.

We didn't need to.

Brielle and Jalen disappeared into the hallway like they'd been waiting on an excuse.

I clocked the shared look between them. Not romantic. But something professional was settling into place—familiar, promising. Like two people who knew this wouldn't be their last collaboration.

And now it was just us.

Alone.

He didn't sit across from me.

He walked beside me instead, his shoulder almost grazing mine as we moved through the gallery. Quiet. Unbothered. Like the room was his to own and I was the only one in it worth engaging.

The space held stillness—brick walls kissed by warm light, hardwood floors that carried our steps like rhythm. But the true draw was on the walls. Art that didn't just hang. It haunted.

Nia Holloway. I'd followed her work for years. First through blog posts. Then in glossy features and curated pop-ups. Her canvases were honest. Black and woman and unfiltered. She didn't paint what she thought we wanted. She painted what we survived.

"She's special," I murmured, slowing in front of one of the newer pieces—crimson and cobalt clashing across raw linen, streaks of copper and soot cutting jagged through the center.

"She is," Taraj said beside me. His voice matched the room. Deep. Low. Intentional.

"That one's from her Unbound series," he added, almost casually.

I blinked and looked at him. “You know the title?”

He nodded, eyes still on the piece. “Been following her since she painted on her kitchen floor and sold prints through PayPal.”

That surprised me. And moved me.

“The indie art movement was all the rave.”

He looked over, met my gaze. “Yeah. Had one of her early pieces hanging in my studio before anything ever charted.”

A pause bloomed between us. Soft but charged.

We kept walking. One canvas after the next—each one a story written in brushstroke and breath.

“She paints like someone who’s lost things,” I said. “Things she doesn’t talk about.”

“She did,” I added, quieter now. “Cancer. Her brother. A house fire, I think.”

He tilted his head slightly, watching me like he was learning something about me too

.

“You followed her story.”

“I did.”

That was the first moment we weren’t just artists forced to collaborate. We were two people with something in common.

Taraj didn't say much as we turned the corner. Just took his time, like the air had shifted and he wasn't in a rush to breathe again.

"You don't strike me as the label's idea," I said, letting the words stretch.

He lifted a brow, faint amusement tugging at his mouth. "That obvious?"

"You carry quiet like a creed. Doesn't usually play well on a rollout."

"They don't want real," he said. "Just real-looking."

"Smoke and mirrors."

"Wrapped in a verse and a slow burn."

I looked over—and there he was, already looking back. Not performing. Just... present.

"And you're fine with that?"

"No." His pause was soft but sure. "But I've learned to pick my battles."

There was something in the way he said it. Like he'd already walked through wars and still carried the ash on his skin.

"You ever wish you could disappear?" I asked thinking about the wars I didn't want to fight anymore.

His gaze didn't flinch. "Already did. For a while."

My breath caught. That wasn't a line. That was confession . Quiet and bare.

“I don’t talk about my past often,” I said, keeping my voice low. “Too many people shape it to fit their version of me.”

He tilted his head slightly. “And what’s your version?”

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I hesitated but only for a moment. His directness was thrilling, and not intrusive. “Still forming. But I want it to feel like mine. Not theirs. ”

He nodded, slow. Like he understood.

“I didn’t want this collab,” I said.

“Me neither.”

“But here we are.”

“Sometimes,” he said, his voice lower now, like it wasn’t just about this anymore, “fate dresses like strategy.”

I looked at him again, sharper. “You believe in fate?”

“I believe in timing. And this?” His eyes stayed steady. “Feels like both.”

He let the words sit. Didn’t try to follow them. Just let them be .

“You always this poetic?”

“Only when the room deserves it.”

My mouth parted slightly. I hated how that hit me.

“You always this hard to read?” he countered.

“Only when I’m deciding if I care.”

His mouth twitched. Not a grin. Just that quiet flicker that said he liked women who didn’t flinch.

The air between us thickened—not tense. Just aware . Like something deep inside my chest was leaning forward without permission.

“What are you looking for in all this?” I asked.

“To create something that don’t feel like a campaign.”

“And if it does?”

He looked over at the nearest painting. One with a woman floating, but barely.

“Then I’ll know I lost something I can’t afford to lose.”

“What’s that?”

“Myself.”

I stood with that. Because I’d almost lost mine, too.

We talked a little about the track—where it would begin, what might anchor it. But it felt secondary. The song had already started between us.

Eventually, he moved. Slow. Smooth. Rising like the moment didn’t need to end—but could shift into something else.

I stood too, and as I turned slightly, my hand brushed his. Skin to skin. A light,

fleeting touch—nothing overt.

But my body betrayed me.

A rush of heat low in my belly. A pull at the center of me. My nipples tightened beneath my top like they were responding to something more primal than logic.

I didn't show it.

But I felt it.

He opened the door. Held it with his body, not just his hand.

I stepped through, every nerve still tuned to the echo of his touch.

Outside, the sky was inked in deep navy now, the last streaks of daylight smothered behind the buildings. City lights flickered on, painting the sidewalk in gold and violet haze. A breeze cut through the street, quick and sudden, tugging at my coat as I cinched it tighter around my waist.

He stood beside me. Not touching. But close.

Our shadows stretched together beneath the streetlight, long and familiar, like maybe they'd already known each other longer than we had.

Then—he reached for my hand.

Lifted it gently. Held it for a beat.

And then, slowly, brought it to his lips. A soft kiss. Warm. Intentional. No performance.

“I had a good time,” he murmured. “Curated or not.”

My breath caught. Just for a second and that’s when it happened.

A soft click. Subtle. Unmistakable.

I turned just in time to catch a figure ducking behind a van—camera still swinging.

“Planted?” he asked, his voice calm.

“Probably. ”

He didn’t flinch. Just adjusted his hoodie like he’d been through worse.

“I hate that they do this,” I muttered. “Turn artists into actors. Love stories into ads.”

“You think that’s what this is?”

I looked at him.

And the way he looked back made me forget what I thought I knew.

“Let’s not pretend it’s not complicated,” I said.

“Complicated don’t scare me.”

We stood there a moment longer, wrapped in tension that wasn’t going anywhere fast. And then Dre stepped up.

He didn’t speak. Just opened the back door like always. Steady. Sharp. Watching the world like it owed me nothing and everything at once.

I turned to Taraj.

He didn't move forward. Didn't try to say anything else. Just lifted his chin once—simple, deliberate, like he respected the weight of what we'd both just stood inside.

I slid into the car.

And Dre closed the door behind me.

We pulled off slow.

I stayed quiet, eyes on the blur outside my window. The way the streetlights hit glass, how the buildings shifted from familiar to new in a single turn.

Then Dre spoke.

"You good?"

I didn't look over. Just nodded once. "Yeah."

He waited a beat. "He alright."

That made me glance his way .

"Taraj?" I asked.

Dre nodded. "Got that old-school energy. Quiet. Watchful. Doesn't move too fast, and doesn't say more than he means. I clocked that."

I studied his reflection through the rearview mirror. "You think he's real?"

“I think he’s been through something. Whatever it was, it ain’t performative. I’ve been in the people-watching business a long time. You can see it in the way he stands. Like he’s not performing, but he’s not hiding either. That’s rare.”

I let that sit. Because the truth was—I’d felt it, too. The way something inside me had stirred just being near him. Not butterflies. Not lust. Something older than both.

I hadn’t expected that. Hadn’t wanted that. But it had happened. And now it lived under my skin—low, quiet, and electric.

Still, I kept that to myself. Instead, I turned back toward the window.

The city moved like a slow song with no chorus. Just rhythm and breath.

"He’s not what I expected," I said eventually.

"Maybe you ain’t either," Dre replied.

I closed my eyes. Let the motion of the car rock me deeper into stillness. It didn’t matter. None of this extra stuff mattered.

This was about the art.

The music.

The campaign.

And giving the label what they wanted.

Whatever I’d felt back there—whatever part of me had reached toward him—it would have to wait. Or vanish.

Either way... It wouldn't change the plan.

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FIVE

My dad's place sat on a private acre in the South Hills.

Not flashy on the outside, but inside it was quiet luxury.

Rich brown leathers and earth-toned fabrics layered against deep mahogany wood.

Heated marble floors gleamed in the foyer, giving way to plush, custom rugs in all the right places.

The sunken living room boasted tailored furniture and lighting that adjusted tone depending on the hour—warm in the morning, golden by dusk.

He never called it a mansion. Said that was too “new money.” But the square footage, staff rotation, and three-car garage said different.

I'd been here more times than I could count, but something felt... different tonight. I could feel it the second I stepped through the door.

The place was too still. Not empty—but expectant. Like it had just exhaled. Then I heard it. Music. Soft, old-school slow jam floating down from upstairs. Something warm. Familiar.

I paused near the bottom of the staircase. Almost followed the sound. Almost climbed the steps to see who had my father's playlist in rotation.

But I didn't. Because I knew better.

My father had women over the years. Quiet, careful ones. None of them stuck. None of them could touch what he had with my mother—even after everything that went down between them. She had betrayed him, and he'd never fully recovered. Not really. Mena and I knew that and felt it.

So I stayed put. Called out instead.

“Yo, Dad!”

For a moment, the music kept playing. Then I heard giggling. Light. Familiar. The music stopped. And then—footsteps.

He appeared at the top of the stairs, robe open over a bare chest and silk boxers. His skin gleamed with a fresh sheen, beard lined, eyes still low-lidded like he wasn't quite done with whatever was going on upstairs.

“Everything okay?” he asked, voice rough.

I raised a brow. “Yeah. Just wanted to talk.”

“You picked a hell of a time.”

Behind him, my mother emerged .

She wore a baby-pink babydoll gown, satin clinging to curves she'd never apologized for. Robe hanging open like she forgot—or didn't care—to tie it. Her honey-brown hair was a mess, falling around her shoulders in thick, loose curls. Lipstick smudged. Cheeks flushed.

She met my eyes and gave a satisfied, sleepy smile. "Hey, baby," she said, voice husky and unbothered. "Didn't know you were stopping by."

I nodded slowly. "Didn't exactly plan it."

She laughed under her breath. "Still your daddy's son. Always popping up when it counts."

Then, without waiting for more, she turned and drifted back down the hallway.

Dad ran a hand over his face. The face like I stole. Same skin tone, eyes, lips, just older. "Give me a minute, Raj."

I nodded and turned for the study, trying to avoid feeling sick about walking in on them being...grown.

Fifteen minutes later, he walked in dressed in charcoal lounge pants and a dark tee, barefoot but pulled together. He looked more like himself. Less like a man I'd just caught mid-tryst.

He didn't say anything about what I'd seen. Neither did I. But as I sat there, waiting, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

About them. About how strange it was to see them in the same space again. Together. Laughing. Touching.

Divorce doesn't end with signatures. It lingers. In the quiet. In the way you watch your parents become strangers. In the questions you stop asking because the answers hurt more than silence.

For a long time, I carried the distance between them like it was mine to manage. And

now... they were back under the same roof. Acting like it hadn't taken years to get here.

I didn't know what that meant. But I knew it mattered.

He settled into his usual leather chair, glass of bourbon already in hand .

"Still let yourself in like you pay the bills," he said, sipping once before nodding to the seat across from him.

I sat.

He watched me over the rim of his glass. "What's up?"

"I met with Sienna Ray tonight."

I came to him because I always did when something sat heavy in my chest. When I needed clarity I couldn't find on my own. My father wasn't the kind to meddle, but he understood women. Understood power, timing, the stuff people didn't say out loud. And when he gave advice, it hit. Always had.

His brows lifted. "Already?"

"Gallery downtown. Brielle and Jalen set it up."

He nodded. "She sound as good in person as she does on them live clips?"

"Better."

"HMMMMM."

I went on. Told him the label's plan. The optics. The fake rollout. The way the flashes went off like someone knew exactly when to pull the trigger.

He didn't say much. Just swirled his whisky.

"She fine?"

I looked up.

He smirked. "I mean... since you ain't said it yet, I'll assume it's messing with you."

I shook my head. "She's beautiful. But this ain't about that."

He leaned back with an unconvincing look. "You sure?"

"Yeah."

He just sipped again.

Then said, "I ever tell you how I met your mother?"

"Pool hall," I muttered, already knowing.

He smiled. "Not just a pool hall. Spot called Smokie's off Chartiers. They sold single joints and liquor. Had wood floors, neon lights, slow cuts in the speakers—vibe was lowkey but smooth. I was mostly there on business, checking on product. Then she walked in."

I said nothing. I'd heard it before—but never like this.

"She showed up with her girl, Shalonda. Claimed she wanted to learn to shoot pool.

Came straight over to me like she already knew I'd teach her. Tight dress, perfume like sweetness and nerve. But it wasn't how she looked that caught me. It was the way she looked at me—like she had a secret."

He chuckled, low. "Told me she needed help lining up a shot. So I gave her the stick, came around, positioned her hands, guided her aim. Let her lean into me. Taught her just enough to keep the lesson going. She didn't pull away. Not once."

His eyes turned thoughtful.

"She wanted to see if I'd rush. If I'd push. I didn't. I let the night stretch out. Gave her time to feel me without me pressing. That's what made the difference."

I raised a brow. "That your move?"

"That was the lesson."

He set his glass down. "Don't play to win. Play to see who she is when she thinks you're not playing. That's how you learn who's real."

I nodded slowly, letting that land.

He looked at me. "If she's got you thinking beyond the mic, beyond the plan—don't be scared of that. But don't move like the story's already been written either."

"She said she doesn't do fake."

"She mean it?"

"Yeah."

“Then you might be in trouble.”

I stood after that. My thoughts moving faster than my mouth. He didn’t stop me. Just watched me the way he always did—like he already knew where it was going.

At the door, he called out.

“Raj. ”

I turned.

“You don’t gotta play the game the way they wrote it. Just make sure when it’s your turn to shoot...”

He lifted his glass.

“Make the pocket yours.”

That one landed. Hard.

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SIX

Jasmine raised a brow. “You rehearsing that line for him or yourself?”

I smirked, but the truth was, I wasn’t sure who I was trying to convince because ever since I met him at the gallery—with that quiet intensity, the way he studied me like he already knew the parts I tried to hide—I’d been off balance .

I’d told myself he was just another artist. Another collab. Another talented man with good bone structure and a deep voice. But something about him unsettled me.

Not in a bad way.

In the kind of way that makes you wonder if you’re about to do something reckless.

Jasmine laughed, not missing a beat. “You couldn’t stop talking about him last night, so chill out.”

I adjusted my cashmere coat with one hand, pushing through the studio doors. “That was just commentary. I’m a vocalist. I talk.”

What I didn’t say—what I hadn’t stopped thinking—was how Taraj had stayed with me.

That subtle kiss on the hand. The pressure of his soft lips.

That look he gave me. That quiet confidence that didn’t try to sell itself.

And maybe because it wasn't performative, it found its way deeper.

Settled in my bloodstream like a note you couldn't unhear.

I hadn't meant to tell Jas all of that. But I'd been off rhythm after the gallery, and she always knew how to catch the beat behind my words.

"You let it slip," she teased now. "So now I'm holding you accountable."

I sighed, stepping into the elevator. "I really wish I hadn't said all that."

She chuckled. "You did. Which means it struck you. I'm not saying fall for the man. I'm saying don't pretend he didn't rattle your cage a little."

"He didn't."

"Mmm."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Manufactured is not music, Jas. And this entire arrangement feels... dressed up. Like we're costumes for someone else's vision."

"But you said he didn't feel fake."

I didn't answer.

She softened her tone. "Look, I know how much you've sacrificed for this career. I know how hard it's been to maintain your voice and your boundaries. All I'm saying is—you're allowed to explore new chemistry. Even if it's temporary."

I exhaled. "You're right."

“Course I am. Now go do what you do, Enna.”

The elevator dinged. I stepped into the hallway and tucked my phone into my coat pocket.

I’d already promised myself I wouldn’t let this session throw me off.

But that didn’t mean I wasn’t bracing for it.

The hallway smelled faintly of pine cleaner and incense trying to cover the sent of buddha. Posters of platinum albums lined the walls like ghosts of legends past.

And then—he turned the corner. Same slow, deliberate gait. Hoodie hanging open. Chain low. Bracelet catching light as he tugged at his sleeve. Effortless in a way that made time shift around him. Like the air moved to accommodate his presence.

His eyes found mine like they already knew the path. Slow drag. No urgency. No apology. Just heat—raw and sure—sliding over my skin until I felt it everywhere. Across my collarbone. Down my spine. Between my thighs.

My breath hitched. Nipples tightened. Core clenched so fast it made me shift my stance.

I held my phone to my ear like armor. Like I wasn’t standing there feeling his gaze press into me, soft and firm at the same time. Like a palm between my thighs, testing my patience.

He didn’t smile. Just looked. And I looked back.

One beat. Two. Long enough for the air to charge between us. For the burn to register.

Then he rounded the opposite end of the hallway, disappearing like he hadn't just taken my body with him .

But I was still there. Still pulsating. Still soaked in the moment.

Still aching for more. More of what, my mind couldn't intellectualize. It was a vibe and a pulse my body seemed to be chasing without my permission.

Inside the studio, the air felt different.

Dim lights brushed every surface in amber, casting soft shadows that whispered possibility. The kind of space you could lay vocals... or bury secrets.

Amir rose from the couch with that signature ease, smile carved slow like he'd already read the undercurrent in the room.

“Sienna,” he said, voice smooth, hand outstretched. “Glad you made it.”

His grip was firm. Professional. But there was depth in his gaze—like he could hear the echo of something between me and Taraj before either of us spoke.

My manager had been singing Amir's praises for months.

Called him a sound sculptor. Said he could touch the core of a voice and make it confess truths it hadn't even named.

I'd heard what he did with Taraj. But it was the smaller projects that really grabbed me—those raw, hungry artists he shaped into something untamed and golden.

Quietly, I'd hoped that one day—after the press cycles died down and the label stopped puppeteering—I'd get to work with him on something real . Just me and the

music. Nothing performative. Nothing pretend.

Myles gave a nod from the booth. “Anything you need, I got you.”

I liked his energy instantly. Grounded. Clean. He didn’t need to fill silence with noise. Engineers like that? Rare as hell.

Amir tilted his head toward the couch where Taraj now sat—hoodie gone, skin golden under studio light, his forearm draped casually over his knee like he owned every beat in the room .

“Y’all already got acquainted,” Amir said, eyes dancing with that kind of knowing you couldn’t fake.

“Briefly,” I replied, keeping it neutral.

Taraj looked up. His gaze landed on me like pressure—steady and slow. “Good to see you again.”

The sound of his voice moved through me like bass through bone. Deep. Controlled. A seduction wrapped in restraint.

“Likewise,” I said, though my tone came out softer than I meant. Then I turned to the mic, hoping movement would ground me.

Focus, Sienna. You’re here for the music. Not his mouth. Not his voice. Not the way his hands would feel on your hips.

Amir looked between us. “So here’s what I’m thinking,” he said, settling onto the edge of the couch. “A stripped ballad. Heavy on emotion. Not too polished—just real. Raw edges. Let the track feel like longing.”

I nodded slowly. “You thinking layered vocals or minimal harmony?”

“Minimal,” Amir said. “Give it space to ache.”

He looked at Taraj. “You still got those lyrics you scribbled last week?”

Taraj reached into his hoodie pocket and pulled out a folded sheet. “Been hearing her voice on this since the first line.”

I arched a brow. “Yeah?”

He shrugged, that quiet confidence on full display. “Tell me if I’m wrong.”

He handed the paper to Amir, who skimmed it, then handed it to me.

I read:

“You weren’t a phase

You weren’t a song

You were the silence after

And the space I never belonged...”

Something clicked in my chest.

I didn’t need the whole verse to know it.

“Play something,” I whispered, stepping to the mic.

Amir cued the track.

A slow bassline slid in like it knew what it was doing—slick, dark, sensual. Synths unfurled behind it like silk sheets pulled back by want. But there was restraint too. It didn't build—it hovered .

I closed my eyes and hummed what felt natural.

Just a melody at first—low, breathy, unsure. Then stronger. Rising like smoke around the chords. I didn't even form words yet. Just sounds. Shapes of sorrow and sweetness curled into tune.

Beside the glass, Taraj nodded slowly. Then picked up a pen again.

Amir leaned forward. "She just gave us the hook," he murmured. "Don't even change it."

I opened my eyes.

"Y'all want a name for this?" Amir asked, glancing between us.

Taraj didn't hesitate. " Dangerous Thing. "

I blinked.

He looked at me. "That's what this is about, right? The way something soft can undo you."

I exhaled, because yes . That was it. That was the thing I hadn't known how to say.

We locked eyes.

“Yeah,” I murmured. “Let’s call it that.”

Amir smiled, already pulling the track stems together. “Let’s make it live.”

I closed my eyes. Breathed. Let the rhythm lick over me. Then I opened my mouth.

“I feel you in the silence

In the breath between the lines

You touch me like a memory

And leave me every time...”

The last note stretched long, thin, aching.

I sang it again. Softer this time. Drew the word leave out until it nearly broke. Until I almost did.

Behind the glass, I caught Amir lean back like he’d felt it in his spine. Myles twisted a dial. And Taraj—he didn’t move. Just stared like he was watching something bloom.

Then he stood and crossed the space like the floor didn’t exist. Quiet steps. Intentional hands.

He stepped into the booth with me without saying a word.

Just a bottle of water pressed into my hand and fingers on the mic stand, adjusting it like it was muscle memory. Like he was used to touching things into place.

“Thanks,” I murmured. My voice wasn’t quiet—it was exposed .

“Your tone,” he said, leaning close enough that I felt the words ghost across my cheek. “It doesn’t just land. It lingers.”

The way he lingered. Like that night at the gallery. Like this morning in the hallway. Like every second since.

He stepped back—but not far.

The instrumental restarted. And then he crooned out his verse.

“You haunt my hands

Every time I reach for sleep

Your name don’t echo in the room

But it echoes in me...”

Each word poured like smoke. Deep. Unbothered. Sensual like it wasn’t trying to be .

He glanced over, voice still velvet. “You wanna come in on the hook?”

I stepped forward. The mic rose to meet me like it knew what I needed.

“Don’t speak it

Don’t name it

Let it stay wild

Let it stay dangerous...”

Our eyes met. Again. And that time it hit different.

Because we weren’t just laying down vocals. We were pushing up against something that hadn’t been touched yet—but wanted to be.

That’s when Amir’s voice came through the speaker. “Y’all ready to take that from the top?”

We didn’t look away.

“Yeah,” we said at the same time...

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SEVEN

The room was still thick with her.

The air hadn't moved since she stepped out. Her voice was still in the walls—wrapped around the bassline, stitched into the breath between my bars.

I sat on the edge of the studio couch, palms flat on my thighs, letting the silence settle where her sound had just been. My chest still buzzed from it. My skin still knew the shape of her tone.

She didn't just sing. She revealed.

Every note felt like it cost her something—not pain, but presence. And when our voices touched in that booth... it wasn't just music. It was memory. It was want. It was the closest thing to sex I'd ever felt with my clothes on.

And I felt it in my chest. In my neck. In the base of my spine.

Shit.

I dragged a hand down my jaw and exhaled through my nose—just as the door opened.

“Yo,” Amir called out, stepping in with that easy grin he always wore.

And behind him—Amaya.

Long box braids tied loose at the nape of her neck. Silver hoops. Soft cream sweater falling off one shoulder. She looked like calm personified. Like grace.

“Hey,” she said, her voice drifting over the space like smoke.

“Hey,” I returned, standing to give her a half-hug.

She used to stir something in me. Back when I was all want and no wisdom, which wasn’t that long ago to be honest. I mistook peace for conquest. But then I watched her with Amir. The way he softened around her. The way she saw through him and still held him steady.

That wasn’t lust. That was sacred. And I never wanted to be the man who tried to breach that.

But standing here now, with Amaya in the room and Sienna’s sound still moving in my bones, I realized something.

I wanted something like that. Something that moved slow. That opened me without warning. Something with weight.

“Where’s Sienna?” Amaya asked, glancing around.

“She just stepped out to take a call,” Amir answered.

As if on cue, the door opened again .

And there she was. They greeted each other like women who recognized depth when they saw it. Sienna complimented her art. Amaya returned it with praise of her voice.

“Y’all wanna grab food?” Amaya offered. “My treat.”

I hesitated. So did Sienna.

I didn't mix work and personal—too many blurred lines but then I looked at Sienna. And she wasn't just watching Amaya.

She was soaking something in.

Maybe needing a night that didn't ask her to perform or prove.

A night to just breathe.

I shrugged. "I know a spot."

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EIGHT

We ended up at Zamari, a Black-owned bistro in East Liberty.

The walls glowed with a slow gold burn, jazz trailing low like a lover's breath across skin. Thick tablecloths, soft lighting, waitstaff dressed in black like stagehands letting the scene unfold on its own.

The maître d' led us to a back corner where the shadows curled, and I exhaled when I saw how the table was set—Amaya and Amir already slipping into one side of the booth, knee to knee, a bottle of red between them like it had been waiting.

Taraj gestured for me to slide in first, then moved in next to me. The intimacy of our closeness reminded me of us moving through the gallery, steps in lockstep. Our energy dancing. But this time it burned hotter.

No distractions. No labels or handlers. No rehearsed pitch hovering in the air.

Just him.

And the light caught him like it wanted to—deep brown skin gleaming at the cheekbones, lips full and relaxed, eyes low but aware. Present.

He watched me. Not constantly. But when he did, I felt it.

We placed our orders. I asked for the halibut and coconut grits. He went with oxtails over mashed potatoes. Amaya and Amir shared a few tapas—comfortably, like they'd

done it a hundred times.

Their rhythm made me ache a little.

They weren't performative. There was no need to prove anything.

I liked her instantly. The calm in her voice. The ease of her presence. But more than that—I liked what they were. How they took up space together without crowding the room.

Taraj's voice pulled me back into the conversation. He was talking about a mix he'd lost on an old laptop, and Amaya was laughing—this soft, caught-off-guard sound—and I found myself leaning in, wanting more of it.

More of them. More of... him.

I asked, "What about y'all?"

Amaya paused. "What about us?"

"How did you... become you?"

The way she looked at Amir softened something in the air. Even the candlelight shifted.

"It started slow," she said. "Friendship. Distance. Circumstance. I used to think he wasn't ready."

"I wasn't," Amir said, without hesitation.

"But I wasn't honest either," Amaya added. "About what I wanted. About what

scared me.”

Her hand slid into his under the table. I saw the slight shift in their arms. Quiet. Certain.

“I said no to him for a long time. And then one day...” She met his gaze again. “He asked me to say yes. Fully. No hesitation.”

My smile came easy. But inside... something tugged.

That kind of intimacy—that choosing, over and over, without shame or question—I’d always wanted it. Dreamed it. Wrote it into my songs. But watching it in real time did something different. It scraped at the surface of something I didn’t even realize was tender.

I held that ache quietly. Let it move in the background.

The food arrived and helped shift the mood. My halibut was buttery and perfect, resting over the silkiest grits I’d ever tasted. I closed my eyes, let the flavor hit, and let out a small, irreverent sound.

“Lord,” I muttered. “This might be better than the session.”

The table laughed. Even Taraj. And in that warmth, I felt myself exhale. For real this time.

We flowed easy after that.

Stories. Tour chaos. A blown gig. Amir nearly choking on a fried pepper.

At one point, I caught Taraj watching me again.

And I smiled. Not to flirt. Not for show. But to say—I see you, too.

My foot brushed his under the table. I didn't move. Neither did he. But the tension rolled through me like smoke curling under a closed door.

When the check came, I sat back and watched Amaya rest her head on Amir's shoulder for a beat. Just a beat. But it was enough to make my chest tighten. Enough to remind me that what they had wasn't staged.

And that maybe... I still wanted something real too.

We stepped outside into a velvet-slick night. The air was cool and clean, kissed with spring. Amir and Amaya walked ahead, fingers brushing, locked into their own quiet orbit.

"I like her," I said, slipping my hands into my pockets. "Amaya. She's got a calm about her."

"She's real," Taraj said. "Always been that."

I nodded, eyes still on them. "You ever want that?"

It came out low. Softer than I meant. But the question felt honest in my mouth.

Taraj didn't rush the answer.

"Yes," he said finally.

The word hung there, warm and open.

I turned toward him, fully now. My body angled before I told it to be. And something

passed between us—electric.

He didn't crowd me. Didn't lean in with ego. Just looked at me, gaze steady and unreadable.

"I had a good time tonight," I said. "Didn't expect to."

He didn't answer right away. Just let the air sit.

Then, low, he said, "I knew you would. You needed the reminder."

My brow lifted. "Reminder of what?"

He stepped closer.

Close enough that the front of my coat brushed his chest. Close enough for my pulse to rise.

"That it's okay to want something real."

I didn't breathe. Not properly. Not until he looked at my mouth and then back into my eyes.

The hunger between us thickened. Not just lust. But something knotted with curiosity. Recognition. A slow, aching draw. I didn't step forward. But I didn't move away either.

Not even when Dre opened the truck door behind me.

"Night, Raj," I said, voice a little lower than before.

I slipped into the car, my body humming like it had been rewired.

And when I closed the door, I didn't look back.

But I felt him still.

Outside. Watching.

Wanting.

Just like I was.

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NINE

VoxRitual's plan worked.

The gallery photo hit the blogs three days after dinner.

It wasn't a full-on kiss. Not a headline-making slip of tongue or a red carpet grab. But it was intimate. Intentional. A captured moment that didn't need context to make the timelines speculate.

Taraj, head lowered, lips brushing the back of my hand like I was something holy.

Me, angled toward him, mouth soft, eyes half-lidded, looking like I'd been seen—and touched—exactly how I wanted to be.

There were no captions.

Just that one photo.

But that was enough.

Taraj Ferrell and Sienna Ray spark dating rumors after late-night gallery exit. Could this be more than a collab?

I didn't post a thing. Neither did he.

Our socials stayed silent. No joint photo. No wink-nudge captions. Not even a damn

emoji. And still... people started watching.

Thing was—I didn't mind the watching. What I minded was the pretending . Because every time we stepped into that studio together, the line between fiction and fact blurred a little more.

The air got tighter. The room grew smaller.

And the way his voice folded into mine during takes? That wasn't pretend.

That was pressure. Heat. A slow unraveling.

We stayed professional. Cool. Hands to ourselves. Eyes mostly focused. Mostly.

Still, something was happening. Something neither of us had language for. And that scared me more than the headlines.

Because I'd felt attraction before. I'd felt chemistry. But this—this wasn't chemistry.

This was gravity. And gravity doesn't ask permission.

We flew out of Pittsburgh early. Same flight, different rows. Aisle between us. Silence filled the rest.

The label jumped on the buzz and booked us for a brand appearance—invite-only, media-heavy, full of streaming execs and tastemakers. A curated rooftop vibe. Sponsored cocktails. Hidden cameras in every corner.

We were expected to arrive together. Maybe not touch. But look like two people one sip away from a kiss.

Flights to NYC were booked—first class seats, private SUV pickups, and two luxury suites at a five-star hotel in Tribeca. Classy. Polished. The kind of place with velvet banquettes in the lobby and diffused lighting that made you feel more expensive just walking through.

We didn't speak at baggage claim. Didn't ride over together but somehow, when I stepped off the elevator on the penthouse floor, he was already there—keycard in hand, standing just across the hall from my door.

Of course. Of course they'd put us close. Close enough to feel him move. Close enough to hear the click of his door. Close enough for the tension to start before the event even began.

I didn't say a word.

Just nodded once, cool, and turned into my suite.

Inside, the space was ridiculous—floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Hudson, a rainfall shower the size of a small bedroom, silk robes folded with precision on the edge of the bed. A bottle of champagne sat on ice near the window. A handwritten card from the label read:

“Let them see it. Even if you don't say it.”

God.

I kicked off my heels and walked to the window, phone in hand, thumb hovering over the screen.

For a second, I almost texted him. Not for anything specific. Just to break the quiet. Instead, I exhaled and slid my phone into my clutch.

I had a dress to put on. A night to survive. And a man across the hall I was trying too hard not to want.

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TEN

As my SUV slipped into lower Manhattan traffic, I stared out the tinted window and let the skyline press into me like a slow inhale.

New York always carried a certain hum—restless, expensive, already watching. And tonight, we were the show.

My phone buzzed before I could even settle. Brielle.

They want subtle PDA, lots of eye contact. Keep the story tight.

You're the music and the muse. Let them see it, even if you don't say it.

Let them see it.

Even if I was still trying to understand what it even was.

I thumbed open my messages to send some of my own.

Me: Almost there. Traffic is hell.

Jas: If he shows up in black again, just take me out.

Me: I'm tryna stay focused.

Jas: Girl. You already feel him. It's not about focus anymore. It's about what now.

I stared at her words. They echoed louder than she knew. Because what now was the question I kept dodging.

The car pulled to a soft stop. Dre's voice, warm and steady, came from the front. "We're here, Ms. Ray. I'll open the door for you."

I slipped my phone into my clutch and exhaled.

Black satin hugged every line of me. Off-the-shoulder. Fitted. A slit that whispered filth if you knew where to look. My hair hung full and soft over one shoulder, curls thick and defined. Skin dewy. Eyes lined in smoke.

I stepped out like I belonged to the night.

Flashes cracked from across the street—paparazzi, even though this wasn't supposed to be that kind of event. I didn't flinch. Let Dre shield me through the entryway.

And there he was. Standing by the glass elevator.

Slate gray suit. Collar open, no tie. Gold gleaming at his wrist. Hair pulled back, clean .

That quiet, lethal kind of fine.

His eyes found mine the moment I stepped in. And just like that—my pulse stuttered. That soft, traitorous flutter low in my belly.

He didn't smile. Just nodded once and somehow, even that made something clench between my legs.

He crossed the space and offered a hand to help me into the elevator. I didn't need it.

But I took it anyway.

The doors closed behind us.

Silence wrapped around our bodies like tension in silk.

“You look?—”

His eyes swept the length of me, slowly. “You wear that dress like it owes you something.”

I let a smile curl at my lips. “That supposed to be a compliment?”

I couldn’t help but bite with my words a bit. He disarmed me and I didn’t know what to do with that.

His gaze didn’t waver. “It’s truth. You already know that.”

I did.

The dress was a slip of black satin, thin-strapped and bias-cut, gliding over every curve like it had been poured.

Slit up the thigh, dipped low in the back.

It clung in all the right places and moved like water with each step.

I’d paired it with my favorite stilettos and a soft nude lip—but I knew it was the skin that made it sing.

Golden brown. Soft sheen. Collarbone kissed with just a whisper of highlight.

The kind of skin that caught streetlight and candlelight the same way—slow and seductive.

And the way he looked at me?

Like he wanted to touch every inch.

With his mouth. With his voice. With something deeper than either.

I tilted my head. “You’re late. ”

He stepped in just a little closer. Barely an inch. Still—it landed.

“Nah. I’m exactly on time.”

The elevator pinged.

Just before the doors parted, I glanced at him, voice low, steady. “This the part where we flirt for the cameras?”

He looked straight ahead. “Nah. This the part where I make sure you decide what’s real.”

And there it was again.

That quiet danger. That smooth, unhurried unraveling.

He wasn’t rushing me.

He was letting me come undone in my own time and we hadn’t even reached the rooftop yet.

The rooftop looked like wealth dressed in restraint. Gold lights strung like fallen stars. A jazz quartet tucked in the corner—upright bass, brushed snare, a sax that moaned low and slow.

Cocktails shimmered in tall glasses. Executives sipped. Influencers hovered. Designers posed without posing. And all of them... watching. So we gave them something to see.

Taraj and I stood close—like we knew how to share air.

No rehearsals. No cues. We moved like we belonged in each other's gravity. Every now and then, he leaned in, murmured something low.

And I laughed. Sometimes soft. Sometimes real. I didn't mean to but it happened.

He was still in that slate gray suit, still open at the collar like temptation. Still the voice that lived in my chest from the studio—rough, rich, magnetic.

I couldn't stop remembering how he'd sounded in my ear. Or how good he was at the silences—those moments between takes when nothing was said, but everything was loud.

"Someone should be filming this," I muttered under my breath.

"They are," he said.

I couldn't tell if we were playing a role... or if we'd already written something real. And the part of me that wanted it to be real? She was getting louder.

He led me to the edge of the terrace where the crowd thinned, the city stretched wide like a promise behind him—lit windows flickering like secrets.

We sat. Champagne came by twice. We both declined.

I glanced at him. The soft gold lights kissed the slope of his cheekbone, tracing that sharp, quiet beauty he carried without effort.

“You ever been to something like this before?” I asked, eyes on the skyline.

He shrugged, leaned back a little. “They tried. A year ago, while I was still in development. Another singer. Smaller fanbase, but her looks had the world hypnotized. They thought we’d sell well together.”

I didn’t respond right away. My body stayed still, but a sting bloomed somewhere behind my ribs.

Jealousy wasn’t something I wore often. But just then, it cinched tight around my lungs.

“What happened?” I asked, forcing my voice light.

He didn’t even blink. “Didn’t go for it. Wasn’t gonna start this chapter lying to myself.”

My pulse kicked.

That was the thing about Taraj. He didn’t sell fantasy. He offered truth. Raw. Uncut. Sometimes rough.

I let the silence stretch, my thoughts chasing each other in a blur of curiosity and something much hungrier.

“So why me?” I asked softly. “Why say yes to all of this with me? ”

He turned toward me, slow and deliberate. The warmth of his gaze swept over my face like fingers.

“Because your voice is honest,” he said. “And so are your beautiful eyes.”

Something trembled inside me. That was more than a compliment. That was a recognition.

The wind stirred. My skin prickled. But I wasn’t cold. I needed to address the truth since he so freely gave it.

“I know you feel it,” I said. “This.”

His eyes didn’t leave mine. “I do. It’s impossible not to.”

I drew in a breath, the world narrowing to the space between us.

“So what do we do about it?”

He leaned in just slightly, his voice a slow flame.

“Be as honest as the music. Follow the notes. Sing the song. Let the verses breathe and pulse around the thickness... and cry out when the moment catches fire.”

A pause. Then—“All we have to do is be honest.”

My panties were wet with his words.

Not just the sound of them, but the way he looked at me when he said them—like I was the melody he couldn’t stop working on.

From the far corner, the quartet played on—soft horn curling into the night like heat. We held each other's gaze, caught between restraint and something far more dangerous.

And then, he smiled. A slow, knowing thing that made me ache.

Midway through the night, the quartet shifted.

One of my earlier tracks—stripped down, slowed to a hush—poured into the air like silk. Someone must've requested it.

A few heads turned. A woman in a green dress called out, "Sienna, you got a mic in you tonight?"

I was already rising. "Don't I always?"

Soft laughter. Applause. A little hush.

I walked to the mic like I'd been born holding it .

The first line came low and breathy, just enough to catch the edge of the air.

By the second verse, I was in it—eyes closed, chest cracked open, emotion spilling like wine across velvet.

When I opened them again, he was watching me. Hands tucked in his pockets. Jaw tight. Eyes heavy like he was carrying something he couldn't name. So I sang deeper. I sang out to him.

Let the ache burn through every word until it wasn't just a performance—it was confession. And then... he moved.

Not to take the mic. Not to make a scene. He stepped beside me. Let the band curve around his presence, smooth and seamless. And then he spoke, his voice low but certain...

“She got a voice that don’t just sing—it remembers. Like it’s been here before. Like maybe I knew her back when I was whole...

Before the cameras. Before the pose. And now all I wanna do is match her tone.”

The rooftop held its breath.

So did I.

We stood there—just breath and tension and something bigger than either of us. And in that moment, I felt myself slipping.

Not falling. Slipping. Because falling feels like choice.

This—this felt like fate.

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ELEVEN

The night followed me. In the weight of my suit. The press of her palm on my chest when we posed for the cameras. The scent of her—vanilla and heat—still lingering in the folds of my jacket.

The car ride back was low-lit and quiet. Dre had jazz playing, something slow and breathy, like the soundtrack of a memory you hadn't made yet.

Sienna sat beside me, body turned slightly toward the window, eyes shadowed with thought.

But I could feel her.

Same way you feel the pull of gravity without thinking about it. She was right there. And every brush of her knee against mine was a reminder of what I couldn't touch. Not yet.

I was trying not to want. Trying to play the part. But she moaned into that mic tonight like she meant it, and I haven't caught my breath since.

Then she tapped Dre's shoulder. "Pull over?"

He glanced back in the mirror.

I looked at her, brow raised. "You serious?"

She nodded, eyes already locked on the window. “Dead.”

I followed her gaze.

Tiny corner pizza shop. Neon sign half-lit. Booths with peeling leather. Two kids tossing dough behind the glass like it mattered.

“I saw you nibbling on food all night.” I said, smirking.

“I’m starving,” she said, pushing the door open. “And that party food was all vibes and air.”

That made me laugh.

So we stepped out—me in slate gray, her in black satin—and walked into the kind of place nobody expected to see us in.

The warmth hit first. Spring air was funny like that. One minute you feel summer peaking out and then the fringes of winter shut her up. Then the garlic hit. Cheese. Tomato. Grease on wax paper. A holy smell if you were raised right.

We ordered at the counter. She got pepperoni. Extra cheese. I kept it plain. Folded it like ritual.

She took one bite, let out a sound so soft and guttural it made my jaw clench.

“Careful,” I said, eyes still on her delicious mouth.

She wiped the corner with a napkin. “What?”

“You makin’ sounds you might have to back up.”

That little laugh she gave me did something reckless to my pulse.

We slid into a booth by the window, red neon washing over her skin like something holy.

Her dress clung to her body in a way that made it impossible to look anywhere else—soft curves, smooth golden brown skin catching the low light like it had been dipped in honey and satin.

Her lips glistened from the gloss, or maybe from the grease she'd just licked away, slow and casual, off the corner of her mouth.

I watched it happen. Watched her tongue sweep that bottom lip while the cheese from her slice melted down her fingers.

God.

My bracelet caught the light when I dragged my thumb over the edge of my plate, pretending I wasn't staring.

But I was.

Her eyes met mine for a second too long, and there was a knowing in them. Like she felt it too. Like she was letting me.

We ate in silence for a while, but it wasn't the awkward kind. It was the kind that felt like... us. The kind that pulsed with things we weren't saying yet.

"You always been like this?" I asked, my voice lower than I meant it to be.

She blinked. "Like what?"

“Focused. Guarded. Beautiful...”

I leaned in a little, couldn't help it. My eyes dropped to her mouth.

“...And fully aware of what that means.”

“I'm not guarded.”

I gave her a look that said be serious .

She sighed, rolled her eyes, then lifted her hand to her mouth. The moment her lips wrapped around her thumb, slow and intentional, sucking the sauce clean—it short-circuited something in me.

My dick twitched under the table.

No lie. I pictured her mouth wrapped around me, that same concentration in her eyes. Wet. Soft. In control.

She didn't even notice the way my jaw flexed. Or maybe she did—because when her eyes flicked up, they'd gone darker. A shade slower. She played with the hoop in her ear like she needed something to do with her hands.

“Fine,” she murmured. “Maybe I am. But when the world keeps asking you to bleed and smile at the same time? Guarded feels like survival.”

I nodded.

Yeah. That, I knew.

She looked at me then. Really looked. Her lashes were thick and low, but her gaze

never wavered. Eyes like a storm rolling in—quiet, but heavy. Measuring.

“What about you?” she asked.

I finished the last bite, wiped my fingers, and leaned back, arm draped over the booth like I wasn’t on fire from the inside out.

“What about me?”

“You always been like this?”

“Define this .”

“Quiet. Magnetic.” She tilted her head, eyes roaming slow like she was mapping me.

“The kind of man who leaves a mark just by looking.”

That pulled a smile from me. Barely.

But I didn’t deny it.

“I’ve had a lot of false starts,” I said. “Music. People. Promises. Learned early that everything loud isn’t lasting. So yeah—I move different now.”

She nodded. Didn’t speak right away. Just licked a drop of sauce from her bottom lip, then let it catch between her teeth before she pulled it back in .

Then her voice dropped.

“Why move with me?”

She asked it softly, like she wasn’t sure she wanted the answer out loud.

I looked at her for a long time.

Not just because I was still replaying the image of her mouth.

But because the question— her —deserved more than something rehearsed.

“You don’t try too hard,” I said. “That’s rare.”

Her lips parted slightly, glistening from the gloss and the heat of the food. She didn’t speak—just tilted her head, that earring swaying, catching light.

I leaned in, kept my voice low.

“You listen more than you speak. You hold your ground. And when you walk into a room, it’s like...”

I exhaled.

“It’s like music starts playing, and only I can hear it.”

Her eyes darkened.

She looked at me like she was reading every line I hadn’t written yet.

“You’re serious,” she murmured.

I nodded.

“Dead.”

She traced her finger around the rim of her glass, slow.

“You know... I don’t usually feel seen this early.”

“You ever been studied though?” I asked.

That made her smile. The kind that curled at one side and sent a ripple through my bloodstream.

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“I’m trying not to. But you make it hard.”

She leaned in too now, and the space between us thinned. Her thigh brushed mine under the table. Her gaze flicked to my mouth for a second before meeting my eyes again .

“Keep talking like that,” she said, “and I’m gonna start thinking this isn’t just about music.”

I let my smile show then. All of it.

“Maybe it never was.”

It wasn’t just about the muse or marketing. She was something I was already writing into the marrow of my next verse.

Sienna

We pulled up to the hotel just before midnight.

The street had quieted, but the city’s hum never truly stopped—it just slid underground. Like craving. Like curiosity. Like everything I hadn’t dared to name.

The car door opened, and cool air kissed my legs. My heels clicked against the wet concrete, the sound sharp, feminine, and assured.

Taraj moved beside me. Still not touching. Still too close.

The doorman nodded, but I barely registered it. All I could feel was him. His steps beside mine.

His energy trailing like heat down my back.

His voice from earlier curling in my ear... You ever been studied though?

Inside, the elevator was all mirrors and low, golden light. The doors closed behind us, and silence folded around our bodies like silk.

He stood behind me—close enough that I felt the warmth of him radiating between us. His breath ghosted the back of my neck. My pulse jumped.

The air changed. I felt his gaze climbing the back of my thighs, reading the tension in my spine, imagining things I couldn't let myself say out loud .

When the elevator chimed, I stepped forward. Slowly. Not because I was uncertain. But because I didn't want to lose the way his presence followed me.

His suite was just two doors down. Every step carried the weight of what hadn't happened yet.

At my door, I paused and he slowed beside me.

The hallway was quiet. Like even the walls were waiting.

“I had a good night,” I whispered, my voice softer than it should’ve been.

More like confession.

“Me too,” he said. “Every part of me did.”

His tone was low. Velvet dipped in sin.

It made my stomach clench.

I turned toward him, my shoulder brushing his chest. I could smell him now—amber, spice, something masculine and unrushed.

“Night, Raj.”

“Night, Sienna.”

His voice lingered. Like he wanted the words to stay on my skin.

I opened my door. Slipped inside but even then— I felt him.

All I could think was... we’re not pretending anymore. Are we?

The robe was soft against my skin, but it didn’t soothe me.

I’d washed the night from my body, but not from my blood.

It beat in my chest. Flickered behind my knees. Settled hot between my thighs, soaking my flesh.

I climbed into bed trying my best to ignore what he kindled inside of me.

My phone lit up beside me.

Jas: So...?

Me: I almost jumped the man's bones.

Jas: I KNEW IT

Me: We ate pizza. Talked. He's not what I thought.

Jas: Lemme guess. Brooding. Brilliant. Built like a god?

Me: ...

Jas: Girl.

Jas: Go to his room.

Me: I can't.

Jas: Why not?

Me: Because if I do... it's not just sex. There's something else here...

Jas: So what?

Me: So I think I like him. And this whole thing is supposed to be pretend.

Jas: Then stop pretending.

I stared at the screen.

My heart thudded—not fast. Just deep. Like it had been waiting to speak up. Because it wasn't the sex I feared.

It was everything after.

The way things shift once you give in. The way silence the next morning says more than words.

I turned off the lamp. Dropped the phone.

But my body didn't listen.

The sheets were cool against my skin, but I was flushed. Too aware. Still thinking about the look in his eyes when he said maybe it never was.

I shut my eyes and tried to wait it out. Ten minutes. Twenty.

An hour.

Still burning.

I kicked the covers off. Sat up. No plan. No shame. No lies.

The night wasn't done.

And neither was I.

TWELVE

She was still under my skin.

That slit in her dress. The sway of her hips when she walked ahead of me—heels clicking soft against the marble like percussion she didn't mean to play. The way she smelled when she leaned in close—like honey melting on brown skin, like heat after dusk, like a promise I'd crawl to keep .

And her voice... fuck . It lived in my chest now.

Not just the way she sang—but the way she said my name. Slow. Measured. Like she'd claimed it. Like she already knew it belonged on her tongue.

I'd been half-hard since the elevator ride. No touches. No kisses. Just breath and silence and glances that peeled the pretense off both of us.

Now, I was fresh out the shower with the steam thick in the air, my towel slung low on my hips, water sliding down my back and my chest still damp. My dick already heavy with need, pulsing with every memory of her mouth.

Then the knock came. Two taps. Then silence.

Another—softer. Certain.

My hand gripped the knob, and when the door swung open—there she was. Black trench coat. Heels. Nothing else and that calm look on her face—like she knew I'd

open. Like this wasn't a question. Just inevitability.

She stepped inside without a word. Turned to face me. Her eyes slow and direct, dark as the night.

Then—two fingers. Soft against my lips.

“No talking,” she whispered. “Not tonight.”

I didn't breathe. Her voice was heat and hush and hunger.

She stepped closer, the hem of her coat brushing my knees. Her lips grazed my jaw, just enough to tease.

“We should sing instead.”

Her scent—skin and perfume made to be kissed off—hit me in the chest like a drumline.

“Do you want to sing with me, Taraj?”

My name had never sounded so undone. I reached for the belt of her coat.

She stopped me. “I didn't say take it off,” she murmured. “Not yet.”

My dick throbbed under the towel like it had ears. “You like control,” I said, voice thick. “I like rhythm. And you've got it.”

She circled me, slow and deliberate, her coat parting just enough for me to catch black lace clinging to her perfect ass, a peek of her slick thighs, the soft curve of pussy lips beneath sheer fabric. She walked like sin—on beat.

When she turned back, her lips were parted, eyes lit with something primal.

“I was just tested. You?”

“Yeah, and I’ve not been with anyone for a while.”

She smiled.” A year for me. I’m on the pill.”

My dick pulsed and I swallowed hard. it was clear what she wanted. She wanted raw. Skin to skin. Flesh to flesh. She wanted everything, and I was going to give it. The proof of that came with her next words.

“I don’t want slow tonight,” she said. “Not at first.”

That was all it took because i didn’t think I could go slow—not when I’d been thinking about smelling and tasting her pussy all night. I let the towel fall.

Her eyes dropped—and stayed.

I crossed the space between us in one step—mouth crashing into hers, hands gripping her hair, dragging down the length of her spine, molding to her waist, then lower, gripping her ass with both palms like it belonged to me.

Her lips parted. Tongue met mine—slick, hot, eager. She moaned into me—deep, messy, like she’d been waiting all fucking day.

I walked her backward until her back hit the wall. My body pinned hers, just enough pressure to remind her how hard I was, how ready. Our hands tangled before I slid mine up, trapping her wrists above her head as my mouth traveled down the silk heat of her neck.

Her skin was like fucking velvet. Warm, flushed, tasting like want.

I licked below her jaw, across her collarbone, down to the swell of her breasts. I sucked her nipple through the lace—slow, greedy pulls that had her back arching, her hips lifting.

She gasped. “Oh my?—”

I dropped to my knees before she could finish the thought.

Her coat slipped from her shoulders and puddled at her ankles—pooling around those fuck-me heels like an offering.

She stood there in nothing but black lace. Thighs trembling. Pussy glistening through sheer fabric that did nothing to hide how soaked she was.

I looked up at her as I hooked my fingers in the lace and eased it aside.

Her mound was plush. Slick. A soft patch of hair glistening with wetness. Her lips were swollen, parted, her clit peeking out like it was begging for my mouth.

God.

She was ready for me.

And I was going to give that pussy the kind of attention it wouldn't forget.

Her breath was shallow. Her eyes heavy. Her pussy—wet, pulsing, calling to my fucking mouth. I kissed her thigh. Then higher. Then again at the crease of her hip.

Her fingers slid into my braids.

I dragged my mouth lower, pressed my tongue against her slit and licked—slow and deliberate, savoring the taste of her through the lace. She gasped, hips jerking. She tasted so fucking good. Her scent in the back of my throat increased the experience of her. God.

“Raj...”

I gripped her ass, pulled her tighter to my face, and devoured.

Tongue flattening against her clit. Circling. Flicking. Tuning myself to every tremble and moan. My fingers slid between her folds. Found her dripping. I pushed two inside—deep and curling, stroking that spot that made her knees shake.

She rocked her hips against my mouth, chased the rhythm like she was built for it. She came once—hard. Her thighs clamped around my head. Then again, messier. Louder.

She tried to pull away, but I kept her there. Tongue fucking her, fingers working her open, until she shattered all over again. Her cum all over my mouth and goatee.

“Raj—fuck?—”

I stood. My dick was throbbing, veins tight with pressure, her taste slick on my tongue.

“I want it,” she whispered. “I want your dick inside me. Now.”

I didn’t make her repeat it.

She reached for me, wrapped her hand around my length.

“God, you’re thick...”

I groaned. Her hand stroked from base to tip, slow and reverent.

Then she dropped to her knees.

Her lips wrapped around me—and I damn near lost it.

Wet. Warm. She took her time. Tongue flicking under the head, sliding down my shaft like she was trying to memorize the shape of my hunger.

Spit slicked her chin, coated her hand. She moaned around me—deep, filthy—and that vibration had me clenching my fists just to stay grounded.

Then she looked up. Eyes wild. Lips stretched.

Throat swallowing around my dick like she wanted to leave a mark on my soul.

“Fuck,” I muttered. “Sienna...”

I pulled her up, grabbed her by the waist, and lifted her like she weighed nothing.

Her arms wrapped around my neck. Legs locked around my hips. She didn’t ask questions.

I carried her to the bed and laid her back against the sheets, spread her thighs wide, and stared at her pussy—wet, glistening, pulsing.

The lace was soaked. Barely there.

I pushed it aside and dragged the head of my dick through her slit—just once.

She gasped. Then I slid in. Slow. Thick. Deep.

“Shit,” I groaned. “You’re so fucking tight…”

She clamped around me like her pussy had been waiting just for this. Just for me.

Her hips lifted, heels pressing into the backs of my thighs, and I drove deeper, hitting the hilt with a grunt.

Her moan ripped through the room.

“Taraj—fuck—yes?—”

I braced over her and moved—deep, full strokes that made the bed rock beneath us. Her nails clawed my back. Her mouth met mine, hot and wild, licking into me between cries.

I fucked her like she was already mine. Harder. Deeper. Her pussy clenched around me over and over, dripping, soaking us both.

She shook beneath me. Legs quivering. Mouth open, breath stuttering.

Then she came on my dick. Screaming.

I didn’t stop.

I fucked her through it—through the trembling, the way her pussy pulsed, the way she whimpered, “Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t fucking stop ? —”

And I didn’t. I gave her everything. Every inch. Every stroke.

Until I felt it building. That tight coil. The edge.

Her lips brushed my ear.

“Cum inside me.”

That was it.

My hips jerked. My rhythm faltered.

I buried myself deep, spilled inside her with a growl that tore straight from my gut.

Hot. Full. Shaking. Her name on my lips. Again. And again.

Sienna .

Sienna.

Sienna.

We collapsed into each other, bodies soaked in sweat and slick, breaths tangled. Her pussy still pulsing around me. My heart crashing into hers like we'd just come back from war.

And in the silence that followed, I didn't feel hollow.

I felt home.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

“He touched me like a melody he was aching to master—fingers deep in the music of my body, coaxing every gasp, every moan, until the song of me spilled out, raw and unfiltered.”

SIENNA

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

THIRTEEN

I was still in his bed.

Still bare. Still damp.

Still full.

Still coming down from something that felt like being split open and sanctified in the same breath.

Morning light crept through the blackout curtains—soft, golden, and shameless. Like it had watched the whole thing and came crawling in to gossip about it.

The sheets were pushed low around my hips.

One thigh thrown over his.

His hand splayed on it—heavy and warm, like a man claiming what he'd earned.

His chest pressed to my back, breath steady against my skin. Every inch of him still touched me. Still lingered inside me.

Like we hadn't stopped—just paused somewhere between the third orgasm and the fourth round.

And maybe that was true. Because I hadn't moved.

Not when the sun peeked in. Not when my thighs trembled with the slow, steady ache of being fucked senseless.

Not even when my pussy clenched from memory alone.

God.

I was wrecked.

Still swollen. Still wet. Still tasting him at the back of my throat.

He hadn't just fucked me.

He worshipped me.

He ruined me.

He talked that shit with a voice that sounded like gravel dipped in syrup. Told me it was his pussy. His fat pussy. His perfect pussy. That he wanted it from the moment he met me—knew it would be as good as my voice, as wet as my lips, as deep as my throat he wanted to coat.

And he meant every word of it.

I could still feel his dick stretching me open. That curve. That girth. Like he was made to fill me.

I'd never been fucked like that in my life. I shifted and felt the ache bloom again. My body shivered. My pussy clenched .

I was sore.

Happy. Fucked-stupid sore. And somehow—I felt shy.

Which made no damn sense.

I'd swallowed his cum like it was the last meal I'd ever get. Sweet. Salty. Thick. I'd moaned around him like I was starving. And I was.

Still might be.

Because we'd gone again before sleep claimed us.

I remembered climbing on top of him, planting my feet in the mattress, riding him hard while my tits bounced in time and his mouth latched onto them like he owned them.

I remembered his voice—low and filthy—telling me to ride his dick, smacking my ass while I moaned through it.

I remembered being on all fours, biting the sheets as he pounded me from behind, thick and relentless, sweat dripping from his chest onto my back.

And when he pressed a finger into my ass and whispered, “You can take it, baby. This body was made for mine,” I came again—loud, shaking, calling out to God like I meant it.

I promised him shit I'd never promised anyone.

And when I collapsed, it was with him still buried inside me—so deep I swore he was touching something sacred.

Now, I was under the water, having left his room in the early morning hours to

prepare to leave. it was hard, as him, to leave because he wanted to go again. But I reminded him that being late wasn't my style. He reluctantly let me go with a grunt.

Thinking back to him lying on those white sheets, his brown skin glowing. His thick dick laying against his stomach waiting for me, had me wondering how I managed to carry this will power. Because he had been perfect.

My hand braced against the tile.

Head bowed and allowed the water to rinse my hair while my pussy throbbed slow. A dull, perfect ache.

And still... I wanted more .

He had ruined me.

The kind of ruin that tasted like honey and salt. Like his cum in my mouth, thick and warm, and the greedy way I'd begged for it again.

I remembered the weight of his tongue. The snap of his hips. The stretch of his dick inside me—claiming, praising, punishing.

You feel that, Sienna?

This pussy was made for me.

Say it.

Say it's mine.

And I had. I fucking had.

Wrapped in a towel, I stepped out.

Feet soft on the cool floor. Breath shaky.

Heart somewhere between hope and what the fuck just happened.

My phone blinked on the nightstand.

1 message.

Brielle – Manager: Call me when you're up. The label loved y'all last night.

I sighed. Picked it up. Dialed.

She answered on the first ring. "You're awake. Good. That little show you and Raj put on? A hit. The press ate it up. Three new blog features, and the execs are asking about a joint interview."

I rubbed my temple. "It wasn't a show, Brie."

Silence.

Then, "You know what I mean."

My phone buzzed.

Jasmine: Girl. Someone got a shot of you heading into his room last night.

Tell me that man didn't just have you singin' solos with no damn mic .

"Brie, hold on."

“No, you go ahead. I’ll text you. Sounds like you need a minute.” There was no judgment in her voice. Only understanding from one woman to the next.

Jasmine again:

[Image attachment: grainy, but clear enough—me, in my trench, stepping into his room.]

I closed my eyes. Covered my face. Groaned.

Another buzz.

Brielle:

Just got the pic. Label execs are obsessed. One of them just sent heart eyes.

I didn’t respond.

Because last night wasn’t strategy—it wasn’t content—and it wasn’t curated. It was him. Me. Us.

And already... it didn’t feel like mine anymore.

FOURTEEN

She hadn't said much since we got here.

Security had swept us through a back entrance and into the private wing of the first-class lounge—quiet, exclusive, designed to keep flashbulbs and whispers at bay. Our handlers stayed close but out of sight, giving us space like they could feel the shift in our energy.

We sat across from each other, both pretending not to be rattled while the distant clink of polished cutlery and the soft murmur of boarding announcements drifted through the air—like nothing was burning beneath the surface.

But it was.

Sienna sat across from me, legs crossed, that black trench coat folded over the back of her chair like it hadn't been peeled off her shoulders hours ago while I was on my knees. Like I hadn't kissed her until her thighs shook. Like I hadn't made her promise things she whispered into my mouth.

Like I hadn't cum inside her more than once.

And now she was sipping on her tea. Calm. Composed. Like she hadn't just moaned my name into a pillow while her ass rolled like a wave against me. Like I hadn't fucked her again before dawn.

Like she hadn't ridden me with her feet planted on the mattress, tits bouncing, my

name spilling from her lips as I sucked them into my mouth and told her to ride my dick like she meant it.

Her hair was up again. Bun tight. But a few curls had slipped free around her temples, softening everything she was trying to harden. Her skin caught the light like honey over bronze. And her blouse... that silk clung to her breasts like it still remembered the way I'd held her after.

Too cool. Too put together. But she caught me watching.

I looked away first.

Because I had questions I didn't know how to ask without sounding like I gave a damn. But I did. More than I should've.

Amir sent me a text this morning.

Amir:

Lemme find out you got trench coat pussy walkin' out your suite like you Bond or some shit,

[Image attached]

Respectfully... you wildin.

I almost laughed. Almost. But when I tapped the image, everything in me stilled.

It was Sienna outside my suite.

Her hair slightly tousled. Lips parted.

Eyes locked on me standing in the doorway with a towel around my hips.

Whoever took it caught the moment too well.

I stared at it too long.

Every memory hit at once?—

Her body bouncing on top of me. Her hand stroking my dick before sliding her mouth down the length of it. The way she whispered, “This right here. Your dick down my throat will never be pretend.”

Right before my hand gripped her head. Guiding her up and down my shaft.

It was all there. Laid bare in one image. No press release. No caption. Just truth.

My chest tightened. Because that moment had been ours. Now it was out there. Exposed. Speculated on. Packaged for clicks.

I came back to the present like someone had snapped their fingers in my face.

Sienna sat across from me—legs crossed, tea lifted to her lips, jaw tight.

I couldn’t unsee what had already been taken from us. I leaned forward, elbows on my knees.

“You tell anyone about last night?”

Her brow lifted—barely. “No.”

“Your manager?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think Brielle would’ve leaked it. That’s not like her. She’s my girl. For real.”

I nodded. Let that settle in the space between us. Watched her sip again like her lips hadn’t just been stretched around my dick, spit sliding down her chin, eyes rolled back while she moaned around my name.

“Do you think I did it?” she asked, voice soft but direct.

“No,” I said evenly. “I don’t.”

But someone did.

And whoever it was made sure to get the best shot.

“That photo was clear as fuck.”

“I know,” she murmured. “Too clear.”

Silence fell again—wide and taut.

The kind that held every question we didn’t want to ask. Because answering them would mean saying out loud that this wasn’t pretend anymore.

She turned toward the window.

Her profile still and regal. Watching planes lift into the sky while her jaw worked, tight and subtle. Her lips parted like she was trying to swallow something she didn’t want to name. Her blouse rose and fell with each breath, tugging over her tits—and her nipples? Still hard.

My dick stirred. Just like that.

She didn't even have to try. My body had been rewritten in her key. Every moan. Every arch. Every filthy promise. Etched into my memory now. Burned into bone.

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Could've been Jalen."

She looked back. "You think he'd do that?"

"He knows what the label wants. Might've figured stirring the pot early would help."

And if I'm being honest, I never trusted his loyalty. Jalen was still in it for the money.

"That's not his call to make."

Her voice cut sharp—angry. Passionate. I felt it in my chest. And lower.

"That fire in your throat," I said, voice low, "I felt it last night too."

She looked away. But not before I caught the flicker of heat beneath the surface .

"I'll talk to him," I added. "Make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Good." Her tone was clipped. "Because this thing's already blurry enough."

She was right. Blurry and messy were the names of the game when it came to public speculation, and the plan was never that. It was to build anticipation and wonder, but once the world got inside of your house or bedroom, in this case, they could tear up whatever was special to you.

I'd tried to stay focused. Tried to remember the music. But all I could hear was

Sienna's breath stuttering against my throat.

All I could feel was her nails in my shoulders, her voice in my ear, her body trembling around me as she came again—tight, wet, mine .

We hadn't talked about what it meant but I wanted an answer that couldn't fit in a press packet. She shifted. Crossed her legs tighter.

Her tongue flicked across her bottom lip.

She whispered, "We're not supposed to do it again, right?"

I stared.

Dropped my gaze to her chest.

Then back up to her eyes.

"Right," I rasped.

"So we won't."

"Right."

But we both sounded like liars.

She stood, reached for her coat. "I'm ready when you are."

Our flight was boarding in ten.

Dre was already waiting when we stepped through Arrivals at Pittsburgh

International.

Posted near the private pickup zone—cleared, quiet, shielded. A black Escalade idled at the curb, windows dark, engine soft. His stance was relaxed, but his eyes clocked everything.

Security had walked us from the gate to this point without incident, keeping press and gawkers at a distance. The kind of escort that said: these two matter.

He spotted us through the glass and stepped out just as we approached. I could tell—he'd seen the photo. The look in his eyes wasn't judgment. Just awareness. And maybe a quiet warning: don't play with her unless you mean it.

"Good trip?" he asked, moving to grab our bags off the cart.

Sienna gave a small nod, but her gaze slid to me—and held.

There was fire in it. Banked low. Controlled. But burning.

The kind of fire that made you forget what silence was even for.

Dre looked between us. Then back at her.

"Where am I taking you, Ms. Ray?"

She didn't answer. Not right away. She just kept watching me. Eyes steady. Unapologetic.

And everything in her look said your move.

My voice came out low. I had to have her again.

“Take us to mine.”

Sienna turned back to Dre, smooth as ever. “You heard him.”

He didn’t blink. Just opened the back door and loaded our bags like this was nothing out of the ordinary.

We slid into the backseat. We were lying again. To the label. To the press. To whoever took that photo and tossed it to the wolves.

But not to each other.

Not tonight.

I looked out the window, watched the city smear past in streaks of streetlight and glass. But in my head, I was already unzipping her coat again. Already hearing her whisper my name into my mouth.

Already bracing for the wreck I knew was coming—and chasing it anyway.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

FIFTEEN

His place smelled like oud and something darker. Something warm. Masculine. Not cologne—presence. Like heat still lived in the walls.

Like secrets had been fucked into the furniture and never fully left.

It reminded me of the scent I chased along his neck.

A body oil he once said came from Jamil's in East Liberty.

"It's called Amber Smoke. What, you like it?"

"I love it," I'd practically purred.

I stepped inside his condo apartment slowly, pulling my coat tighter—even though I wasn't cold.

It was nerves. Tight around the edges. Trying to keep me small when I'd come here to open.

The foyer gave way to an open-concept living space—wide and intentional. Hardwood floors stretched beneath my heels, dark and matte, like they'd been chosen just to hush the sound of footsteps.

To the left, tall built-in shelves cradled rare vinyls and first-edition books. A console held a vintage record player gleaming like it was loved.

A mic stand stood in the far corner, spotlighted by a track light overhead—silent, but not forgotten.

Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the skyline. Curtains open. City lights pouring in like applause.

The couch was low, deep, and masculine—charcoal velvet with clean lines, draped in a single soft throw the color of wine.

No clutter. No noise.

Just mood.

Just him.

Lighting glowed amber from recessed strips hidden in the ceiling, casting the whole place in a hush. Every detail whispered that he knew beauty—had studied it, trusted it, touched it often.

Taraj dropped his keys in a black stone dish by the door still carrying that delicious restraint that made my thighs press together just to survive him.

I looked at him— really looked.

Hair loose from his braids—he took them out on the flight. Chestnut brown skin golden under the low lights.

That mouth—the same one that made me cum so hard I forgot my name. And those eyes? Already undressing me again. Like memory wasn't enough. He needed more.

“You want something to drink?” he asked, heading toward the kitchen.

“Water’s fine.”

I followed and stayed on the other side of the island like that slab of stone could protect me from what we both knew was coming.

He passed me the glass. Our fingers brushed. And just like that, my pussy pulsed. No warning. No finesse. Just raw need, curling in my belly like smoke.

Still, we danced around it.

The want. The danger. The lie we’d both agreed to that was unraveling with every second we were alone.

“I came to hear more of your work,” I said, lips brushing the rim of the glass.

His eyes dropped to my mouth. Stayed there.

“Right. Studio’s in the back.”

But neither of us moved.

“That’s where the magic happens?” I asked, voice light even though my pulse wasn’t.

His dark eyes pinned me in. Reading me. Knowing me. “Some of it.”

We both knew we weren’t talking about the booth.

He set down his drink. Rounded the island.

Stopped in front of me—all heat and quiet pressure.

“You good?” His voice was deep enough to stir something slick and messy between my thighs.

I nodded, no more pretending. “Yeah.”

He stepped closer. So close I had to tilt my chin to meet his gaze.

“So if I kissed you right now...”

A pause. A breath .

“You wouldn’t stop me?”

I licked my lips. “No. I’d kiss you back.”

Why lie, when the truth tasted better?

He didn’t wait. His mouth found mine like it belonged there.

He kissed me like he’d been starving since the second I left his bed. And I kissed him like I was still wet from the memory of his tongue.

Like I still had his cum on my tongue and wasn’t ready to let it go.

His hands gripped my hips. Mine slid up his chest, fingers grazing the chain he never took off—resting just above the heart I hadn’t meant to touch.

I wanted to taste all of him. So I did.

We didn’t make it to the studio.

He backed me up against the island, pressed his mouth to mine, and kissed me like he was trying to undo the flight, the photo, the silence. Then he gripped the backs of my thighs, and lifted me onto the counter like I weighed nothing.

My skirt slid up easily. His hands pulled it higher—fingers dragging up the backs of my thighs, parting them.

He dropped to his knees.

And when he pushed my panties to the side and saw how wet I already was—he groaned. Low. Deep. Like I was the only thing he wanted to pray to.

He didn't say a word. He just ate me. Tongue wide and slow. Focused. Devoted.

He licked through my folds and sucked my clit like he was trying to pull a melody from it.

He took his time, like he was making music and I was the beat.

I cried out. Loud. Desperate.

Legs open, trembling, one heel banging softly against a cabinet .

One hand in his hair. The other gripping the edge of the counter like it could keep me from floating away.

He moaned against me, like the taste had wrecked him.

And when I came—shaking, dripping into his mouth, hips lifting off the counter—he didn't stop.

He licked me through the aftershocks, eyes half-lidded and locked on my face. Like he needed to see what he'd done to me. Like he wanted to be sure I'd never forget.

He didn't stop. Not even when I came once, twice—shaking, gasping, dripping down his face.

He just rose, eyes dark and glazed, lips shining and kissed me like he needed me to taste what he'd just done to me.

We crashed on the couch.

Limbs tangled. Breaths uneven.

Ordered Thai. Something spicy. Neither of us touched it.

"I don't usually do this," I said, curled into his side, cheek pressed to his bare chest.

"Me either."

I looked up. "You sure about that?"

He smiled. "Not like this."

I believed him.

The music played low—Chaka, Chante, Marvin. A playlist made for sweat and skin.

He told me about his sister Mena. About his mom leaving. The split that shaped him and then he looked at me, like he needed to know more.

"What about you?"

I sighed. Let it spill.

“I sacrificed a lot for this career. Family. Time. A real shot at love.

I think people forget women like me want softness too. I want to be touched. Desired. I want pleasure without performance. But I rarely let myself have it.”

He didn’t speak.

Just listened .

And that —that gaze? That stillness? That presence ? It unraveled me more than any tongue.

“I wasn’t planning on sleeping with you again,” I whispered. “But my body didn’t ask for permission.”

“Neither did mine.”

He kissed me again. Reverent. Then he laid me down—right there on the rug in front of the speakers.

The city outside didn’t matter. Not tonight. He kissed every inch of me. My mouth. My throat. My breasts. My thighs.

Bit my shoulder when I whispered his name.

Licked my clit until my legs trembled again.

Then finally— finally —he slid inside. Thick. Deep.

One slow thrust that felt like he was filling me with truth.

He didn't pound. He pressed.

Body to body. Soul to soul.

He fucked me with his eyes locked on mine, his voice in my ear.

"This pussy mine now?"

I moaned. Nodded.

"Say it."

"It's yours."

"Say it again."

"Fuck, Taraj. It's yours."

His hand slid under my ass. He lifted me to meet every thrust.

His mouth found mine again—wet, messy, hungry.

And I told him through moans, through breath, through touch— I want you.

I need this.

I need you.

When I came, it was a quake—low and long, dragging me under.

When he followed, he wrapped me in both arms, groaning against my neck like he couldn't let go of me .

And I didn't want him to.

We stayed like that.

Sweaty. Tangled. Silent.

And for the first time in a long time, I didn't think about what I might lose.

I thought about what I might be brave enough to keep.

SIXTEEN

We hadn't talked about those nights. Not in the studio. Not in the hall. Not when she leaned over me to adjust a mic level, and her soft hair grazed my jaw. Not when I passed her a water bottle and our fingers stayed touching for just a beat too long.

But the silence didn't make it disappear. If anything, it deepened it.

That first night in New York lived in every breath we took now. A low hum under every lyric. A memory threaded through the soundscape of our sessions. It followed us like a bassline. One you didn't need to hear to feel.

And I felt her.

In every damn way. The clench of her wet pussy haunted my thoughts as did the sweet nectar of her invaded my thoughts.

Even now, her posture called out to me. The line of her neck, and the curve of her jaw...

Sienna was perched on the stool in the booth, curls pulled up again, neck bare like she was asking to be looked at. A soft sheen on her collarbone. Tank clinging to her just right.

She sang into the mic like it was a secret. Notes wrapped in ache.

"It's not a lie if we both play along.

Call it a game, but I feel it too strong...”

I sat in the engineer’s chair, headphones half on, trying to stay focused.

But her voice? Shit. Her voice pressed against places in me that had nothing to do with music. And everything to do with how she sounded moaning my name, nails in my back, pussy wrapped around me like silk and fire.

I closed my eyes, jaw clenched.

“Run it back,” Amir said. “Let’s get another layer.”

She didn’t roll her eyes. Didn’t push back. Just nodded, took a slow breath, and reset.

I respected that about her. She gave the art everything. Didn’t force it. Let it build. She moved like someone who’d lived through things and turned every one of them into a note.

She finished the take and stepped out of the booth, tugging her sweatshirt over her head like it was part of her exhale.

She wore a ribbed black tank beneath it, thin and low, the kind of soft that only came from time and skin.

A sheen of sweat gleamed across her chest. Her curls were a little frizzy at the edges now, lips bare, voice slightly raw from the chorus she’d just poured her whole damn self into.

And every part of me reacted.

She dropped onto the couch beside me and took a long drink of water. Then let the

bottle rest against her lips for a second too long.

“You ever notice,” she said, not looking at me, “how music hits different when your heart’s in chaos?”

I dragged my gaze from her mouth, chest tightening. “Yeah. But sometimes... that’s when it hits the best.”

She turned to face me. “You ever make something that hurt too much to release?”

I looked down at my hands. “Yeah. Couple of times.”

Her voice lowered. “Me too.”

That silence settled again. Not heavy, but dense. Like steam.

She pulled one leg beneath her, and I saw her shoulders soften in that way they always did right before she opened up.

“My dad passed when I was fifteen,” she said quietly. “Heart attack. Out of nowhere.”

I blinked. “Damn. I’m sorry.”

She nodded, looking down. “He used to play jazz on vinyl when I was a kid. Miles, Coltrane, Ella. He said music was the only thing honest enough to trust.”

“That’s real.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I didn’t start singing until after he died. Like... something in my chest cracked open, and it just came out. At first it was grief.

Then it was the only thing that felt like home.”

I was quiet for a second. “You ever feel like the more success you get, the more you lose pieces of that? ”

She looked at me. “Every damn day.”

I exhaled. “People think this life is all studio lights and stages. But they don’t see what it costs.”

“Relationships,” she said. “Privacy. Sleep. Peace.”

“Yourself.”

She nodded. “But it’s still worth it.”

“Why?”

She paused. “Because when I’m in that booth... when I hit a note and feel it in my spine—I know I’m alive. That something real is still inside me.”

I looked at her. Not just looked— saw her.

The woman beneath the fire. The girl who sang her pain into purpose. The artist who had traded comfort for truth and still managed to sound like salvation.

“You close with your people?” she asked, voice low like it wasn’t just curiosity—but something deeper. A reach.

Taraj nodded, thumb brushing the rim of his glass. “Mena, yeah. That’s my sister. She kept me anchored when everything else felt like it was coming undone. My

parents split when I was twelve. Shit got real messy. Mena stepped up... raised me in ways our mother couldn't at the time."

Sienna watched him, something warm flickering behind her eyes. "That kind of bond—don't come easy."

"She's everything. Real talk, I think she's the reason I didn't lose myself. The reason I still got some softness left."

Sienna nodded, slow and knowing. "My mom's that for me. We talk every other day, even if it's just a voice note or FaceTime. She's the one who told me to chase the music, even when it didn't make sense to anyone else."

Taraj looked at her like he could already picture that woman—grit wrapped in love.

"She says, 'your voice is a gift, but it's not all you are.'"

"That's beautiful."

"Yeah." Her gaze softened. "She reminds me to live outside the songs too. To feel things that ain't for the stage. "

He sat with that. Let it settle between them.

"You ever get scared?" he asked. "Loving people like that. Knowing they can be taken from you?"

Sienna didn't answer right away.

"I lost my dad when I was nine," she said finally. "I didn't understand the weight of it then... just that he was here one day and gone the next. Watching my mom hold it

together, raise me on her own, still find room to pour into my dreams... that shaped everything.”

She looked away, just for a moment. Then back at him.

“So yeah, I know what it means to lose. But I also know what it means to survive it. To still love anyway.”

Taraj’s jaw tightened like he felt it somewhere deep. He didn’t speak right away.

When he did, it was quiet. “That kind of strength... that’s why your voice hits the way it does.”

That hit different.

We sat with that for a while.

Both of us too full of words to speak any more of them.

Then Amaya walked in with coffee, lightening the energy. She lit up when she saw Sienna and they fell into easy banter—skincare, teas, natural deodorant debates. I watched Sienna lean into that joy, watched her laugh like it came from somewhere new.

But every so often, she’d glance my way. Not to flirt. Just to see me.

And when our eyes met, I knew she’d felt every word we hadn’t said.

Because this wasn’t just sex anymore. Wasn’t just sound waves and chemistry. It was resonance and maybe something deeper than that.

Later that night, after everyone dipped out and the studio was quiet again, my phone buzzed .

I let it ring once. Twice.

Then picked it up, leaning against the back wall where the light didn't quite reach.

“What’s up, old man?”

“ You tell me,” he said, his voice that familiar gravel—seasoned, steady. “Heard the new track.”

I exhaled through my nose. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Sounded good. Clean. Focused. But...”

I smirked. “Still needs something?”

A beat passed. “Mmm. Yeah. But I ain’t talkin’ about the song, son.”

My chest got still. Eyes dropped to the floor like they were trying to dodge something I couldn’t name.

“I’m talkin’ about her.”

I didn’t say anything. The silence stretched long, but not empty. It was full of all the things I’d been avoiding.

“You love this work. Love this craft. You know what rhythm is. You know what tension is. But you sound like you’re stuck in both right now. Trust me, I’ve been there, but I was there because I was running the street game, and nothing about the

game supports love. Your music is all love.”

I closed my eyes for a second. Let the words soak.

The game my dad played was a dangerous one.

It helped to end his marriage to my mom.

It had him losing people who mattered to him.

People I never met, gone long before I was created.

It had him missing out on Mena’s and my childhood.

So if anyone understood the place between rhythm and tension, it was he.

“Where’s your head at?” he asked, quieter now.

I ran a hand down my face. “Same place the music’s at. Right in the middle of wantin’ it bad and not knowin’ how to move.”

Another pause. Then, “You remember what I told you when you couldn’t finish that last track for your EP?”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see it. “Yeah.”

“Say it back. ”

I sighed. “You said sometimes the song don’t need more notes. It needs more feeling.”

“Exactly,” he said. “You was tryna perfect the melody, but the soul was missing. And that ain’t somethin’ you can force.”

He let that land.

Then, quieter, like he was talking to the part of me that still didn’t want to feel too much.

“You always get stuck when you try to control it. But when you give it love —when you lead with that—it opens up. Every time.”

I swallowed.

Because I knew he wasn’t talking about studio sessions anymore.

“Don’t wait too long,” he added. “You can lose a good thing tryin’ to keep your hands clean.”

Then he hung up.

I stared at the phone for a second. Thumb hovering. Thoughts loud.

He always did that—dropped wisdom and vanished before I could armor up again.

I wasn’t sixteen anymore, tryna make my first beat on a hand-me-down Mac. This was Sienna, and she wasn’t just a verse or a hook. She was the song I hadn’t figured out how to write yet, and I was scared that if I didn’t move right... I’d lose the only thing that ever made me want to sing like this.

I slid my phone into my pocket and turned around and found her watching me with calm eyes and a quiet posture.

We didn't speak. We just... moved toward each other.

Toward the thing neither of us had the courage to name out loud yet.

But it was there and maybe—for the first time—we were both starting to hear the same song.

Dinner was slow and private.

Candlelight and comfort food. She ordered for both of us again, teasing me with bites and that smug smile that made me want to kiss her in public and deal with the consequences later.

She laughed. I matched it.

She touched my hand. I didn't let go.

And when the check came, she didn't ask what was next. She just looked at me. Like she already knew.

We didn't speak in the car. Didn't need to. Dre kept his focus on the road while her fingers traced lazy circles on my palm.

He pulled up to my building. I didn't say a word—just reached for the door.

She followed. Her hand was still in mine when we stepped into my place. I didn't let it go.

Didn't want to.

Not after the way she fed me like I was hers, slow and smug and knowing. Not after

the way she laughed, like music I wanted to memorize. Not after she chose my floor without a word, like the decision had already been made in her body.

Now here she was—standing in my space, bathed in dim light and that scent she always wore. Something soft but commanding. Like intention.

Sienna Ray didn't stumble. She stepped into things. Fully. Boldly. And that's exactly what she did now.

She slipped off her coat, hung it on the hook near the door. Turned to face me with no hesitation in her eyes.

“Still thinking about that pasta?” she asked.

I stepped toward her. “I'm thinking about how you looked feeding it to me. ”

That smile curved her lips, but didn't reach her eyes—not all the way. There was something quieter behind them now. Want, yes. But something deeper too.

Readiness.

She was ready for whatever this was going to be. And so was I.

I reached for her waist, slid my hands down over her hips.

She tilted her head. “You sure about this?”

I'd show her my ready. I kissed her—slow and deep.

One hand at the back of her neck, the other gripping her hip like I'd been waiting all week.

And I had. Even when we tried to be good.

Even when we stayed on task in the studio.

Even when her voice made my spine tingle and I looked away so I wouldn't lose control.

Now there was nothing in the way.

I backed her up toward the couch.

She pulled me with her, fingers curled into my hoodie, tongue sliding against mine like she needed more. I kissed her until she moaned, then pulled back just enough to look at her.

"I wanna see you," I said.

She nodded. "Then take me out of these clothes."

I did. Piece by piece. Slow and reverent.

Her tank top. Her jeans. The softest cotton underwear I'd ever touched.

She didn't look away once.

And when I dropped to my knees and kissed her thighs, she reached for my face and said my name like it meant something.

Because it did.

I lifted her onto the couch and spread her open, kissing her there, again and again.

Letting my tongue say what I hadn't yet: I want you. Only you.

She came trembling under my mouth, hips jerking, hands in my locs, back arched like she couldn't hold it all.

I could've stayed there, tasting her forever .

But she pulled me up with a breathless, "Please."

I undressed, slow. Let her see me, bare and real and already hard for her. She watched me like she wanted to remember it all.

And when I slid into her—slow, deep, full —we both moaned like it had never been this good before. Because it hadn't. Not like this.

We moved slow. Then faster. Then slow again.

She gripped me tight with her legs and moaned in my ear, her nails digging into my back.

"You feel so good," she whispered.

I kissed her neck. Her shoulder. Her mouth.

"Say it again."

She did. Again and again.

And when I came, it was with her name on my lips, the taste of her still thick on my tongue, and the knowledge that whatever we were doing—it wasn't casual anymore.

It was a choice.

Her body curled into mine afterward. Legs tangled. Her breath at my chest and her not ready to leave. So she stayed.

SEVENTEEN

Weeks had passed, and more pictures surfaced, and while this had been part of the plan, which I never liked, it still felt wrong. Especially since we were actually a thing, falling in deeper and deeper.

But...They were calling me his girl now.

Not Sienna Ray. Not the woman with three platinum albums, two sold-out tours, and a voice they swore healed them. Not the artist who'd kept her name clean, her head down, and her soul in the music.

Just... his.

I didn't blame Taraj. Not really. He wasn't the one posting the photos, making the reels, stitching old interviews with new clips of us walking into a restaurant. But still—every frame told a story I hadn't signed off on. And every story made me smaller.

One picture in particular hit different. I was mid-laugh, hand on his chest, while he looked down at me like I was his everything. The comments were relentless.

“Y'all see how he looking at her? That's HIS woman.”

“That's the kinda muse I need. She glowing for him.”

“She BEEN with industry dudes. At least Raj real.”

That last one sliced clean through me. I knew exactly who they meant. One man. One regret. One moment I couldn't undo. And though they didn't know the details, they always smelled blood.

Even now. Even after I'd spent years making damn sure I never let another man write my narrative.

I set my phone face-down on the hotel table and walked to the window, arms crossed tight over my chest. The Pittsburgh skyline blurred through the glass, steel and gray and quiet.

I had made love to that man two nights ago. I'd let him hold me like I was fragile and sacred. Let him kiss my thighs like they carried secrets he was honored to keep. I wanted that moment to stay untouched.

But the world was twisting it and maybe that's what scared me most—how easily I could lose myself inside something so beautiful. How much I wanted to.

My phone buzzed again. I let it ring twice before lifting it.

Jas: You okay?

Me: You see the post?

Jas: Yeah.

Jas: Also saw you looking like a damn trophy.

Me: That's the problem.

Jas: ...talk to me.

Me: They don't care who I am, Jas. Just that I'm his. Like I've never had a name before.

Jas: You do have a name. You are the name. You are Sienna Raymond. Sienna Ray to them.

Jas: They can't shrink you unless you let them.

Jas: Now take a breath and go do something with that ache.

I stared at her message for a long time. Then I tapped out one more.

Me: I'm calling Amir.

He answered on the third ring.

"Sienna?"

"I need to work," I said. My voice was calmer than I felt. "Can I get in today?"

"You good?"

"I just... I need to move something through."

There was a pause. Then, "Come by around four. I'll hold the room for you."

By the time I walked into the studio, my stomach was tight with silence. I hadn't eaten since breakfast. Hadn't slept much the night before either. I was all raw nerve and reverberating thoughts.

The space was dark, lit only by a low amber lamp near the console. Amir was already

inside, hoodie on, head nodding slightly to something playing in his headphones. He looked up when I entered, eyes soft.

“Mic’s hot. The keys are yours.”

I nodded once and made my way to the booth. I took off my shoes. Let my toes press into the cool floor. That always made me feel grounded.

The keyboard was already plugged in, waiting. I sat, fingers hovering. My throat ached in that familiar way—the kind that told me the truth was sitting just behind it, waiting for permission to rise.

I didn’t ask for a track. Didn’t cue anything up.

I just... played.

Simple chords at first. Soulful, aching. Then layered progressions, soft suspensions. A storm you don’t see coming until you’re standing in it.

Then I sang. Not for him.

Not for them . Just for me.

“Say I was never more than a look in your song

A headline to hold you

A curve to lean on...

But I was a story long before you said my name

And now they forget me

In the echo of your flame... ”

My voice cracked—clean and true— and I kept going. Pouring myself out into the atmosphere. Disappearing in my pain but not only that...also into my passion and the budding of love I fought to deny.

One verse. Another. A key change. A breakdown. A wordless run that felt like conversation. And when it ended, when the last note dissolved into the quiet, I stayed still. Hands trembling. Shoulders shaking.

A tear fell. Then another. I wiped them, but not fast enough.

Amir was there before I knew it. He didn't say anything at first—just placed a bottle of water on the stand beside me, then sat across the glass, watching me the way only someone who's been cracked open by the craft can.

“I recorded it,” he said quietly.

I blinked.

“I hope that's okay.”

I nodded, unable to speak.

He leaned in. “You did something holy in here, Sienna.”

My throat clenched. I wasn't ready for that.

But he didn't push. Just sat there, holding the space like he knew how sacred this

moment was.

“I’ve seen magic in this room,” he said. “But that? That was something else.”

I closed my eyes because this— this —was the part no one clapped for. The part no one captured. The part that wouldn’t trend on timelines or be used for clickbait. This was the truth.

And I’d finally found the courage to sing it.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“You know,” he murmured, “for a long time... women only wanted me for the shine. The noise. The flash.”

I blinked. Still coming down.

“They didn’t know my mom’s name. Didn’t know what I was working through. Just knew what I could give them. The access. ”

I didn’t expect that. But I understood it more than I wanted to.

“Only one person ever saw me before the shine,” he added. “Before the plaques. Before the streams.”

“Amaya,” I whispered.

He nodded. “She wanted me before all of this. And she still does. She ain’t impressed by what I got—she’s moved by how I move. And when you feel that? When somebody wants your core , not just your image?” He paused. “It shifts something.”

I swallowed hard. Something thick rising in my chest.

He leaned in. “I don’t know what’s going through your head right now.

But I see how the game plays you. I see what it’s doing out there.

And I know what it feels like to be praised publicly but misunderstood privately.

To be branded as something convenient, when you’re carrying so much more than they could ever write in a caption. ”

I blinked fast. Still listening. Still hearing the last note of my song behind his words.

“You’re not somebody’s side story,” he said. “You’re the whole headline. And if they can’t see it, that’s their blindness. Not your burden.”

I pressed the bottle to my lips but didn’t drink.

“You laid something down today that was bigger than music,” he added. “It was truth. And I know pain when I hear it.”

I nodded slowly.

“And if you ever want to take that pain and build something beautiful out of it?” He cracked the faintest smile. “I got strings. Keys. Space. Just say the word.”

That made my chest ache all over again—but in a different way.

“What’s it called?” he asked, softly.

I didn’t think I had an answer but... rose from my throat like it had been waiting .

“ Echo of Your Flame. ”

“Dope. I love it,” he nodded.

I glanced over at him, voice softer now. “You ever gonna marry her?”

He leaned back, eyes warming. “When you agree to sing on the proposal track I’ve been working on.”

My lips parted, caught off guard. “Me?”

He grinned. “Amaya plays your songs on repeat like they’re scripture. If I’m gonna ask her to be my forever, I want your voice in the background.”

I didn’t say anything. Just held his gaze. Let the weight of his words sink in.

He didn’t know it, but in that moment, he gave me something back. For the first time in days, I didn’t feel reduced.

I didn’t feel reactive. I felt real and ... whole again.

EIGHTEEN

I knew she'd gone in without me.

Her scent still lingered—sweet, rich, and feminine—woven into the air like harmony after a final note. Jasmine and amber, maybe. Something soft and intentional. I closed the door behind me, slow, quiet, like walking into a space already sacred.

Amir didn't say a word at first. Just looked up from the console with that steady, unreadable calm he always wore when something real had happened.

"She singing solo now?" I asked, setting my bag down against the wall.

He didn't flinch. He shrugged and said, "She needed the booth."

That was it.

"She use it?" I asked anyway, even though I already knew.

"She did. You'll hear it later."

I didn't press. I just nodded, taking in the way the air still carried her. Thick with the ache of something she left behind.

Later that night, I drove with no destination in mind.

Just kept going. The city lights flashing across the windshield like they were trying to

keep up with my thoughts.

A track played low from the speakers—the one we'd been working on together.

The one she kept rewriting, saying the second verse didn't feel true yet.

She was right. It didn't.

But it had been looping in my head ever since.

Just like her. The way her voice curved around a note when she got lost in it.

The warmth of her laugh when she finally let herself be soft.

The press of her palm on my stomach when she thought I was sleep.

The taste of her. Like honey and heat and something I wasn't ready to live without.

I'd been with women before. Plenty. But this thing with her? It wasn't about sex anymore. It was the way her silence filled up a room. The way her absence echoed louder than most people's presence.

The way I scanned every crowd for the shape of her curls and didn't even realize I was doing it. That kind of feeling could break a man in two. Or put him back together. Maybe both.

I pulled into the garage, parked, and took the elevator up in silence. My place welcomed me with dim lights and clean lines. Everything in its place. Everything still.

Except me.

I walked to the kitchen, poured two fingers of Jack, leaned against the counter, and thought about her.

Three days back and not a single call. No text. No knock. And not a word since the photos started circulating.

I thought we were past all that. Past pretending. Past caring about the noise. I knew what I felt. Knew what I wanted.

A man don't touch a woman the way I touched her—don't give her the parts of him he's never named out loud—and expect to walk away like it didn't mean something.

We didn't just fuck. We fused .

But maybe she didn't feel it the same. Maybe I was in this deeper than I realized.

But... we fell asleep on the floor, the sound of Chante Moore still floating above us. Her legs tangled in mine. My hand resting on the small of her back like it had always belonged there.

And now? She was quiet again. Protecting something. Her peace. Her image. Her heart.

I couldn't be mad at that. Not when I knew the cost of this industry. Not when I knew how easily a woman like her could get reduced to background noise in somebody else's story.

I'd been listening to Dangerous Thing on loop, trying to figure out what felt off, what still needed layering.

And it hit me: Her . It was her. The verses were there. The chords. The ache. But the

fullness...the completion... the honesty behind what we were singing.

That was missing. She was missing.

The way she hummed when she didn't know anyone was listening. The sound her breath made when she caught a lyric in her throat. The unwritten part of our story—the one that could only come if she gave herself permission to show up again.

Not just in the booth. But here. With me. We weren't done. Not musically. Not emotionally. Not soulfully.

And she knew it. I felt it in the silence she left behind.

I don't know how we got here. When this all began, I was strictly about laying down the track, not laying down my heart. But I'd done just that, and let her tap all over it.

My phone buzzed.

Amir: Bro. You in tomorrow or what?

I typed back quick.

Me: Yeah. Afternoon.

Then I hesitated.

Opened another thread.

Her name at the top like a lyric I couldn't shake. I sent my messages and hoped she'd be responsive.

Three dots appeared.

Paused. Flickered. Disappeared. I stared at the screen, then placed the phone face down on the counter.

She'd reply when she was ready and until then, I'd keep making music. That's what this was supposed to be about anyway.

She's the one reminding me how much I'd lost the beat.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

NINETEEN

The hotel room was quiet, but my thoughts weren't.

I stood barefoot near the floor-to-ceiling window, arms folded, robe loose around me, looking down at Pittsburgh from the thirty-second floor.

Everything below was a blur of amber streetlamps and the slow drag of traffic.

I could still hear the echo of my own voice in the studio hours earlier—raw, unfiltered, real.

That song hadn't been for them. It was for me.

For the ache sitting in the center of my chest that I'd carried too long without naming.

And yet... Amir had heard it because there was no way he couldn't but I didn't expect what came next, after he hit record and Brielle called.

"They heard it, Sienna. Amir sent Echo of Your Flame to the execs."

I was still in the back seat then. Dre driving, steady hands on the wheel. Eyes on the road, but I could tell he felt the shift in the air the moment my phone rang.

"What do you mean they heard it?"

My voice had come out harsher than I intended.

“They’re obsessed,” she said, completely ignoring my angst. “Talking about lead single potential. But that’s not the point— girl, what was that? I haven’t heard you like that in years.”

I hadn’t responded. Not really.

Because I didn’t have the words.

Until now.

My phone lit up again. A message from him—again.

Raj:

Still on for tomorrow?

I’ll probably be late. Wrapping something for the drop.

But I’ll be there.

Unless you don’t want me to be.

That last line made my stomach pull. He felt it—the distance.

Not just in the days we hadn’t spoken, but in what had been said without words. The pause. The ache underneath my silence. The way I hadn’t responded to the footage, the headlines, the noise.

But this—this was him reaching anyway.

There was another message right behind it.

Raj:

Also...

I heard the track. Still hearing it.

That was something else. Because you let yourself be vulnerable and free.

My breath caught.

Because he hadn't just listened. He'd heard me.

Not the branded version of myself. Not the media-trained woman who knew which angles flattered and which notes soared. He heard what I buried. What I'd let spill without armor.

My thumb hovered over the keyboard.

I considered not replying. Considered letting the silence speak for me, just a little longer. But I couldn't.

Me:

It wasn't meant for anyone to hear.

But I'm... glad you did.

The dots appeared. Then disappeared.

Then returned again.

Raj:

Maybe it was meant.

Just not for everyone.

You sounded like somebody remembering herself .

My throat tightened.

Because that was exactly what it was. A remembering. A return and the scariest part was I didn't know if I could stay there.

The screen dimmed in my hand, but I didn't move to lock it. Just pulled the blankets higher, clutching them to my chest like they could keep the truth from spilling out of me completely.

That track was mine but now it was something else. Something more.

Just like him.

He wasn't just a feature anymore. He was the melody I couldn't stop humming in my head. A vibration under my skin I hadn't asked for but could no longer ignore.

My thighs still held the memory of his hands, his mouth, the way he'd sung my name without needing a mic.

I should've felt powerful. But instead, I felt like a woman caught in a verse she didn't write... but couldn't stop singing.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

TWENTY

The next morning, before I'd had a chance to shower, my phone lit up with Brielle's name.

"You free?"

"Define free. "

She laughed softly, but I could hear the undertone. That edge. "I just got off a call with Jalen and the rest of the suits. They want to move."

I sat up. "Move how?"

"The song, Sienna. The one Amir recorded. They think it's... transformative. They said it sounded like your soul grew wings and flew through the speakers."

I was quiet.

"You don't sound excited," she added.

I leaned my head back against the headboard. "Because it wasn't supposed to be for them."

"I know. But it's already done. It's on their radar, and they're salivating. They're talking campaign visuals, a deluxe release, a roll-out with Taraj standing behind you in a damn silk shirt like y'all just woke up in love."

I let out a low groan.

“They’re serious,” she added. “The whole ‘romance’ thing? They want to run with it hard now. Because they want to connect this sound that you released in Echo with this budding thing you got going on with him. I mean, girl, your bare feet were caught in that video still. Somebody zoomed in.”

I sat upright. “What video?” I didn’t know there was video!

Brielle exhaled. “The hallway footage. You leaving Raj’s room. It’s got over 800k views already on one of those gossip accounts.”

That was me. So damn dick drunk that I tiptoed out of his suite with my pumps in one hand, and my coat in the other.

I closed my eyes. “This is spiraling.”

“It is. But you’ve always known how to center yourself when shit spins. I trust you to do that now.”

“I’m not sure I can.”

“You can,” Brielle said. “And Sienna?”

“What?”

“I think what’s scaring you isn’t that they know. It’s that you do. That what you sang, what you gave him—what y’all shared—was real. And the truth is, real makes better art.”

I couldn’t even argue.

She was right. Even if I hated that she was.

“Are we locked in for that breakfast meeting tomorrow?” I asked, needing to pivot before I unraveled.

“Yep. Eleven. The execs want to talk packaging. You, Raj, the song, the moment.”

“Perfect,” I said, sarcasm sharp. “Because nothing says love like product placement.”

Brielle laughed under her breath. “Welcome back to the industry, baby.”

We hung up.

And I sat in the stillness, my thoughts racing, my body still aching faintly from the imprint of him. The truth was, I had let something go in that booth. And now it was everywhere.

A song. A look. A door caught on camera.

I was an artist. But tonight, I felt like a woman laid bare. And I didn’t know how much longer I could pretend those two things were separate.

The café was all soft gold light and polished wood, the kind of place meant to feel warm and disarming—like good coffee could make you forget the sharp edge of the industry.

It didn’t work. Not on me.

I adjusted my sunglasses and scanned the room as the hostess led me toward the back. Our table was near the window, tucked just enough to feel like we might be able to talk without being watched. But I felt watched anyway. That wasn’t new .

They'd started showing up again—the eyes. The whispers. The camera phones lifted just high enough to capture something they could make into something else.

I smoothed a hand over my dress—simple, black, sleeveless. My hair was up in a loose twist, soft curls framing my cheekbones. I hadn't worn this for them. I'd worn it because I needed armor that didn't look like armor. Something that let me feel good in my skin.

Brielle was already there, tapping through her phone with the kind of tight smile that told me she'd been fielding messages all morning.

She looked up when I approached. "You're late."

"I'm right on time."

"Fashionably," she muttered, but stood and gave me a quick hug anyway. "You good?"

I hesitated before answering. "Define good."

She exhaled, sliding back into her seat. "You look good."

I sat across from her. "That's not what you asked."

"No," she said, glancing down at the table. "But I figured we should start with a lie we can both agree on."

I didn't laugh. Couldn't. Not when everything felt like it was teetering on the edge of something I hadn't planned.

A server came by. I ordered something light—fruit, jasmine tea. My stomach was

tight. Brielle ordered coffee, then locked eyes with me.

“They love it,” she said.

“I know.”

“The footage, the song, the vibe of you two together. The way it’s caught fire? It’s doing something. And the label wants to throw fuel on it.”

I looked out the window. Cars passed. People walked. Life was happening. And yet, mine felt paused. Spun into something glossy and shaped by other hands.

“They want more,” Brielle said, watching me. “More appearances. More ‘candid’ moments. They want a joint interview.”

I shook my head slowly. “We agreed to pretend. To make it believable. But this?”

“They believe it.”

I looked at her then. Really looked. “Do you?”

She didn’t blink. “I believe something happened. I believe it’s bigger than what the label cooked up.”

A breath caught in my chest.

“I believe you care about him.”

I didn’t answer.

Because I didn’t know how to explain the way his voice lived in my skin now. The

way he looked at me like I was more than a story told in fading headlines. The way he'd held me. Eaten from me. Sung to me.

The way he'd listened.

"I think you need to decide if you're scared of them seeing the truth," Brielle said gently, "or if you're scared of seeing it yourself."

The tea came.

I stirred honey in without tasting it. My fingers trembled slightly, barely enough to notice, but enough to feel.

The truth was I didn't know if I was scared of the lie or the love. Both could eat you alive. One just took longer.

"He makes me feel seen," I said quietly.

Brielle leaned in, expression softening. "Then let yourself be."

The sun shifted outside the window, sliding across the table.

And for just a second, I thought about calling him. Instead, I picked up the spoon. Stirred again. Let the silence stretch.

Let the truth simmer.

Brielle's phone lit up again.

She glanced at it, grimaced, then slid it across the table. "Look at that. "

I took the phone. Read the message.

Jalen:

"Can we get them in the same room this week? A surprise studio drop. No press, just BTS footage. Capture some magic. Let the fans keep guessing."

I handed it back.

"Magic," I said flatly.

Brielle sighed. "You knew this would come. That track you laid down? It opened something up. Not just for the label. For the public. They want more of you two. They want to see what that sound looks like."

"I bet they do," I murmured, sipping the tea finally.

It had cooled.

"We can say no," she offered. "You still have control. But it's a moment, Sienna. And moments like this don't come often."

I stared at the ripples in my cup.

My voice was trending again. My name was getting hashtags. They weren't talking about my age or my shelf life. They were talking about how I sounded. How I made them feel.

But at what cost?

I closed my eyes for a second and saw him.

His mouth. His hands. His voice. The way he'd looked at me while I sang—like I was something rare and holy.

Was it worth making that look part of the game?

I opened my eyes. Looked Brielle in the face.

"I'll do it," I said. "But on my terms. No fake flirting. No pre-written talking points. If they want magic, they better not try to manufacture it."

Her mouth curved. "Now that's the Sienna I know."

I raised a brow. "Then let's remind them."

Fifteen minutes later, a host walked the executives in—Barry, Keesha, and a younger assistant in a boxy blazer trying too hard to blend in. Jalen followed behind them, his posture less corporate, more watchful. He wasn't here for them. He was here for Taraj—and maybe, quietly, for me too.

They offered greetings, but I stayed seated, letting them approach me. On my turf. My terms.

Barry nodded with that practiced ease. "Sienna. Thank you for making time."

"Did I have a choice?" I murmured.

He gave a thin smile but didn't push. "Let's talk campaign strategy."

Keesha remained standing, sleek tablet in hand. "We've got preliminary storyboards for a visual campaign," she said. "We want to lead with the audio—no full video drop yet—but build it around the intimacy. The realness."

She tapped the screen and turned it toward me.

The first image:

A dimly lit studio. Shadows painting the walls. A woman seated at a piano—clearly modeled after me. Hair tousled, back bare, light kissing the slope of her spine.

Slide.

A slow pan-in. Taraj behind her, shirtless, drawn close like gravity did the pulling. His hand on her back. Her lips parted. Not singing. Not speaking. Just... there. Breathless.

Slide.

Hands on keys. Not playing—just touching. His and mine. Tension in the forearms. A sticky note overlay read: “Fingers speak before mouths do.”

Slide.

A grainy black-and-white still. The hallway video. Me leaving Raj’s suite. My feet bare. His robe slipping from one shoulder. The tagline underneath: “Was it just a song?”

Slide .

A staged argument. Tension behind glass. I’m in the booth, singing like I’m breaking open. He’s at the console, gripping the mic stand like it’s the only thing holding him together.

Slide.

A long hallway, sunlit. We walk in opposite directions. Turn back at the same time. Lock eyes. Fade to black.

I stared.

They'd made it beautiful. Marketable. Memorable.

But it wasn't real .

"This is what you think intimacy is?" I asked, voice low.

Keesha didn't flinch. "It's what the public responds to."

"It's a script," I said. "Performance. You're turning something sacred into a storyboard."

Barry raised a palm, calm. "We're not denying the realness, Sienna. We're just... amplifying it."

"It's fiction," I snapped.

Jalen, still leaning in the corner, finally spoke. "It's not your truth. That's what matters."

Keesha tilted her head. "So what is your truth, Sienna? What does your version of this look like?"

I met her gaze. "Less myth. More meaning. No artificial tension. No suggestive stares. If we're going to show people something, let it be how the music comes to life. Let them feel what we felt—without all the lace and lighting."

They paused. Exchanged glances.

“We can work with that,” Keesha said slowly, recalibrating.

Brielle gave me a nod that said: That’s how you hold your line.

I sipped my tea again.

Still lukewarm. But I didn’t care.

Because the fire in my voice was mine again.

They left ten minutes later, promises hanging in the air like fog that hadn’t burned off yet .

I didn’t move. Didn’t speak. Brielle finally broke the silence.

“You want my opinion?”

“No,” I muttered, “but you’ll give it anyway.”

She smirked. “That was some queen shit.”

TWENTY-ONE

I wasn't in the room when they decided how to sell us.

Not at the café. Not on the calls. Not when the storyboards were passed around.

Jalen had pulled up on me yesterday, trying to keep it light. Tried to spin it like a win.

"They want to lead with the chemistry," he said, flashing that label-polished grin like it was good news. "Soft shots. Real light. Her voice over yours. The way y'all look at each other? That's the hook."

He sat back like he expected a fist bump or a thank you. But I didn't give him either. Instead, I let silence stretch, then leaned forward slow. "You tell me why I wasn't there when that was decided."

Jalen blinked. "I figured it was more of a visual strategy thing—marketing. Keesha and Barry had already scoped some rough ideas, and?—"

"That's not what I asked."

He exhaled. "Look, Raj, it's not personal. We've gotta move fast on this, and Sienna?—"

"Sienna was there."

My voice dropped, tight and low. "And y'all sent the assistant to ask me after the

fact. Like I'm a prop."

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got.

"Come on, man. You're not?—"

"You ever been treated like packaging for someone else's purpose?" I asked. "Like your talent is decoration instead of the reason we're even here?"

His mouth opened. Closed again.

"I wrote Dangerous Love. That's my story in those bars. My blood in those lyrics." My voice tightened. "And I was nearly killed behind another deal where people decided my value for me."

Jalen froze—not flinching, but definitely clocking the weight behind the words.

"I've played this game quiet. Humble. Patient. Let the music speak." I leaned in, my voice low and steady. "But don't confuse that with being passive. You know who my father is."

The room held still. No raised voices. No threats. Just the sharp shift in air when somebody remembers who they're sitting across from.

"I don't want problems," I continued, "but I'm not above solving them—permanently—if it comes to that. I've had to once before."

Jalen swallowed. The flicker in his eyes wasn't fear—it was recognition. A recalibration.

Because for the first time, he saw it. Not just the legacy. The bloodline. But what it

meant when it lived in me too.

“You’re right,” he said, his voice lower now. “I should’ve looped you in sooner. That’s on me.”

I didn’t blink. Just sat back, let the silence stretch, my pulse steady.

Now here we were. I’d said my piece. And I was still on the outside.

When my dad asked how shit was going and my silence became the answer, he started talking about getting with Eli and I regretted not filling that space in with something.

No one wanted Eli to become Maestro . All of a sudden, the label would be asking me where Jalen had disappeared to, and I would know Jalen wasn’t ever going to turn up. Nah.

So I told him I had it handled and the truth was, I felt close to that point where I’d leave all this good boy shit alone and show them who the fuck I could be, but Sienna’s smile filled my mind and that wasn’t the man I wanted to be for her.

Speaking of her...I knew what this was. The whole pairing—this moment, this rollout—sparked off Night Things. My shit. My sound. But Sienna? She was the headline. The return. The golden voice they were betting on.

And I didn’t mind that. But I wasn’t about to be the background beat in someone else’s ballad.

“Yo,” Amir said, tugging the mic closer. “She told the execs no fake chemistry. Said if they want magic, they gotta let it breathe. No script.”

That didn't surprise me.

It sounded like her. Unbothered. Unmoved. Uncompromising .

Still, it hit me sideways because honesty's a bitch when you're not sure where you stand in it.

"She's cool with recording the engagement track too," Amir added. "I asked her myself. She said yeah."

My chest went tight.

He'd asked if I could write something for him and Amaya—something true. Something lasting. Of course I'd said yes.

I just didn't know she'd be singing on it.

Another duet.

Another song that wasn't ours —but might still split me open.

"She say anything else?" I asked.

"Just that she'd be here around five. Coming alone."

That's how she'd been moving.

Solo. Guarded. Not cold. Just... locked up.

"She been texting you?" Amir asked.

“Yeah. Studio stuff. Nothing personal.”

He nodded. I didn’t. Because it was getting personal. Even in her silence.

Especially in the spaces where her voice used to live. And Dangerous Love was still unfinished. Because what’s a song about longing—without the woman you long for in the room?

Amir had been watching me silently. The way I would watch him when he was going through it with Amaya. As if he could read my thoughts he said, “I remember when that shit had me twisted,” he said, laughing.

“Back when Amaya was acting like we were just ‘good friends’ and I was eating her shrimp fried rice like it wasn’t breaking my heart.”

That pulled a real smile from me. “You were down bad.”

He pointed. “Still am. But it’s worth it. When you’re in the thick of it, you can’t see the forest for the trees.”

I looked away, jaw flexing.

Because yeah... I was deep in it. Deeper than I meant to be .

Before I could respond, he clapped my shoulder. “We lay this right, it’ll be a classic. One run, catch the feel. Photogs stepping in later—just some raw stuff. BTS energy.”

I nodded.

But the quiet stayed with me.

That ache that came when you started to feel like background in your own story.

And yet, I stayed. Because something in me believed the door wasn't fully shut.

Sienna arrived twenty minutes later.

Myles too—laughing, dapping up the team with that easy energy he always carried. But I didn't clock him at first. Not when she stepped in.

Her skin shimmered golden-brown beneath the soft lights, like she'd rushed to get here but still looked composed.

Effortless. Her curls pulled into a low puff, a few rebellious spirals dancing over her cheekbones.

No lipstick. No gloss. Just her—bare, beautiful, unguarded in a way that made my chest tighten.

Her eyes scanned the room, sharp and focused. But when they brushed over me—just for a moment—I felt it. That flicker of something real. Recognition. Then... distance.

We ran the track once. Then again.

The song was intimate—slow piano, soft strings, barely-there percussion. It rose like breath and dropped into stillness, the kind of space you needed when love was trying to say something.

I laid the foundation. She followed. But on the third run... something changed. The wall around her cracked. Her shoulders dropped. Her voice opened. And the bridge—low, warm, aching—it shifted the whole damn room.

She didn't perform it. She lived it. And for that moment, I knew she wasn't thinking about campaign strategy or headlines. She was feeling. Maybe not me , maybe not us—but something that softened her.

I watched her mouth form the final words. Watched her chest rise. Her eyes closed for a second too long. I felt it in my chest. Deep. When she caught me looking, she didn't look away.

The track faded. Dangerous Love was done.

“Perfect,” Amir said. “We’re good. Myles—go ahead and prep the stems.”

He gave me a look. “I’m out. Anything else?”

I shook my head. “We’re good.”

He nodded and left, reading the air like the pro he was.

Now it was just us.

The lights dimmed to amber. The blackout windows blurred the world outside.

And suddenly it felt like everything was holding its breath.

She stood at the console, arms crossed, the faintest shimmer still glowing on her collarbone. A delicate gold chain rested just above the dip of her throat.

I stepped closer. Not all the way. Just enough to feel her there.

“You okay?” I asked, my voice quiet.

She hesitated. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“You sounded beautiful,” I said. “That bridge? You brought it to life.”

Her eyes flicked up to mine. “You wrote it.”

I shrugged. “Wrote it for a friend. Didn’t know it’d hit like that when you sang it.”

She paused.

I could feel the hesitation hanging between us like smoke.

“I heard about the campaign,” I said. “What you asked for. No fake shit. No curated storylines. You were right to say it.”

She tensed. “If you think I?—”

“I don’t.” I cut in, gentle. “I respect it. I do . I just... I wanna feel like I’m in it with you. Not watching from the outside.”

Her mouth parted. Then closed. Her eyes softened—like she wanted to believe me, but didn’t know if she could.

“Sienna...” I stepped in, slow. “It’s not about the rollout. Or the cameras. Or even what they see.”

I swallowed, my voice low. “It’s you. I just need to know I’m not losing something that never even got to be .”

She looked up—really looked and the distance dropped away. Only the memories of what we’d created in and out of the booth were visiting with us.

Her voice trembled. “I didn’t mean to shut you out. I just—everything got loud. Too many eyes. Too many people with plans for us.”

“And none of ’em asked me,” I said. “Jalen works for me . But I wasn’t even in the room.”

Her face changed. “It wasn’t my intent to be a part of that experience for you.”

“I know. But it made me feel like...”

I exhaled. “Like maybe I wasn’t the star in this story. Just a placeholder.”

Her eyes shone. And she stepped closer.

“You were never a placeholder,” she said softly. “You were the spark, and I, of all people, should have made sure you knew that because that had been my fear all along.”

I reached for her hand. Laced our fingers together like muscle memory.

“You still want this?” I asked. “Whatever this becomes?”

She nodded slow. “If we get to build it our way.”

I kissed her then.

Soft. Certain. Honest. Her lips parted with a sigh I felt in my bones. In the place where music and meaning met. And when we broke apart, her lashes fluttered. She was still close—this time, not out of obligation, but choice.

“That wasn’t part of the image,” she whispered.

I traced her cheek with my thumb, slow. “Then let’s create something they can’t package.”

Because this was ours. The only real thing in a world of edits and frames. And when she leaned into me again—she stayed.

TWENTY-TWO

I didn't know what time it was.

Only that the light pouring into Taraj's kitchen was soft and gold, like the kind of warmth that made you think time was slower than it really was.

His T-shirt hung off my frame, brushing the tops of my thighs. The hem swayed as I moved barefoot across the floor, flipping French toast in a hot pan that hissed and crackled.

It was one of three things I knew how to cook without burning, but that morning, it felt symbolic.

Like I needed to carve out something warm and soft between us before the world barged in again.

Because it would.

And soon.

The night before still lingered on my skin. That kiss. That silence. The weight in his voice when he admitted how all this made him feel—how I'd moved like I was the only one trying to protect something precious.

And I had been. But not just me.

I hadn't stopped to think what this all might've looked like from his side of the glass.

How he'd been asked to perform, to fall in line, to be available for the vision—without ever being invited to help shape it.

I'd lived that. Knew how it stole pieces of you, how easily your name could become an accessory in someone else's storyline.

And still... I'd done it to him.

Unintentionally. But harm doesn't ask for permission.

I turned the bread again, my throat tightening as the edges browned. The scent of cinnamon filled the space—sweet and heady, familiar. It wrapped around the quiet like a balm.

This wasn't about fixing everything.

But maybe it could be a beginning. A soft one.

Behind me, I felt the shift in the air before I heard his steps.

Then warmth.

His hand sliding around my waist. His chest, bare and hot, pressing to my back.

"I like seeing you here," Taraj murmured against my ear, voice still thick with sleep .

I smiled without turning. "Even if I used too much cinnamon?"

"You could've set the pan on fire," he said, kissing below my jaw, "and I'd still wake

up hard.”

I laughed, breath catching when his fingers dipped under the hem of the shirt. When they curved over the soft of my thigh like he already knew the way.

“Don’t,” I whispered.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t touch me like that when I’m already weak.”

He kissed my shoulder. “Thought you liked when I made you weak.”

“I do.” My body betrayed me, leaning back into him. “But I’m tryna finish breakfast.”

He moved slower then—hands still trailing higher, mouth grazing my neck.

“Let it burn.”

Then he turned me.

What followed was the kind of soft chaos only we knew how to make—a kiss that unspooled into something deeper, hungrier. Me on the counter. Him inside me. No camera. No beat. Just us. Raw. Full. Mine.

The French toast survived. Barely.

I plated it anyway, drowning his in syrup just to be petty.

Taraj didn’t mind.

He sat across from me in only sweats, shirtless, brown skin glowing in the sun. One of my hair ties was looped around his wrist, taming his twists. His chain caught the morning light, and for a moment, everything felt right-sized again. Just us and this quiet.

“You good?” he asked, stealing a piece from my plate, licking syrup from his thumb.

I nodded, then paused. Tilted my head.

“What are we doing? ”

He leaned back in his chair, something thoughtful passing through his eyes.

“Eating breakfast,” he teased.

“Raj.”

His smirk faded, just a little. “We’re figuring it out.”

“That’s what this is?”

“It is for me,” he said, simple and true.

I let that settle. Let myself believe it.

“Me too,” I said.

Five minutes later, a knock shattered the peace.

Three raps. Clean. No hesitation.

Taraj stood, pulling on a shirt as he crossed to the door. He cracked it open, brow furrowing as two men came into view—one in a black windbreaker with the label’s logo, the other in a tailored suit and mirrored sunglasses, an earpiece coiled at his jaw.

“Corporate security,” the first said, holding up his badge.

Taraj didn’t move. “For what?”

“There was a crowd outside your building this morning,” the second one said. “Your location’s made it to a few fan accounts. The label doesn’t want things to escalate.”

I stilled, coffee halfway to my lips.

“It’s not just the music,” the suited man added. “It’s the energy. You two are drawing eyes. They want us with you for a few days. Just in case.”

Raj didn’t answer. He just shut the door—calm, controlled—and locked it.

I stood, setting my mug down.

A familiar flutter stirred in my chest.

Not fear. Not entirely.

It was adrenaline. That rush of knowing you’re the moment. That the city is buzzing because of you . I’d felt it before—on red carpets, on tour stops, during pop-ups that turned into stampedes.

But this was different .

This wasn't a controlled rollout. It wasn't curated.

This was real attention—spontaneous, unpredictable, and somehow more intimate. Because it wasn't just me they were watching.

It was us .

And as thrilling as that was, it made my skin feel thin. Like every gesture, every breath, might be read a thousand different ways before nightfall.

Taraj turned to face me.

"It's starting," I said softly.

His gaze held mine. "Yeah."

A beat passed.

"You still want it?"

My pulse ticked up. I thought of the studio. His kiss. My voice threading through his music like a confession. The kind of art we made when no one was watching.

And I knew, with all the noise rising outside, that was still the purest thing we had.

"I want it to be real," I said.

His jaw flexed, then eased.

"Then let's make it that."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

TWENTY-THREE

I wasn't supposed to be here.

Not in a stadium with thirty thousand people and her leg brushing mine every time she shifted in her seat. Not laughing at dumb shit about overpriced pretzels.

Not watching her tilt her face to the sun like she wasn't the hottest topic on every gossip blog this morning.

I was supposed to be at the crib. Writing. Hiding. Playing the role. But she pulled me into this moment like gravity. And I didn't want to fight it.

Said she used to go to baseball games with her dad when she was little—just the two of them, bundled in hoodies, splitting soft pretzels, booing the players who couldn't run.

So when she saw the Pirates were playing the Phillies, she looked at me with that glint in her eye, the one that made it hard to say no.

“We have security... why not?”

Her voice was bright, hopeful. Like a memory remade in real time. So we called our managers. Cleared the air. Set it up. Shit, if we were gonna out ourselves, might as well do it in daylight.

She looked good—too good.

Hoodie loose. Lips glossy. Hair tucked under a black fitted like she wasn't one of the most recognizable voices and faces in the game. She leaned close to whisper something wild about a player's tight pants and cracked up when I gave her a look.

That laugh—that shit did something to me. Not just because it was beautiful. But because it was free. Like she'd peeled herself out of the headlines and just decided to be here. With me. No tension. No lights. Just us.

I used to think the most dangerous thing about her was her voice.

I was wrong.

It was this— us . Out in the open. No booth, no dim lights, no fake flirting for the label. Just her shoulder pressed to mine, and that familiar ache in my chest building again.

I took a slow sip of my drink, tried to focus on the game, but her hand brushed my thigh and I flinched.

“You alright?” she asked, grinning.

“Define alright.”

She bit her lip like she wanted to say something slick, but then she caught it—someone's phone lifted two rows ahead of us. The subtle angle. The slow zoom. The shake of a hand trying to steady excitement.

“They see us,” I muttered.

“Yeah,” she said quietly. “They do.”

She didn't shrink. Didn't pull away. Just sat a little straighter, adjusting her sunglasses and linking her fingers in her lap.

I felt it again—that pull toward her. Not fear. Not the urge to run. Just the quiet ache to protect what was mine... and let the world see it.

I leaned in a little. “We can dip if you want.”

She shook her head, eyes never leaving the field. “Nah. Let 'em watch.”

I studied her for a beat. The way her jaw was set. The glint in her eye. The calm in her body. She wasn't shaken.

She was done hiding.

And maybe that was what made something ease in my chest. Because I'd spent most of my life keeping things close—staying quiet, staying low. But this—Sienna Ray beside me, smiling like the sun had always favored her first—that, I could live with. Hell, I could let the world see it .

I nodded, voice low but sure. “Then we'll let 'em.”

She turned her face toward me, slow and deliberate. And when our eyes met, I saw it. Not the curated version. Not the image they pushed. But her . Bare. Steady. Choosing me in real time.

That look was intimate. Unapologetic.

And it felt like the softest kind of spotlight. Before I could speak, the stadium erupted around us—not in noise, but in light.

The jumbotron lit up above the field, and there we were—caught on the screen, side by side in Section 123. First the image. Then the text.

SIENNA RAY & TARAJ FERREL L

Gold font. All caps. Centered like a headline the world had been waiting for.

Gasps. A beat of silence. Then the swell of recognition as the crowd caught on. Cheers started in pockets, then spread like a wave.

Phones rose. Fingers pointed. Sienna's eyes never left mine and I knew what she was asking without saying a word.

So I gave her the answer. I leaned in and kissed her.

Right there, under that massive screen, in front of thousands of strangers and one woman I didn't want to hide from.

Our lips met—soft, deliberate, and so damn sure. Her hand found my jaw. My fingers brushed her thigh. It was more than affection. It was ownership. Not of each other, but of the truth between us.

When we pulled apart, the crowd was still reacting—shouting, clapping, a few standing just to see us clearer. The buzz around us blurred into a haze I didn't care to translate.

Because right then, I wasn't Taraj the mystery. Taraj the marketed. Taraj the voice behind the track. I was hers . And she was mine.

Two weeks later.

Echoes of Your Flame had crossed six million streams.

Six. Million.

For a song that wasn't even supposed to exist. No rollout. No marketing plan. No hook. Just her voice in a dark room, and my lyrics laid bare like an open wound.

Now it was everywhere.

Clips of her runs stitched into reels with captions like the gospel of the gut. Tweets called it soft rage in sonic form. Edits of her face and my pen, layered together like the internet had finally cracked the code on us. Some fans knew the lyrics better than I did.

And maybe that made sense.

Because the truth was... that song wasn't just a track.

It was a confession. And not mine.

What nobody was saying, though—what was beneath all those think pieces and perfectly cut viral clips—was that Dangerous Love was done too.

Finished. Mixed. Ready to move. But instead of launching my solo project, it had quietly become ours—a duet that no one planned but everyone wanted now.

The label had already started seeding it.

Behind-the-scenes footage. Studio b-roll.

That final shot of her leaning into the mic, mouthing touch me again and I'll burn you

down —yeah, they’d clipped that for TikTok.

And it was working.

Which meant the spotlight had shifted.

Sienna was the name on every exec’s tongue. Not the washed-up star trying to claw her way back. She was back. Bigger. Brighter. On fire.

And me? I was the one who helped build the track that reignited her—but now I could barely get a call returned.

I sat at the long, overdesigned table on the thirteenth floor of the label’s headquarters, surrounded by neutral tones, double-speak, and the kind of air that smelled filtered three times over. My chair looked expensive but felt like shit. Amir sat to my left, pen tapping softly against his thigh.

The door opened.

Sienna walked in beside Brielle, her stride unbothered. Collected. Hair swept up. Soft beat. Gold hoops. Black dress hugging all the right curves without trying too hard. And somehow, still, it was her eyes I saw first—warm, familiar, sure.

When she spotted me, she smiled, just a little. Then she crossed to my side and sat beside me, not across. Our knees almost touched.

She didn’t speak, just placed a hand on the table, palm down, close enough that if I needed grounding, I could find it.

Barry, in his signature watch and polished charm, cleared his throat. “Glad we’re all here. We’re ready to talk rollout.”

I glanced at Jalen, his silence already louder than I liked.

“Rollout for what?”

Barry grinned. “ Echoes , of course. The response is phenomenal. But also Dangerous Love. The timing is perfect to drop them back to back.”

I nodded slowly. Just once.

“We’re thinking of a tandem campaign,” Barry continued. “Strategic release windows. Feature placements. Visual rollouts. That behind-the-scenes footage from the mix session? Blew up overnight.”

He said it like I should feel honored.

Like I hadn’t spent a week trying to get Jalen to clarify if my actual album was still on the table.

I shifted, jaw tight. “And my solo project?”

That’s when it happened. The first flicker of discomfort passed across Jalen’s face. Not panic—just that low thrum of guilt that says I wish I had better news. But he didn’t say anything. Just gave me the kind of look men give when they’re trying to say I’m sorry without using their mouths.

But under that guilt was something else. That memory of the last time I reminded him who I was. Who I could be if I had to be.

Brielle’s expression didn’t change, but I saw the stillness in her. The way she caught the temperature drop in the room.

A few nights ago, Sienna had warned me to play this one different. “Don’t come at them with fire,” she’d said. “Make them walk into the flame.”

So I sat back. Let them cook. Let the silence hang a little too long. Just enough to make them sweat.

Sienna’s hand shifted slightly—still not touching mine, but closer now. Her body angled toward me like she wasn’t just present for this meeting. She was here for me, too.

Another exec leaned forward. “Essence wants a cover story. If we do an exclusive, we might be able to bring in Billboard as well. The idea is to show intimacy. Real connection. You two in a warm, homey environment. Soft light. Candid but elevated.”

I exhaled. “So... fake real.”

“Curated real,” Jalen finally said, like that was any better. But his voice was softer this time. Like he was trying to keep things from boiling.

“What you two have—what you built—it’s working. This is what the people want.”

I looked to Sienna. We didn’t curate anything. From the start, our shit was real.

Her eyes said she knew what I felt but to play the game.

“I’ll do Essence, ” she said.

Barry lit up. “That’s great news?—”

“But I pick the writer,” she added. “And the setting. I’m not interested in

performance. If we're giving the public truth, it needs to come from us. Not the machine."

The table went still.

Barry gave her a long look. "You know that's not usually how this goes."

"I'm not usual," she replied, voice steady. "Neither is this."

Barry laughed, smoothing over the silence. "Alright. That's something we can work with."

Barry nodded eventually, conceding. "You'll have support. Within reason."

Sienna just nodded once. "That's all I need."

They kept talking—pre-save strategy, launch windows, PR targets. Amir said something about holding *Dangerous Love* until *Echoes of Your Flame* crested at eight million.

But I wasn't really listening anymore.

I was watching her .

The curve of her jaw as she considered their bullshit. The calm fire in her voice when she pushed back. The quiet grace of a woman who had earned this return—not with noise, but with art. With pain. With power.

I loved that woman like a vow I didn't know I was allowed to make.

But I'd be lying if I said the moment didn't sting.

The spotlight was warm on her shoulders.

But it cast a long shadow where I sat.

And Jalen—he hadn't forgotten who I was.

I could see it in the looks he kept sneaking me. The twitch in his jaw. The care in his words.

That wasn't guilt. That was memory. That was respect dressed up like caution.

But he had a label to consider. A career. Budgets. Stakeholders.

Me... I had a story nobody wanted to fund.

So I let the quiet stretch until it bent the mood.

Then I leaned forward and said, voice even,

“Just make sure the story you're selling doesn't erase the ones who wrote it.”

And that was it.

The rest of the meeting ran without me. Talking schedules. Features. Magazine layouts. Timelines. But my mind stayed right there—on the space between us.

Sienna reached down when no one was looking, her fingers brushing mine.

A simple touch. Reassuring. Steady.

I squeezed her hand once, then let go. Because I wasn't bitter. I was just waiting for

my moment.

And the next time I speak... they'll listen.

TWENTY-FOUR

The lights were hot. Too hot. I could feel sweat building beneath my collar, heat crawling up the back of my neck like a silent warning.

The set was all clean lines and commercial gloss—soft blue walls, a white lacquer desk, and the glowing GMA logo pulsing behind the hosts like a halo. Cameras glided across tracks. Stagehands whispered into headsets, signaling five seconds until the segment went live.

Sienna stood beside me in a plum silk dress that hugged every inch of her. Her makeup was flawless. Hair pulled into a soft twist that revealed the long line of her neck. She looked effortless, even under all that light. Even with the pressure rising.

I kept waiting for the nerves to settle.

They didn't.

“You’re watching Good Morning America,” Robin Roberts said, smiling directly into the camera. “And this morning, we have an exclusive with the duo behind the rising hit, 'Dangerous Love.' Please welcome powerhouse vocalist Sienna Ray and the breakout singer-songwriter and producer, Taraj Ferrell!”

Applause. Lights up. Cue the close-up.

We both smiled. Said our hellos. Sat close on the white couch they used for musical guests. But from the first question, I knew the tone was off.

"Sienna, this new era you're stepping into is incredible—the vocals, the visuals, the story behind the album. It feels like a rebirth. What inspired this next chapter for you?" Robin asked warmly.

She lit up. Voice polished. Confident. Her hand brushed mine gently as she spoke, and I nodded along like I was part of it. Like I wasn't fading from the center of the room.

Every question pointed to her. Her rise. Her evolution. Her voice. Her control.

Then Michael Strahan chimed in, flashing a grin. "Taraj, your production is amazing. What was it like working with someone as iconic as Sienna?"

I cleared my throat. Sat forward. "She brought the kind of energy that demands something honest. We wrote from a place that wasn't safe. That's where 'Dangerous Love' came from."

They smiled politely. Pivoted.

She was radiant. Her voice lifted the room when we transitioned to the live performance. A stripped-down version of the track. Just a mic, some keys, a subtle bass line. The air shifted when we started.

She took the first verse, her tone honeyed and aching:

"You don't ask for nothin'

But your eyes say too much

And I'm scared of the rush

Of believing in us..."

I followed:

"Got my hands on the edge

But I dive when it's you

You say we could crash

And I hope that we do..."

Our harmonies met in the hook, that tension curling between us:

"You do Dangerous Love to my peace

And I love how you ruin me sweet..."

Her eyes found mine and stayed there.

She smiled like it was everything we wanted.

But inside, I was drifting. I didn't know where I fit anymore. If this was still mine too.

She didn't notice. Didn't see the weight behind my smile.

After the show, we stepped off set into a flurry of PR chatter and producer praise .

"We're gonna send car service for the next thing," someone said.

Sienna turned to me, glowing. “Come back to my suite? We can order food, decompress a little before the press junket tonight.”

I hesitated. Not because I didn’t want her.

Because I didn’t know if she still saw me.

I kissed her warm cheek gently. “I’m wiped. Gonna lay low for a minute.”

She searched my face for something. Didn’t press.

“Okay. I’ll text you.”

I nodded. Let her go.

Back in my suite, I poured a drink. Sat on the edge of the bed. The curtains were still drawn, the room dim except for the TV casting soundless color across the walls.

I pulled out my phone.

Sienna was everywhere.

Clips of the performance. Screenshot of her smile. Tweets about her voice, her dress, her glow-up.

And under one photo from a selfie she posted after i fucked her senseless:

@DarianMontrose: Didn’t know you still had that look in your eyes, Songbird. Miss it.

No comment from her. But she’d liked it.

I sat there, thumb hovering. Swiped to my messages. Texts from women I hadn't opened.

Come see me tonight. You know I keep it quiet.

Miss that mouth.

You in the city or nah?

I stared at them. One tap and I could feel wanted again. Loud. Visible. But it wouldn't be real. And it wouldn't be her.

I put the phone face down. Finished my drink. Let the silence stretch. Because the truth was loud as hell: I was falling for a woman who didn't even realize I was slipping into the background.

And I didn't know how to ask her to see me again.

TWENTY-FIVE

The room smelled like shea butter and warm brilliance.

Not the usual stifled air of hairspray and half-eaten pastries. Not the stiff chill of professionalism dressed up in politeness. This place breathed. It lived. Every corner of it told a story I wanted to remember—one built with care, detail, reverence. For me.

A wall of soft linen curtains diffused the afternoon sun, giving the space a golden wash. Gold mesh and dark velvet caught the light, flickering back at you like memory. The set was layered—lush, elegant, Black as jazz. Somewhere between a Harlem parlor and a dreamscape.

All around me, the room moved like a rhythm.

Stylists in braids and bright nails adjusted drapes and shadows.

A photographer in sneakers and bamboo earrings calibrated her lens like it was an extension of her heartbeat.

An assistant fixed lighting while nodding along to a playlist you couldn't find on Spotify—jazz threaded into soul, drumless and rich.

The kind of music that moved your bones before your brain caught up.

Everyone here was Black. Beautiful. Vibrant. Intent on capturing me in the softest,

strongest light. I could feel their belief in me before the first flash went off. And still... something in me lingered at the edge.

I sat at the mirror as a makeup artist smoothed something golden along my cheekbones, her hands confident and gentle, a quiet magic in every stroke. She didn't ask many questions. Didn't need to. The look was already happening.

Hair swept up. Neck bare. My collarbone catching light like it had something to say. The gown they chose curved down my body like liquid dusk—wine in shadow, shadow in silk. It changed color depending on how you looked at it.

Like me.

“You good?” Brielle asked from just behind me, holding a tablet in one hand and an espresso in the other.

I nodded, slow.

She tilted her head. “You look it.” Her voice softened, something like awe riding the edge of her breath. “Like... unbothered goddess realness.”

A slow smile curved my lips, though it didn't quite reach.

“Is that the look we're going for?” I murmured .

“For you?” She grinned, scrolling. “We're not going for anything. You already are it.”

I should've felt proud. Centered. Seen.

And I did... mostly.

But underneath the pride was a ripple. A shift.

Because I could feel it—the difference. This was no longer about us . Not the duet. Not the shared chemistry that once sparked so loud it shook the room. Not the storm we unleashed when we made the kind of song that wasn't meant to go public but did anyway.

This was about me.

My cover. My moment. My story.

The light belonged to me now. And somehow, I missed sharing it.

I held my own gaze in the mirror a moment longer.

Took in the woman I'd become—the one who told the label no when it mattered. Who demanded more and got it. Who loved a man in a kitchen, then stepped into the spotlight like she hadn't just come apart in his arms the night before.

But something had changed and it started with GMA.

Taraj hadn't come back to my suite after. Said he was tired and maybe he was. But it felt like more than exhaustion.

Since then...he'd been quieter. The texts had thinned out. The calls stopped altogether.

We weren't broken, not officially. But there was space between us now. Unspoken. Unnamed.

And widening.

We were still smiling for cameras. Still singing like we belonged to one mic. But at night, he wasn't there. And that silence—the kind only lovers feel in the chest—had started curling around the edges of everything.

Still, I felt him everywhere.

In the demo I looped just to hear his voice catch on the second verse .

In the scribbled lyrics I couldn't finish because his presence wasn't in the room to pull them from me.

In the ache in my jaw from holding back everything I wanted to say when we were alone for just a breath too long—and he looked away first.

I didn't want him for clarity. Didn't even want answers.

I just wanted him... near.

I wanted him because he quieted something in me.

Because I could be fire, and he wouldn't flinch.

Because he looked at me—not the fame, not the voice, not the image—but me ... and still leaned in.

Taraj didn't complete me. He reminded me I was whole, even when I felt hollow. The man who laid me down like I was a hymn.

Who said, "I'm not pretending," like it was scripture.

Who made love to my doubts and left them breathless.

And now he felt like a dream that hadn't disappeared—just dimmed.

The photographer's voice cut through my thoughts.

“Ready when you are.”

I stood, smoothing the silk over my hips. Bare feet on warm white flooring. They walked me toward the arch they'd built—drapes of velvet, soft golds and lived-in browns. Everything lush. Everything soulful.

I reclined on a chaise, found my light, and let them shoot.

Click.

Another angle. Another breath.

Click.

I shifted, let my mouth part. Tilted my head and held something back in my eyes—just enough to make the mystery feel earned.

Click.

And in that stillness, I realized they were capturing something sacred. Not a woman selling a story. Not a comeback. Not an image .

They were capturing a woman who had finally let herself be held . Not by hands. But by belief. Her own.

And by a love she didn't want to fix. Just stay close to.

Between setups, I reached for my phone and snapped a mirror pic—hair perfect, skin gleaming, the gown catching shadows like they were secrets.

I sent it to him.

Me: Styled by Black women. Shot by a Black woman. On my terms.

Wish you were here.

The dots appeared almost immediately.

Paused.

Then came his reply.

Raj: Wish I was too.

You look like power wrapped in silk.

My breath caught.

He was still there. Quiet, but present. Still watching. Still proud.

I bit my lip and tucked the phone away. Then stepped back into the frame, spine straightening as I exhaled slow.

I wasn't half of anything.

But God, I still wanted him beside me.

TWENTY-SIX

A month later...

The studio was dark. Not empty, just quiet—the kind of quiet that pressed its weight into your chest if you let it. But the screen in front of me glowed with a thousand voices I didn't ask to hear.

“Sienna Ray is the moment. The music, the image, the voice—all her.”

“Taraj Ferrell is dope, but let's be real... she doesn't need him.”

“The track gave her wings. He just happened to be there when she took flight.”

“This comeback is all Sienna. She's the headline.”

Scroll.

Scroll.

Scroll.

Then came the reel.

Soft gold lighting. Velvet shadows. Her gown clinging like the universe had been fitted to her form. Lips parted, not in performance—but in presence. Like she was thinking and singing and daring the world to keep up.

She looked like someone who belonged to no one.

Not even me.

The caption read:

The siren herself. No co-star needed.

My jaw tensed. I didn't even know I was holding my breath until I heard the door swing shut.

"You good?" Amir asked.

I nodded. "Yeah."

Even I didn't believe it.

He dropped a USB on the console and leaned against the board. "Final mix of Heavy Soul is in. Numbers look good. But I need you locked in for the next one."

I stared at the screen. Didn't move. Didn't blink. When would be the next one? The label was quiet and seemed to be over a second album coming from me.

He waited a beat. Then, "This about Sienna?"

I didn't answer right away. Not because it wasn't. But because it was too much of her and not enough of me all at once.

"It's about the silence," I said, voice low. "That strange quiet after people start clapping... for someone else."

Amir tilted his head. “You knew she was fire, man.”

“I did. But I didn’t expect her light to be this bright without me.”

I hated sounding this... unsure. That wasn’t who I was. Not in the booth. Not in the streets. Not when it came to my name.

But love? That shit leveled you.

I knew how tough I could be. Knew the world read me like a hardback—hardcover, hard edges, unflinching spine.

But an artist? A real one? We got soft spots. Goopy, bleeding, untended soft spots. You had to. To write ballads and whisper heartbreak through a mic. To croon to women around the world.

To croon to her .

Amir looked at me—hard. But not with pity. With truth. “That woman’s been fire since before either of us had a damn studio to step into. You didn’t light her. You just didn’t dim her. And that? That matters.”

I swallowed thick, fingers tightening around the edge of the chair.

“It’s like they forgot I existed.”

“They didn’t,” Amir said, calm. Cutting. “You did.”

I turned, finally. Met his eyes.

He shrugged. “You watching edits and reels and headlines like they’re scripture.

That's not God, Raj. That's marketing."

"But it's working," I muttered.

"So?" Amir stepped closer. "Let it work. Let her shine. But don't forget—you built the sound."

I didn't speak. Couldn't. Not with the lump rising in my throat, thick as a hook that hadn't dropped yet .

Because it wasn't about the credits. Or the press. It was about her. I loved her.

Not just in the spotlight. But in the shadow. In the silence.

In the way her voice made my chest tighten.

In the way her absence made my pen dry up.

In the way I still heard her moan in the middle of a song that wasn't even about sex.

I'd tried writing about other things—other women. Other sounds. But she kept showing up.

In the metaphors. In the melodies. In the margins.

Sienna Ray lived in my music now.

She was the music.

My phone buzzed.

I glanced down.

Sienna: I know they're loud right now. But you're not invisible to me.

You were the first one who heard me when I thought I had nothing left to say.

That's not noise. That's memory. That's truth.

My breath stilled.

I typed slow, fingers tight.

Me: I don't want to be a part of your past.

I want to be beside you in every room you command.

Three dots pulsed.

Paused.

Then returned.

Sienna: Then come to the listening party.

You helped build this sound.

Don't act like it's not yours too .

I stared at the message.

The choice wasn't just about pride. It was about healing something deeper. About

deciding if I could let love be louder than ego.

Amir watched me with that same look he'd given me back when we first started this project—like he was waiting for me to stop shrinking and remember who the fuck I was.

I took a breath. Not the kind that settles you. The kind that steadies you.

“Send me the next beat,” I told him.

He smiled. “Already did.”

And in that moment, I didn't feel like a shadow. I felt like the one who shaped the light.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

TWENTY-SEVEN

I smiled for the cameras. Laughed at the right moments. Clinked my glass against others, nodding through compliments that fell like petals—soft and fleeting.

“Congratulations, Sienna.”

“You’re back back .”

“This rollout is flawless .”

“Vocals like yours? They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.”

It should’ve felt like a coronation. But it didn’t. Not entirely.

The rooftop was beautiful. Warm string lights casting a golden haze over exposed brick and soft music. The DJ played a slow instrumental version of the lead single, letting the bass roll like waves under conversation.

All eyes were on me. But the only one I was looking for hadn’t shown up. Not yet at least.

I told myself I wasn’t watching the door. I told myself this was my moment, and if Raj wanted to sulk in silence over social media commentary, that was on him.

But the truth was I wanted him here. I needed him here.

Because no matter how good the numbers looked, no matter how glowing the articles or how glossy the pictures, he was the one who made me feel like I had something left to say.

And now that the noise was getting louder, now that the spotlight was mine alone again, I wasn't sure how to carry all of it without that anchor.

It had been days.

Since the shoot, our texts had been sparse. Thoughtful, but short. I'd seen the posts too. The reels. The think pieces making it sound like he was a chapter I'd already closed.

I never said that. But I hadn't corrected it either.

Public Relations wasn't my strong suit, and I let Brielle take the reins on pushing the appropriate soundbites into the atmosphere through a rep.

But I hated the effect that had on him because my silence was the opposite of golden. It was a judgment.

And now the silence between us was stretching—thin, sharp, dangerous.

"You alright?" Brielle appeared beside me, handing me a glass of champagne.

I took it, nodded. "Yeah. "

"Liar," she said gently. "You've been eyeing that entrance like you expect Jesus to walk through it."

"Worse," I said under my breath. "I'm hoping for Raj."

She said. “He’ll come.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I don’t. But I know you didn’t come this far to carry regret too.”

I looked down at my glass.

“He’s proud of you,” she added. “Even if he’s mad. Even if he’s scared. And somewhere in him, he knows you didn’t leave him behind. You just stepped forward.”

The words hit me somewhere deep. Because that was exactly what I’d done. I hadn’t pushed him out.

I just... kept walking, and somehow I thought he’d be walking with me, because why did it matter if the cameras focused on me more...that was the game.

A month from now, it might be on him. But I had to remember, he was newer to the game, even if he had false starts and experience under his belt. It was still new, and that meant he didn’t understand the tide, and how to ride the waves when they came.

I needed him; that was what was important. As if I sensed him, I looked up—He was there.

Standing at the edge of the rooftop, in a black jacket and boots, hair pulled back in a puff that only he could pull off, chain catching the lights just enough to remind me who the hell he was.

My breath caught. He hadn’t seen me yet.

But I saw everything .

The way he scanned the room, taking it all in. The ease in his shoulders that only came when he was around people he trusted. The heat behind his eyes that still looked for mine even in a crowd.

Then our eyes locked and the room faded.

My heart thudded hard enough to echo in my chest. I handed Brielle the glass without a word and walked toward him.

Halfway there, I paused. He stepped forward.

And when we met in the middle of the room, it wasn't loud. It wasn't dramatic.

It was quiet . It was real.

“Didn't think you'd come,” I said softly.

“Didn't think you'd want me here for real with the way I've been acting,” he replied. I loved his honesty. He always gave it.

“I always want you here,” I admitted, voice barely above a whisper. “Even when I don't know how to say it.”

His jaw flexed. “You shining so hard right now, I didn't know if I belonged in the frame.”

I stepped closer. “You helped build the light.”

He stared at me for a long second. “That's not what they're saying.”

“I don’t give a fuck what they’re saying,” I said. “I know what I feel. I know what we did. And I know I don’t want to celebrate this if you’re not somewhere in it.”

His chest rose and fell. Then—slowly—he pulled me into a hug. Not the polite kind. Not for show. The kind where your whole body exhales. Where your heart stops clenching.

I wrapped my arms around him and let myself rest there.

We weren’t fixed. But we were finding each other again. And in this industry, that was a revolution.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

TWENTY-EIGHT

The mic caught the low glide of my breath before the first note even left my lips.

I heard it in my headphones. Felt it in my chest. The hush before something holy.

Taraj stood behind the glass, one hand on the console, the other pressed to his lips like the sound of me settled somewhere sacred. His eyes tracked every movement of my mouth, every vibration I let fall into the space between us.

We were building a song that didn't belong to us. Not this time. This was for Amir and Amaya—for their love, their story, their spark. But still, as the melody swelled and my voice found the pocket he carved with those piano chords, it was us I felt.

Every harmony we'd never written. Every kiss that lingered too long. Every stretch of silence between us these past few weeks that still managed to pulse with feeling.

"Pull back on that bridge," he said gently through the talkback. "Float on it like you're still not sure if it's a yes."

I nodded once and stepped back to breathe. "You want hesitation?"

"I want surrender. But the kind that surprises even you."

I smiled, slow and deep, because he knew exactly what that sounded like. Knew it because he'd pulled it out of me already, in more ways than music.

I closed my eyes and gave it again—just enough ache to make it real.

When I stepped out of the booth, the studio lights were low and warm, the kind that made everything feel personal. Taraj was already playing back the track, his head bobbing slightly to the beat, lips parted like he was tasting every note.

That's when the door opened.

And in walked Amaya, all braids and bare shoulders, laughing at something Amir said just behind her. They moved like one breath fed the other. Like whatever she was about to say, he already knew.

“Don't kill me,” Amaya said, holding up her phone. “But I had to show y'all the mockup.”

She walked right up to me, screen out. The digital image pulsed with energy—bold lines, warm tones, brushstrokes that felt like heartbeat and honey .

“They wanted something that felt like love in motion,” she said, eyes bright. “This is what came out.”

“It's stunning,” I said, meaning it. “It feels like you.”

“Us,” Amir corrected softly, walking up behind her, arms circling her waist like he needed to touch her to stay grounded.

Amaya leaned into him, smiling as his lips brushed her shoulder. “Y'all working on something?” she asked, eyeing the board, the open session still glowing on the screen.

Taraj sat up straighter. “Just tightening some things.”

Amir cleared his throat. "Yeah, just...you know. Studio stuff."

"Mmhmm." She turned her gaze toward me, eyes narrowing with playful suspicion. "You're lying. I can smell it."

"Trust me," I said, mouth curving. "You'll like what you hear."

She eyed us both, then shrugged, turning in Amir's arms to face him fully. "You want to grab dinner after this?"

He nodded, brushing a kiss to her cheek. "Anything for my muse."

She laughed. "You better be glad I'm cute."

"And yours," he said, catching her mouth with his in a kiss that lingered just long enough to remind me why this song mattered.

Why it deserved to be perfect. Why we were pouring every ache and joy into every note.

Later that night, the suite was low-lit and warm, the television flickering with the soft hues of Mahogany on some cable station that still ran movies with commercial breaks. Diana Ross was framed in a gold gown, looking over her shoulder like the world was hers to hold or burn .

I sat curled into Taraj's side on the velvet sofa, skin still dewy from the shower, hair wrapped up, a hotel robe tied loose around my waist. His arm rested along the back, fingers occasionally brushing my shoulder like he couldn't help himself.

The popcorn we ordered sat between us, forgotten. Salt clung to my fingertips. His scent clung to my skin.

We were halfway through the second act when the knock came.

He stood to answer, still shirtless, sweatpants slung low on his hips, and opened the door with no urgency.

A young Black woman stood there, holding a tray like it was communion.

Her eyes widened. Froze. Then popped.

“Oh my God. Sienna and Taraj? My whole week has been made.”

Taraj smiled, clearly amused. “Appreciate you.”

She handed the tray over like it was an offering. “Here’s the popcorn you requested, Ms. Ray. Three kinds of salt. Extra butter. The kitchen said to tell you, whatever you want, we’ll make it happen.”

“I’ll be sure to thank them,” I called out from the couch.

The attendant beamed and backed away slowly, whispering, “I’m telling everybody.”

When Taraj returned, he looked at me like I was made of glitter and smoke. “Your fans are serious.”

“She’s yours too now,” I teased, patting the seat beside me.

He sat down, grabbed a handful of popcorn, and kissed my shoulder. “I don’t mind being recognized if it’s next to you.”

We watched the rest of the film like that—half-focused, half-tangled up in each other. Taraj’s hand on my thigh. My fingers tucked in his. The sound of Diana Ross singing

about dreams and sacrifice and beauty filled the room.

After the movie ended, the TV dipped into a string of trailers. Taraj muted it and turned to me, eyes heavy with something softer than lust, deeper than desire .

We didn't speak. We just moved.

We kissed like there was nothing left to prove, only pleasure to give. He laid me back against the cushions, opened my robe like he was unwrapping something sacred. His body folded over mine and we made love slow, with full hands and full hearts, skin to skin and nowhere to hide.

Afterward, I lay still, his head resting on my stomach, our breaths tangled.

Then something stirred.

Not in my chest. But lower. In that place where melody blooms before you realize you're humming. Low and unsure at first. Then fuller. Warmer. Something between a question and a promise.

Taraj shifted, his fingers drawing lazy shapes on my hip. "That something new?"

"Maybe," I whispered.

He sat up slowly, reached for his phone, and hit record without asking.

I hummed again, letting it roll into the quiet, letting the seed of the song plant itself in the room.

I didn't know the lyrics yet. Didn't need to. But I knew what it was about. Him. And maybe us too.

What it meant to fall for someone who saw you past the polish. Who touched you like you were more than your voice. More than your image.

Pittsburgh wasn't supposed to be permanent and it still wasn't but I hadn't left despite our collab being finished and the feeling of home reaching out to me.

But love...

Love had a way of rerouting things and I wasn't just passing through anymore.

I'd stayed.

Because something real was here and he was sleeping in my arms.

TWENTY-NINE

A couple of weeks later...

The rooftop was lit like a dream—soft candlelight flickering against the city’s skin, music swelling into the quiet like it had somewhere to go and didn’t want to rush getting there.

I stood off to the side with Sienna’s fingers wrapped in mine, watching Amaya’s eyes well as the first notes of our track played.

It was stripped bare—keys, breath, and intention. A love note dressed in quiet.

We were always more than a moment...

More than time slipping through hands...

We were fate, we were written...

We were love before we knew where to land.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Amaya turn toward Amir. Her lips parted, her eyes already full.

Then he stepped forward, reached into his jacket—and dropped to one knee.

“I’ve loved you my whole life. Even when I was too young and dumb to admit it.

Even when I was too scared to claim it. Even when I thought I didn't deserve you."

Her breath hitched. Mine did too.

"But I'm done wasting time. I'm done running from what I've always known. You—us—it was always supposed to be this way."

Tears slipped down her cheeks, each one catching the candlelight.

"I want forever with you. I want mornings and nights, laughter and love, fights and making up. I want to be yours in every way that matters."

He flipped open the box. The ring caught every shimmer in the sky—radiant-cut, platinum, timeless.

"Say yes, baby. Say yes to us. Say yes to forever."

She whispered, her voice trembling through tears, "Yes. Yes, Amir. Forever. "

And just like that, the rooftop exploded—cheers, claps, someone crying in the corner. Champagne corks. Laughter.

But I barely heard any of it.

Sienna's fingers gripped mine tighter.

"That was ours," she whispered, her gaze still fixed on the last lingering note.

"Yeah," I said. "We gave them a love note."

She turned her face toward me, light from the lanterns catching her cheekbone.

“And what about ours?”

I could’ve joked. Could’ve played it safe. But I didn’t want safe.

I wanted her.

I reached for her wrist, brushed the soft skin there. “We’re still writing it,” I murmured.

But even as I said the words, something inside me twisted.

She was leaving soon. The tour was set—eight weeks, coast to coast, then overseas. She’d told me one morning, just after rehearsal, when we were both sipping coffee and ignoring the clock. Said it so casually, like it wasn’t going to split the sky in half.

I never expected to care. When I got into music, all I wanted was to create something that could live beyond me. I never planned for love to sneak its way into the lyrics.

But she had.

Now she was in every beat, every bridge, every breath.

And I didn’t know how to sing the last note if it meant she wouldn’t be there to hear it.

We didn’t go straight back to the hotel.

Dre caught my eye the moment we reached the car, and I gave the nod. His voice low in the earpiece, he murmured something to the second guard, then took the wheel himself.

Sienna looked over. “Where we going? ”

“Somewhere I go when I need to feel the whole city and none of it at the same time,” I said.

She tilted her head, curious but trusting.

The city blurred by, tinted windows shielding us from the world. It was late. Quiet. But Pittsburgh still breathed—bridges lit like veins, the three rivers gleaming in the dark like they were waiting for something to be whispered across them.

Dre pulled up to an overlook that sat just high enough to feel separate from the world below. Not a tourist spot—something quieter. More private.

He stayed in the SUV, giving us space. We stepped out.

No paparazzi. No fans. Just Sienna in my hoodie again, the hem skimming her bare thighs, her eyes wide like she was trying to memorize this version of the night.

“I’m scared,” I admitted but not caring how it made me look. “Not of us. But of time. Of how fast everything moves. You’re leaving soon, and I keep thinking... what if I don’t know how to keep you when the world keeps trying to claim pieces?”

Her voice was barely a whisper. “You don’t have to keep me, Taraj. Just love me.”

I pulled her in. Right there, under the moon. My mouth claimed hers slow—like the answer I’d been searching for was hidden somewhere between her lips.

And later, when we finally made it back to my place, we didn’t speak much. She stayed wrapped around me. Her legs tangled with mine. My hands on her hips. Her cries in my ear.

And when her body trembled and she came on my dick with tears breaking down her cheeks, I felt everything.

Everything I couldn't say. Everything I didn't know how to fix.

The tour was real. Eight weeks. Back-to-back shows. Europe. U.S. stops. Sold-out cities and dreams she deserved.

But here—right now—was our truth.

I cradled her face, kissed the salt from her skin, and held her until her breathing slowed again. Neither of us said it out loud. But we both knew what it meant. She was slipping into the sky.

And I had no idea how to stop loving her without losing myself in the process.

We lay tangled in the dark, her breath on my chest, sweat cooling on our skin. I ran my fingers down her back, memorizing the curves of the woman who made music sound like something God created with me in mind.

And as the night held us close, I wondered how the hell I was supposed to keep her forever... when time kept knocking like it had other plans.

And in the midst of my fears, I said what we both needed to hear, "We've got time."

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

THIRTY

Philadelphia, PA, Three Days Before Tour Launch

The scent of sweet potatoes hit me first—brown sugar and cinnamon curling through the air like memory. Jasmine must’ve been baking that sweet potato pound cake she only made in the summer, rich and golden, like holidays showed up early.

“Sienna Ray! Girl—get in here!”

I laughed, dropping my bag near the stairs and slipping off my heels. This house had always been a soft place to land. The kind of space that never changed, even as everything else around me did.

The living room was warm and well-lived, the kind of cozy that had its own heartbeat. Wedding photos, school portraits, framed drawings, a scripture framed in gold leaf: Let love be genuine. Hold fast to what is good.

Jasmine’s voice floated from the kitchen. “Grab a glass, superstar. You ain’t company.”

I followed the sound and walked into what had to be the happiest kitchen in all of Philly. Yellow walls, cream cabinets, and a wooden island covered in flour like someone had thrown a celebration.

Her youngest, Savannah, was licking batter from a spoon. The oldest, Mariah, braided a doll’s hair with expert precision.

“Auntie Enna!” Savannah squealed, running straight into my legs.

“Hey baby,” I said, scooping her up. “You been baking?”

She nodded, serious. “I poured the vanilla.”

“Brave woman,” I teased Jasmine.

“I try,” she said dryly, wiping her hands. “Dinner’s almost done. Darnell’s outside doing the most with the grill.”

Right on cue, her husband walked in, carrying a tray of ribs like it was gold. He pulled me into a one-armed hug and said, “We’ve been praying over your tour.”

“Pray my voice holds,” I said with a grateful smile. “And that I don’t lose my mind.”

Fifteen minutes later, we were gathered around the table, plates heavy with food and stories.

Darnell played one of my old tracks on the Bluetooth speaker and two-stepped behind his girls until Jasmine made him sit down.

Savannah showed me her drawing of a unicorn.

Mariah asked if she could come on stage with me one day.

There was joy. There was peace. There was ease. And God, I needed it more than I knew.

After the girls were tucked in, Jasmine and I sat out on the porch swing under a velvet sky, wine glasses in hand, our legs covered in a knit throw.

“You ready?” she asked.

I nodded. “As ready as I can be. I saw Mommy and gave her my hugs and kisses, and she wanted to know why I was acting like I ain’t never done this before. I shook my head because she was right. I’m used to this.”

She sipped. “And Raj?”

My chest pulled tight. She knew how to get to the heart of a matter.

“We’ve been... together. Like, really together. Ever since the proposal night.”

“You love him?”

“I do.”

“Then hold onto that. Tour’s a beast, but it don’t last forever. Love’s the only thing that can out-sing the noise.”

I rested my head on her shoulder. “I needed this.”

“I know.”

What I didn’t say was that the quiet moments were getting harder to come by. The last couple weeks with Taraj had been intense. Beautiful. And quiet in all the right ways.

We’d been inseparable—laughing, writing, laying around half-naked and talking about everything and nothing. He took me to meet his people, and I met the baby they all adored—his nephew, who reached for me with those fat fingers and laid his cheek on my chest like I was already part of the family.

I didn't cry. But I thought about it later. In bed. In his arms. How I'd always loved children, even if I'd never said it out loud.

But the last two days before I left, we spoke less and felt more. Made love slow. Hummed to each other between breaths. Wrapped around each other like the world was trying to tear us apart and we were holding the line.

Most people didn't understand what fame did to you. What it took to keep a spotlight burning. It wasn't just the travel or the schedules. It was the giving. Of your voice. Your presence. Your image. Your time. Your body.

On tour, you were both product and producer. It chipped away at you, one show at a time. And love—new, tender, unfinished love—didn't always survive the distance.

Taraj hadn't said it, but I knew he felt it too.

I could still hear his voice that night before I left.

"I'm scared," he'd whispered. "Not of us. But of time. Of how fast everything moves. You're leaving soon, and I keep thinking... what if I don't know how to keep you when the world keeps trying to claim pieces?"

And I wanted to believe we were unshakeable. That time couldn't ruin us. But in the quiet parts of me—the ones I didn't show often—I was scared too.

We were still learning how to be stars and stay in love at the same time. Still figuring out how to move in sync without one of us losing momentum.

He'd been good for me. Better than good. He saw me—not just the performer or the polished image. He heard the music in my heart and found a way to sync his rhythm with mine.

I had spent so long convincing myself that being alone was the cost of my dreams. That reaching my goals would be enough. That standing on the biggest stage in the world could fill every crack.

But once you find someone who matches your frequency... who knows how to pull truth from your throat, how to meet your words with his voice and his hands and his body?—

You don't ever want to let that go.

He hadn't asked me to stay.

And I hadn't asked him to come .

But we both knew what we were walking away from.

The tour was real. Eight weeks. Back-to-back shows. Europe. U.S. stops. Sold-out cities and dreams I deserved.

So I flew solo.

Berlin, Germany, First Stop on Tour

The lights were hot. Not warm. Not flattering.

Hot.

They pressed into my skin, made my satin cling and my glitter shimmer. The crowd was loud but distant. Thousands of people, hands raised, mouths open, waiting for the sound they came for.

But inside me, it was quiet. Still.

I stepped forward, letting the spotlight catch me in its grip. One golden beam. One moment. One mic.

The chords began.

I exhaled.

I sang More Than A Moment , the proposal song. Wishing he was here to complete the melody...

I didn't know what forever looked like

'Til you held me like it already lived

I was all walls and late goodbyes

But you taught me how to stay and give

The crowd moved as one. Like water. Like memory. Like breath.

But I didn't see them. I saw him.

His jaw tightening in the studio. His hand gripping my thigh after we laid the track down. His voice thick when he whispered that he loved me into my mouth.

I missed him.

Not the sex. Not just the intimacy .

I missed our quiet.

Our stillness.

Our home we created in our hearts. In our souls.

I held the final note until it cracked something in my chest.

The audience erupted.

I bowed.

But I didn't smile. Because my heart wasn't on stage.

Later in my empty suite, the room was colder than it should've been. Bigger than it needed to be. I peeled off the stagewear piece by piece until I stood in nothing but one of Taraj's old T-shirts.

The water scalded me in the shower. Still, I didn't move. And then I cried.

Not the pretty kind. The ugly, gut-deep kind that made your knees tremble and your soul ache.

Because I was tired and the tour had just begun. But I missed him and that seemed to pull everything out of me.

I didn't want to be the woman who left love behind for lights and applause. But the world didn't slow down just because you found something real.

Wrapped in a robe, I sat at the edge of the bed, phone in hand, his name lit up on the screen.

I wanted to call. To say I couldn't do this without him.

Instead, I whispered to the dark, "Something has to give."

THIRTY-ONE

Weeks later...

I was in the booth, headphones on, laying a scratch hook over a beat Amir had flipped—something moody, minor key, full of space to bleed. But my voice?

It wasn't bleeding.

It wasn't doing a damn thing.

Every take came out flat. Too clean. Like it didn't hurt enough. And it did hurt. Just not the way it needed to—loud and honest and cracked open.

I pulled the headphones off and rubbed both hands down my face.

"You good?" Amir's voice cut through the glass.

I gave him a half nod I didn't mean, already reaching for my phone like it was second nature. Muscle memory. Desperation.

I hadn't heard from her in two days.

Texts were brief. Voice notes even shorter. The last time we FaceTimed, she smiled like someone trying to hold a wall up with a paper spine.

Still beautiful. Still brave. But something behind her eyes had gone dim.

And I missed her. Missed the sound of her breath when I kissed her neck. The way her hips moved when she was half-asleep and clinging to me. The last time I touched her, she trembled—and I could still feel that shiver in my hands.

We'd tried to have FaceTime sex once since she left.

Tried to make it feel like something close to what we had.

But the reception kept dropping. Her image pixelated half the time.

Her moans skipped. I came with her name on my lips and a mess in my hands, and it didn't feel like victory. It felt like the ache got worse.

My phone lit up.

Sienna.

I swiped so fast I nearly fumbled the screen.

“Hey.”

Silence.

Then her voice—cracked, soft. “Hi.”

That "hi" wrecked me.

I sank back in the chair, heart thudding like it wanted out of my chest .

“You okay?” I asked, already knowing.

A pause.

Then, “I don’t think I am.”

My breath caught. “Talk to me.”

She sniffed. Again.

“I sang the song tonight. Our song. More Than a Moment. And I gave them everything, Raj. Every drop of me. And when the last note faded... I was alone again.”

I closed my eyes.

“You’re not alone,” I said.

“You’re not here.”

And there it was. The silence between our sentences finally filled in.

“I know,” I whispered. “I know, baby.”

She didn’t say a word, but I could hear her breathing—shaky, low, like she was holding on with both hands and still slipping.

“Listen,” I said, already on my feet, pacing. “I hear you. Even the parts you ain’t saying. And I’m not waiting for you to spell it out.”

A sound left her then—part sob, part sigh.

“I’m coming to you,” I said. “Tomorrow.”

“Raj...”

“No more time zones. No more pretending distance doesn’t bruise us. I want you. Real time. No filters. No countdowns.”

Another breath. Then the softest, most broken “Please.”

And that was all I needed.

I stood there for a beat, staring into space like I could replay her voice in the air. Still hearing the ache in it. Still feeling the way it cracked something open in me.

Falling for her hadn’t been a choice. It was a slow descent—one I never tried to stop. And somehow, I’d learned how to breathe underwater.

Amir’s voice cut through the quiet. “She okay? ”

I swallowed. My throat tightened. “Not really.”

He didn’t need more than that.

“Then go to your woman,” he said, firm, like it was the only answer. “I’ll handle the label. Blame me if you need to.”

“You sure?”

“You think they’ll argue with me after I gave them Night Things ?” he snorted. “Nah. But if they do, I’ll just say your vocals were trash and you needed to go get your heart back.”

I let out a breath that might’ve been a laugh. “Appreciate you.”

“Go fix that shit, man.”

And I did.

12 Hours Later — Madrid

Her hotel was a palace tucked behind a wall of ivy and quiet elegance. Marble floors. Gold-trimmed elevators. The kind of place you only stayed when the label wanted the press to whisper about the opulence and the star they’d built.

Security—not the guys we had in Pittsburgh—stopped me at the door.

“I’m on her list,” I said, wondering why the fuck they didn’t know who I was. I might not be Sienna, but I wasn’t no chump. Still, I got it. They had jobs to do.

One of them checked the iPad and nodded. “Suite. She hasn’t left all day.”

They escorted me to the top floor, then stepped back.

I knocked once. The door opened slowly.

She stood barefoot in a robe, curls loose, eyes swollen from sleep—or tears. Maybe both. Her mouth parted like she wasn’t sure I was real.

“Raj...”

“I’m here.”

She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me, face pressed to my chest. And then she broke .

No sobs. Just that soft, bone-deep trembling that happens when someone finally stops pretending they're fine.

I carried her inside, set my bag down, and held her on the bed. Clothes still on. Shoes still tied. Just holding her. My hands moved in slow, steady circles across her back until her breathing evened out.

She looked up, lashes wet.

"I'm so tired."

"I know."

"I don't want to do this alone anymore."

"You don't have to."

She searched my face like she needed to be sure.

"What now?"

I reached up, brushed her loose hair behind her ear.

"Now we stop surviving around the life we want. We build it."

"Even if the label doesn't understand?"

"They don't have to," I said. "We do. Plus you and me are the stars. They'll figure it out."

She leaned in. Kissed me soft. Long. Her hands cradling my jaw like she was afraid

I'd disappear again.

We undressed each other without urgency. No rush, no hunger. Just reverence.

It wasn't sex. It was sanctuary.

Skin to skin. Breath to breath. We curled under the covers like the quiet itself was ether. Her body fit against mine like it had been waiting for this stillness.

She fell asleep first.

Curled up against me, her breathing soft again.

I stared at the ceiling, one hand on the curve of her back, thinking about all the ways this industry takes without asking.

The way it turns light into labor. Passion into product. The way tours stretch time and fame steals privacy. How the very thing that makes them love you is what keeps you away from the people you love .

She'd been carrying it. Performing through exhaustion. Smiling through isolation. Holding herself together in interviews and on stages and hotel beds while I convinced myself she had it handled.

But I knew better now.

Love doesn't ask for perfection. It shows up. In real time. And tonight, so did I.

THIRTY-TWO

The light through the curtains was golden, touched with dusk.

He stood by the window, his braids crisp, his muscular torso shirtless, hands in his pockets, looking out over Florence like he hadn't just caught me mid-collapse and carried me back to myself.

Like he hadn't just flown across an ocean because my voice cracked through the phone line.

I watched him from the bed, chin resting on my arm, completely bare beneath the sheets. Tender in places he took ownership of.

"You always this dramatic?" I teased, voice still thick with sleep.

He turned, that slow grin stretching. "Only when it's worth it."

I sat up, letting the blanket slip to my waist. "You think I'm worth an international flight?"

He crossed the room in a few strides, leaned down, kissed my shoulder.

"I think you're worth my life."

My throat caught. My whole body stilled.

He meant it.

And I believed him.

I reached for his hand. Pulled him down beside me.

We lay on our sides, knees touching, foreheads brushing, the quiet folding in like silk. I kissed the corner of his mouth. Then his jaw. His neck. His shoulder. His collarbone. Like prayer.

“You still tired?” I asked.

“No.”

“Good.”

I rolled him onto his back and straddled him—slow, smooth, no rush.

His hands found my waist like they’d missed me. Like they were afraid I might fade.

I bent and kissed him. Soft. Deep. Full of everything I hadn’t said since we parted.

It wasn’t desperate. It was deliberate. A claiming. A confirmation.

We kissed until my thighs were trembling, until he was hard beneath me and whispering my name into my mouth like it was sacred .

I reached between us. Guided his thickness, that sweet dick of his, inside me. And when he moaned, I did too.

I rode him like the only truth that mattered was here. This. Us. Now.

Like I needed to know the shape of his love from the inside out.

He filled me slow, deep, eyes locked on mine like I was home and heaven and everything in between.

“Tell me,” I whispered, grinding harder. “Tell me who I belong to.”

“You’re mine,” he said, voice guttural, face flushed.

“Say it again.”

“You’re mine. All of you.”

I came like those words split me open. Shaking. Shouting. Falling.

And before the tremor faded, he flipped me and drove himself in deeper, harder, hands in my hair, mouth on my neck.

We made love like we were learning each other all over again. Like we didn’t know how long we had, but we were going to make it count.

When it ended, we stayed tangled. Breathing. Glowing. Full.

And for the first time in weeks, I wasn’t worried about tomorrow.

I knew we’d figure it out. Because I loved him. And he showed up. And that was the start of everything.

Hours Later – Florence, Italy

The stadium was alive.

Thousands of bodies moving as one. Lights flickering like stars in the rafters. My name chanted like a promise.

I stood backstage, mic in hand, earpiece buzzing, heart drumming against my ribs .

Tonight was different.

Not because the crowd was louder, or the city more beautiful, but because I was no longer singing from a hollow place.

I was full. Of him. Of us. I stepped into the light. The roar nearly knocked me off my feet.

I waited until it softened, until the band stilled.

Then I spoke.

“Y’all still with me tonight?” I smiled, voice teasing.

More screams.

I nodded, eyes scanning the crowd.

“I wrote a song a few weeks ago,” I said. “At a moment when I couldn’t quite say what I was feeling... so I sang it instead.”

The crowd quieted.

“I didn’t have a name for it back then. But I do now.”

A hush fell like a curtain.

“I call it All of You. ”

Gasps. Then silence again.

“And this one,” I said, voice trembling just a little, “this one’s for the man who flew across the world when I needed him. Who reminded me what it feels like to be held, seen, loved. Taraj... this is yours.”

The first chords played—slow, sultry, soaked in longing.

I closed my eyes.

And sang:

I tried to love you with half of me,

But you pulled the rest from where I’d buried it deep.

You kissed the scars I didn’t name,

Made me feel fire and never shame.

Now I crave you like the sun craves the sea,

Like silence longs for a melody .

I don’t want the pieces—I want the truth.

I want the breath. The pulse.

I want all of you.

The crowd was still. Spellbound. I opened my eyes.

And there he was. Standing just off stage. Hand over his heart. Jaw clenched. Eyes wet.

I kept singing.

Let the world spin wild outside our bed,

We'll be wrapped in words we never said.

Give me mornings with your mouth on mine,

And nights that taste like red wine and time.

I don't want the moment—I want the proof.

I want the breath. The ache.

I want all of you.

The last note curled into the air like smoke—thick, golden, lingering. It held the ache of everything I couldn't say out loud. Everything I'd carried. Everything he came to carry with me.

And when it faded... the silence broke.

The crowd erupted. Thousands on their feet, screaming, clapping, crying .

But I didn't bow.

I stood still, chest rising with breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. My gaze locked on him—right there in the wings, arms folded, heart wide open, eyes burning like I was the only thing in the room that mattered.

I mouthed, Come here.

He stepped forward. Not rushed. Not showy. Just slow, grounded steps like the whole earth was moving with him. Like fate had taken his hand and brought him into the light where he belonged.

The crowd lost it—but I only saw him.

And when he reached me, everything else melted away. The noise. The lights. The spectacle.

All that remained was us.

He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me—soft and sure and deep. Not for the cameras. Not for the headlines. But for every moment we'd been apart. Every fear we'd laid down. Every promise we hadn't spoken but had already started to keep.

My knees nearly buckled, but his hands held me firm.

When he pulled back, his forehead rested against mine. The mic caught the whisper he gave only to me...

“All of me is yours.”

My heart split open. Not from hurt—but from the fullness. And this time, I didn't cry. I just held his face, thumbs brushing the corners of his mouth, and gave him the only truth I had left.

“I know.”

THIRTY-THREE

The cheesesteak was messy—grease slicking the paper wrap, onions slipping out with every bite, hot sauce painting the corner of my mouth.

Taraj watched me devour it with amused disbelief, his own half-eaten sandwich forgotten in his hand.

“I’ve seen you take down a stage in six-inch boots,” he said, voice low, that grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “But this might be your most savage performance.”

I licked my thumb slow, then raised a brow. “Don’t disrespect the art.”

His laugh was warm, quiet, thick with something heavier than humor. He leaned back against the brick wall behind us, elbows propped, gaze locked on me like I was a song he was trying to memorize.

And just like that, it hit me.

New York. That night with the pizza slice and the streetlight catching the edge of his smile. How he’d looked at me like I was half sin, half miracle. Eyes dark, hungry, reverent. Like every bite I took made him harder.

He was looking at me the same way now.

Same smolder. Same restraint.

Like he was already playing back the sounds I made in his bed. Like he was counting the minutes until he could strip me down and eat every damn thing I left on the wrapper.

My stomach flipped, heat curling low and slow.

He didn't say anything else.

Just kept watching.

And Lord, I felt it.

Between my thighs. In the rise of my chest. In the pulse beneath my skin that beat like a drum made just for him.

We were tucked into a narrow alley off South Street, posted up in front of a no-name cheesesteak spot with no signage, just a window, a bell, and a line that always curled down the block.

Locals knew.

But now...

Thanks to a teenager who caught us mid-bite and whispered, "Wait—is that Sienna and Taraj?" loud enough to summon the TikTok gods, a different kind of line started to form.

Two girls in pastel hoodies fake-scrolled nearby, stealing glances. A guy in a Sixers jersey pointed at Taraj like he couldn't believe it. One woman stood across the street, hand to her chest, tears in her eyes just from looking at us.

I offered a small wave.

That was all it took.

Phones came out like the spectators they were.

“Is it really you?”

“Oh my God, I just watched your Florence performance again— All of You had me in tears.”

“Taraj, bro... that last verse on Heavy Soul ? Whew. Sermon.”

We took pictures. Signed a napkin. Hugged a woman whose hands were shaking. Taraj kept one hand on the small of my back the whole time, eyes scanning the crowd, soft but steady. Protective without words.

We’d been moving without security because I trusted my people, but one never really knew, so I understood his position.

Eventually, a man in an apron popped out the front door, waving a dish towel.

“Y’all good, but we gotta move the crowd,” he said with a grin.

That earned a round of laughs, a few more selfies, and then it was just us again. Brick wall. Grease-stained paper. The buzz of the city around us.

And the heat of his stare, still on me like he couldn’t wait to finish what I’d started with that first bite.

I let the silence hang, then met his gaze head-on.

“What?” I asked, licking the last of the sauce from my thumb slow. Deliberate.

He didn’t answer. Just tilted his head and smiled like he knew exactly what I was doing—and loved it.

“I’m just saying,” I went on, dropping the crumpled wrapper into the bag between us. “You keep looking at me like that, we’re gonna have to find a dark corner somewhere.”

His jaw flexed .

“You don’t think I’ve already been thinking about that?” he murmured, voice low, gravel-rich. “Since bite one.”

A flutter shot down my spine. I moved in closer, toes brushing his. “Then maybe you should do something about it.”

He stepped forward, real close, his mouth just shy of mine.

“Oh, I will,” he said, voice silky smooth. “But not in some alley with people still around the corner pretending they’re not listening.”

“Obviously not.”

His hand found my waist like it was home, fingers splayed wide, warm through the fabric. And I swear, if the cheesesteak hadn’t already done it, that touch alone would’ve melted me.

“We’re not gonna make it through dessert, are we?” I asked, already breathless.

“That was dessert,” he said. “You’re the main course.”

I gasped—laughed, swatted his arm, but my thighs pressed together anyway. Because I knew him.

And when he looked at me like this? He meant every filthy word.

Distraction had a way of interrupting a good thing, however. My phone buzzed.

Brielle: Need your eyes on this pitch deck. They're asking about a third leg of the tour.

Seconds later?—

Jalen: Yo, I know y'all in Philly but the label needs both y'all on that Zoom tonight.
Re: campaign rollout.

I looked at Taraj. He was glancing down at his screen, too.

He met my eyes. "Jalen."

"Brielle."

He shook his head and tucked the phone into his jacket pocket.

"Later. "

I did the same. "Yeah. Later."

We stood in silence for a moment. Just breathing each other in.

Then he extended his hand. "C'mon, superstar. Let's finish this walk."

I laced my fingers through his and followed. Past the mural of Black jazz legends. Past the corner barber shop with Anita Baker spilling from cracked windows. Past three more fans who recognized us, whispered excitedly, but didn't interrupt.

It wasn't normal. But it was ours.

"I missed this," I said, leaning into his side. "The in-between stuff. The parts nobody claps for."

He glanced down into my eyes. "I missed you."

My chest warmed. My phone buzzed again. I didn't even look.

"Meetings going okay?" I asked.

He exhaled through his nose. "Heavy. Labels want everything. Brand deals. Appearances. They pitched me a podcast and a fashion collab in the same breath."

"Damn."

He nodded. "Not complaining. Just... I didn't expect it all to land this fast."

"You mean after More Than a Moment blew up?"

His mouth curled into that smirk I loved. "You mean after you blew it up."

I stopped walking and turned to face him. "You ready for all of that? The heat, the press, the constant motion?"

He didn't flinch. "I'm ready to make music that matters. That lasts. And I'm only doing this if it still feels like us. No matter how loud the world gets."

I swallowed the lump rising in my throat.

“They offered me another tour,” I said softly.

He blinked.

“Europe. Asia. The whole thing. With way less turnaround than before. ”

“You thinking about it?”

I hesitated. “I’m thinking about how to move without losing myself. Without losing you.”

I reached for his hand again. “I don’t want to be a silhouette on a world stage with no light inside. I want this... us ... to still feel real when the noise fades.”

He leaned in. Pressed his forehead to mine.

“Then let’s build it like that,” he murmured. “Real. Grounded. Yours.”

A breath passed between us. Heavy with heat and truth.

“I’ve been writing,” I said, voice barely above a whisper. “Something raw. Something that sounds like skin and confessions and truth you can’t take back.”

His gaze darkened. “What’s it called?”

“Siren.”

The name hung between us like steam—fierce and feminine. Dangerous in all the ways a woman should be.

He traced his thumb along my jaw. “Of course it is.”

I smiled, just a little. “Because when it comes out... I want it to sound like I kissed the mic with my whole mouth. Like I gave the world every moan I ever held back.”

His eyes burned. “Then I hope I’m in the room when you record it.”

I leaned closer, brushing his lips with mine. “You already are.”

He kissed my hand, slow and deep. “Then let me hear you, baby. Loud.”

A beat passed. My chest rose. So did his.

“Yes,” I breathed. “And no more hiding. No more dodging calls just to get a few minutes of peace.”

He smiled, mouth brushing mine. “Except for today. Because we’re ignoring the hell outta those calls.”

I grinned. “Exactly.”

We reached the steps of my brownstone. He took the keys from my hand, unlocked the door, then turned to face me, his eyes molten.

“Time for dessert.”

I stepped in close. “You must love dessert because you look like you plan to devour me.”

“I do—I will.”

We stepped inside. Kicked the door shut.

Shoes off. Clothes soon after.

He pressed me against the wall and kissed me like the mic was still hot, like he had something left to say. Then again, slower, whispering against my lips?—

“I want to put music inside you.”

I whimpered. “Then do it.”

My body burned for him—already parted, already pleading. Every inch of me ached with the memory of him, the promise of him. He made me feel like a temple and a temptation all at once. Like I was something sacred that he still wanted to sin with.

He laid me on the couch, on the floor, up the stairs—everywhere we had breath.

Worshipped me with hunger.

Told me what I meant to him with every stroke, every kiss, every claim.

Told me I was his harmony, his melody, his reason.

And when he finally slid inside me, deep and slow, my soul fractured open.

I sang. Shouted. Cried. Came undone.

For him. Because of him.

We were a whole damn song.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:56 am

The roar of the crowd was thunder wrapped in joy.

It rolled through the stadium in crashing waves—hands raised, lights blinking, bodies swaying to the rhythm that had brought us all here. The band held the final chord, letting it breathe, while the stage lights dimmed just enough to make the moment hold.

And then his voice rang out, warm and steady through the hush.

“Before we close this out,” Taraj said into the mic, “I got one more surprise for y’all.”

The crowd erupted—screams pitched high, a thousand guesses colliding in the air.

From the wings, I placed one hand over my heart, the other resting on the soft swell of my stomach. My pulse was a drumbeat in my ears, steady and strong—just like the little one growing inside me.

I hadn’t expected it to feel like this.

Full. Electric. Sacred.

For so long, I thought the stage was the only place I’d ever create something that moved people. But now, I was carrying something deeper. A new kind of song. A life formed in love, shaped by every note, every kiss, every whispered promise between us.

He looked toward me. Found me in the dark like he always did.

Nodded once and I stepped into the light—not just as the artist they came to see, but as a woman transformed. A woman becoming.

And this time, I wasn't just singing for them.

I was singing for us.

The reaction was instant—gasps, cries, applause so loud it rattled the rafters. Phones shot up. Hands clutched chests. Some people cried like it was their baby we were about to announce.

I walked slow, the spotlight catching on the satin curve of my dress, each step a soft hymn. My hands framed the new life I carried. My hair was swept back in a low knot, skin glowing, lip gloss soft. I felt every inch a woman—loved, held, radiant.

Taraj met me at center stage and kissed my hand first?—

not just any hand, but the one wearing the quiet diamond he slid on my finger one morning when the world was still sleeping.

Then he kissed my forehead.

And in that exact moment—despite twenty thousand people watching, despite the press in the crowd, the bright, blinking lights—everything went still.

“You see this woman right here?” he said, voice low and thick with feeling, one hand at my waist.

The crowd answered with a roar.

“This woman saw me when I was still figuring out who I was. She gave me her light. Her voice. Her love. She said yes to me when no one was looking. And now,” he turned slightly, placed his palm against the gentle rise of my belly, “...she’s giving me our next verse.”

The crowd broke. Louder than before .

Cameras flashing. People crying.

But all I saw was him.

My husband.

My home.

My harmony.

Cries. Cheers. People hugging each other in the front row.

I laughed through tears, turning just enough so they could see the round curve of our future.

He wrapped his arm around me, and for a few beats, we just stood there—two artists, two lovers, two souls who had weathered the industry and each other, and still found harmony.

Still singing.

Still writing.

Still here.

One year ago, we made the choice to build something real.

Not perfect. Not easy. But real .

I took time off after the tour—focused on my peace, my body, my breath. I started writing again. Quiet, intimate songs full of warmth and wonder. A few lullabies, too—soft melodies I haven't let anyone hear yet. Not even him.

Taraj stayed creating. His solo debut charted at No. 3.

He's producing now, mentoring, even got a Grammy nom last month. But through it all, he never let the spotlight pull him away from me. From us .

We found our rhythm.

We built a home just outside Philly.

His studio's on the top floor.

My garden's out back. I promised I'd keep it alive this time—and I'm trying. We still had his apartment in Pittsburgh for when we needed to get into the studio with Amir. But in Philly, we found a peace we didn't know we needed.

We have late mornings, Sunday pancakes, vinyl spinning in every room.

And when I found out I was pregnant, he cried .

Didn't say a word at first—just knelt in front of me and kissed my belly like he was already singing to our child.

Tonight, I wasn't the headliner. But I was the heartline.

And when he kissed me in front of twenty thousand people, I knew?—

We were always more than a moment.

We were the melody. Now we're the chorus.

And soon...

We'll hear a new voice join the song.

THE END

Please leave a rating/review . Thank you!