



Veronica Ross: Come For Me

Author: *Mallory Monroe*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: A badass who makes no apologies for who she is, Veronica “Roni” Ross fights for what is right and true against all odds. A cop who won’t let crooked cops define her, she refuses to let the bad guys win and will do whatever it takes to destroy them at their own game. She doesn’t suffer fools at all and doesn’t stick around when men try to play with her heart.

She can do bad all by herself.

Except when it comes to one particular man she can’t seem to do without. . .

Billionaire bad boy Braxton McCrae treats women as if they are another one of his commodities that he trades daily on the stock exchange. He can take them or leave them and never wants any of them twice. Although he will never get tied down to anyone, Roni Ross has stolen his heart in such a dynamic way that she is his obsession. But a control freak and a woman who refuses to be boxed-in makes for a combustible pair. They can’t live with each other, nor without each other. But they always have each other’s back.

Veronica Ross: Come for Me is the first book in a brand-new Romantic Suspense Thriller series by Mallory Monroe, one of the queens of IR.

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FOUR YEARS EARLIER

The security gate parted and Braxton McCrae sped his dark-silver Pagani Zonda up the winding driveway of his parents' Tudor-style mansion and came to an abrupt stop at the east entrance. Hopping out, he hurried inside.

His mother, Lady Millicent McCrae, was just coming down the eastern staircase when he entered the foyer. In his bomber jacket and gloves, and his jeans and Timberland's, he looked more like the member of a motorcycle gang than the titan of industry he had become. He didn't follow in generations of footsteps at McCrae Aeronautics, a company that competed with Boeing, like all of her other sons had done. He charted his own course. Created his own businesses. Made his fortune his own way. But that was her beloved Brax. "You got here fast enough."

"But not too late I hope." He hurried toward the staircase.

"Not too late, no."

"But soon?"

Millicent looked deftly worried. "Very soon."

"Is Father here?"

"No. Why would he be?"

"Common curtesy. Respect. Love and honor for a woman who's worked for the

McCrae family for fifty years?” Brax could go on. But it was all beside the point. He kissed his mother on both of her cheeks. Even at fifty-six, she was still the most beautiful woman in the world to him. “Has Roni made it yet?”

“Not yet. Poor thing.”

Brax’s face suddenly looked anguished, as if Roni’s wellbeing concerned him most of all. So much so that his mother noticed it. “Don’t worry about Veronica. She can take care of herself.”

Brax felt exposed. “You don’t have to tell me that. I know that.” He quickly changed the subject. “What are the doctors saying?”

Milicent let out an exasperated exhale, and then shook her head.

Brax unzipped his jacket. “Damn.”

Millicent beheld her son’s expressive face with nothing but love and admiration for him. He was her favorite because he just was. Just as she had been the favorite daughter of a Norwegian Duke who did not want her to marry the young, rich and brash American Edward McCrae. But she was spoiled rotten and would not be denied. The young couple married and relocated to America when she was only seventeen (and pregnant with Braxton). She moved in with Edward’s now-deceased parents and never moved out of the family home. And although she was royalty back in her home country, she made it her business to raise her children to be down-to-earth, kind, considerate people. With the help of her children’s nanny Beatrice Ross, she felt she had succeeded beyond her wildest dreams. Especially with Brax.

But changing Edward into a responsible husband and father, as she had also planned to do, didn’t succeed at all.

But you can't have everything , was the motto of her life.

"She's asking for you and Veronica," Millicent said, "so go in there and keep it light and calm. Don't break down in tears or display any untoward emotion because you know how Bea hates that." She patted him on his chest. "Just try to . . . Just try to . . ." She shook her head. She was the one who was about to breakdown.

Brax hugged her, he understood, and then he hurried up the stairs.

When he got just outside of the bedroom he touched his forehead and then made the sign of the cross, praying for strength. Then he stiffened his spine, exhaled, and walked on in.

When he saw her lying in that bed looking her elegant self even though it was obvious her time was near, he did his best to put on his best fake smile. But he couldn't do that to her. Not a fake bone was in that lady's body and Brax wasn't about to pretend all was fine and dandy either. The fact that a doctor and nurse walked out of the room when he walked in proved that nothing was fine. Nothing was dandy.

He removed his gloves and tossed them on the dresser as he went over and sat on the side of her big, California-King sized bed. "Hello Miss Bea."

"Hey." Her voice was hard to hear and very strained. Then she looked at him. "If you say I look beautiful I'll bop you one."

Brax smiled then. That was so her. "Yes ma'am." Then his look turned serious. He took her hand. "How do you feel?"

"Ready to meet my Maker. But just my luck I'll be here another fifty years."

He laughed. Her voice was getting fainter, but he understood every word.

Then she nodded her head, which he knew was not easy for her, and looked him dead in the eyes. “You take care of yourself, Braxton. And take care of your mama.”

“I will. And I’ll look out for Roni too.”

But Beatrice’s expression changed. “You stay away from my daughter,” she said to him in no uncertain terms.

He smiled, thinking she had to be joking. “Very funny.”

“No I mean it.” Somehow her voice was stronger. “You’re a great man, Brax. You have a good heart. But when it comes to women, you’re no good.”

Shocked to hear her say that with a straight face, Brax’s smile left. “I’m no good?”

“With women, you’re no good at all. Just like your daddy. Just like your granddaddy. It’s in your bloodstream. Stay away from her. You’ll only break her heart, and she’s had too many heart breaks already. And here I come dying on her and she’s only twenty-five, when she needs her mama the most.” It was Beatrice who had to fight back tears. “But she’s strong.”

Brax nodded, although he was fighting tears too. But he held on. It wasn’t about him. “She’s very strong.”

“And you keep her that way. Don’t baby her. Don’t you ever baby her or you’ll run her away.”

In any normal circumstance Brax would have mentioned that she had just told him to stay away from her. Now she was telling him not to baby her or he’d run her away.

But this was no normal circumstance. “I promise you I will never baby her.”

Beatrice nodded. “Good. That’s good. And don’t try to change her either.”

Stay away from her but never baby her and never try to change her? It made no sense! But Brax knew she was heavily medicated. “I won’t,” he said.

“I told her that if she graduated from college like I wanted her to do then after that she could pursue any career she wished. But college, I told her, was non-negotiable. She was my only child and my child was going to graduate from college if it was the last thing I saw her do on this earth.”

“That was when you first got diagnosed and she wanted to go to school here in town.”

“And I would have none of that,” said Beatrice. “She was going to the best college she could get into and that wasn’t going to be in Victorville. And she did that for me. Got herself in Columbia and graduated with honors. That’s why I never objected when she decided she wanted to stay in New York City and become a police officer. I never wanted that for her no more than you did.”

A frown appeared on her face as if it was still a bitter taste in her mouth. “Being a cop is dangerous. But that’s her choice. And she loves it. Don’t you take that away from her because you know she can do better. She don’t wanna do better. Being a policewoman is better to her. So don’t you interfere, you hear me? She’s as tough as you are. Don’t baby her. She can take care of herself.”

Brax was baffled as to why she would waste her last breaths on earth dictating to him all the things she didn’t want him to do to her daughter as if he was the center of her daughter’s existence when she lived on the other side of the State from him. Nearly seven hours away by car. They rarely saw each other except when she came to visit

her mother a few times a year. But he wasn't about to argue with Miss Bea. She always knew more than he did. "Yes ma'am," he said.

And she nodded her head, as if his word was as good as gold to her.

Then they both could hear heels clanking up the stairs. Which made them both smile.

"She's here," Brax said.

"That's my daughter," Beatrice said proudly. "Could have been a supermodel, that one, the way she walks. Nobody high-steps like her," she added, and Brax laughed. Because he knew it was true too.

But when Veronica "Roni" Ross walked into her mother's bedroom inside the mansion of her mother's half-a-century-long employer, she didn't know if she was going or coming. She was just that flustered.

And the idea of her mother living in the oldest mansion in Victorville astounded her still. Her mother had never been a live-in maid nor live-in nanny for the McCrae family. Until her condition deteriorated and Lady Millicent moved her into the mansion for around-the-clock care. Roni was against it. She was willing to quit her job at the NYPD and move back to upstate New York, to Victorville, where she could provide the care her mother needed.

But her mother would have none of it. She preferred to move in with Lady Millicent, she said, than to ever be a burden on her child. Her mother could never be a burden on her, Roni told her forcefully, but it was settled. And when her mother said it was settled, only God Almighty Himself could unsettle it.

But seeing her there, in that bed, looking so fragile and helpless when her whole life she had been so strong, broke Roni's heart.

Like Brax, she couldn't bring herself to fake a smile either. Not with the "realest" woman she'd ever known right in front of her. "Hey Ma."

Brax and Beatrice were already looking in that direction when she entered the bedroom. And as soon as Brax saw her face again, a face he hadn't seen in months, his heart lurched into that unfamiliar territory where he felt a burst of happiness and warmth, but an adjacent sadness, too, because he knew it was only a momentary joy. That she would be gone again soon. That he wouldn't see her again for another half a year or more. And, he feared, once her mother died, he'd just may never see her again at all.

Beatrice managed to put on a smile and reach out her hand to her daughter. "Hello baby," she said heartfelt.

With her five-feet-seven slender frame decked down in an ankle-length brown overcoat, brown and red gloves, and a scarf around her neck, Roni quickly shed her coat and her gloves, tossing them into a nearby chair, and sat on the opposite side of the bed from Brax. Wearing a short leather skirt, she crossed her flawless legs and took her mother's hand happily. "It's so good to see you again, Ma."

"How did you get here so fast? New York City is six-and-a-half hours away from Victorville."

"Brax sent his plane," Roni said. "It only took an hour on his plane."

Beatrice stared at Brax with that I mean it: stay away from my daughter look on her face. "That was very kind of him," she said despite her look.

Roni had been dreading doing it, but she knew she couldn't just ignore him. She looked over at Brax too. And like him, her heart went into that unfamiliar, highly-charged emotional territory whenever she was near him too. But only her heart didn't

display any competing emotions of joy and sadness the way his heart did. It was all sadness for her.

Mainly because she'd loved him from afar for so many years. She knew he was a good man. She saw him in action with her own two eyes every time she was around his family growing up: which was often. He was a kind, goodhearted man who treated people with respect. All his brothers treated her and her mother well, she couldn't think of one single time when they didn't, but Brax always seemed to go that extra mile. Even on her fourteenth birthday, he and his girlfriend took her to the movies. And even when the girlfriend was complaining that she didn't want to do it, Brax told her to hit the road then. The girlfriend then pretended she was joking and went along with it too. But that was the side of Brax that Roni loved.

But she also knew the other side of him too. A side that had gotten worse as the years went on. And that side made clear that Braxton McCrae was a player of the first order and always would be. She wanted a good husband for herself and a great father for her future children, not just a sperm donor. And that would be Brax. Because he was not, by any stretch of the imagination, marriage material. He just wasn't. And she was never going to be about wasting her time trying to change a grown-ass man. "Yes," she said to him, agreeing with her mother. "It was very kind of you to send your plane. Thanks, Brax."

She and Brax gave each other a polite smile, as if to shield their true emotions, and then Roni turned her attention back to her mother. But she was always abrupt with him that way. And it always made Brax feel as if she didn't want to have anything to do with him. And rightly so, he thought. Even his beloved nanny just told him he was no good.

Then Beatrice squeezed her daughter's hand in as much as she could squeeze at all. "I'm ready to go, baby girl. You hear me? I'm ready to be with the Lord. To sing in that heavenly choir. To praise his Holy name."

Brax could see Roni fighting with all of that considerable strength she had to hold back her tears. And she nodded. “Yes ma’am. I know you’re ready.”

“But are you ready to let me go, baby girl?” her mother asked her. “Can you let me go?”

Roni wanted to scream no. Hell no ! But she wasn’t going to do that to her mother. She nodded her head. “Yes ma’am,” she managed to say.

Brax’s heart dropped when he saw the pain on Roni’s face. He wanted to grab her and hold her and be there for her until the end of time. But he knew that was out of the question.

But despite the pain on her daughter’s face, Beatrice managed to smile. As if she was waiting for her child’s consent.

And then, a few seconds later, she fell asleep. She was still breathing, but barely. She was tired and they knew it.

But Roni wasn’t leaving her side. And neither was Brax. Roni laid down on the bed beside her mother, and Brax laid down on the opposite side of the bed of one of the most important women he’d ever had in his life. And even though he was now a grown man of thirty-nine, he still viewed her as his second mother.

But oddly enough, he was more worried about Roni.

When they both laid on either side of Beatrice, and were staring into each other’s big, expressive eyes, tears appeared in their eyes. They couldn’t fake it. This was devastating for both of them.

But the weight of their emotions opened Beatrice’s eyes again. And without looking

at either one of them, she smiled. “All your lives I’ve been squeezed in the middle between you two. Now you’re still trying to squeeze the life out of me. Thanks a lot.”

Her sense of humor was always so out of nowhere that they both couldn’t help but smile. And then they were laughing.

When Lady Millicent came into the room, she found it rather rude and ill-mannered of Veronica and Braxton. What could possibly be funny at a time like this? But when she saw that look on Beatrice’s tired face, she smiled too. Yes. It was good. Surrounded by the two people she loved the most, it was exactly the way Bea would want to go.

Lady Millicent sat down at the bottom of the bed too, and enjoyed the laughter.

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FOUR YEARS LATER

Nightfall in Brooklyn and Lou Jerard, a husky white cop, slung their patrol car across the sidewalk, trying to block the suspect in, but the young man was too fleet of foot for any car to stop him. He jumped on top of the patrol car's hood, slid his small frame across it, and jumped down running. Lou and Roni, his partner, hopped out running too.

Their suspect, a petty thief who had snatched a young lady's iPhone, had run into the alley that led into an open field behind a housing project. If he made it to that housing project they knew it was over. He would easily get lost in that crowd, and once there nobody would be willing to help a cop do anything about it. They had to get to him before he got to that open field.

Roni in uniform looked a whole lot different than Roni in street clothes. In uniform, she wore no heels, no jewelry, and her big afro was neatly tucked away inside her officer's cap. It wasn't her style by a mile, but it was a necessary step to her goal: Plainclothes Detective. She'd already been notified she'd passed the exam. Again. But would she be passed over again?

She was five years younger than Jerard, about a hundred pounds lighter, and was therefore able to outrun her partner easily. But their suspect was younger than she was and faster on his feet. There was no way, in her estimation, they were going to catch him.

But fate intervened and he stumbled over a brick and fell, causing him to twist his ankle. But it was all she needed to rush up on him and place her knee in his back until

her partner could arrive. She frisked him and found the phone, but no weapons.

Jerard, nearly breathless, finally made it up to them. He grabbed up their suspect and slammed his back against the alley wall, which was a boarded-up old pharmacy building. “Making us run like that.” He punched the young man in his stomach, causing the young man to bend. “You think we got time to be running after your thieving ass?” He punched him again.

“Okay,” Roni said, holding her hand between their suspect and her partner. One punch she could see. He deserved it in her view. But they weren’t about to brutalize the kid.

But their suspect was as defiant as ever. “Yeah you better listen to the sister,” he said, taunting Jerard. “We know who wears the pants in that partnership.”

“Why you little punk,” Jerard said and flung Roni’s hand out of the way as he punched their suspect on the chin, causing his knees to buckle.

“J, that’s enough!” Roni yelled out, but Jerard wasn’t finished with the punk. He hit him again, this time in the stomach once more, causing the young man to fall on his knees. Then Jerard kicked him in the chin with his shoe, causing him to fall on his back. But the suspect quickly sat up and spit at Jerard.

Although Roni’s arm caught the brunt of the spit, Jerard’s anger took over and without giving it a moment’s thought, he pulled out his weapon and shot their suspect in the head.

The young man’s eyes stretched at the veteran cop, and then at Roni as if he couldn’t believe she allowed it to happen to him too, and then he slid down to the ground, his eyes wide open.

Roni backed up in pure shock. Did she just see what she just saw? Did her partner of seven years just execute a phone snatcher ? Did that just happen?

Her partner was breathing even heavier than he already was. “That’s what his butt get for coming at me like that,” he said as if he was attempting to justify his actions to himself. Then he pulled out his own phone and made a call.

“What are you doing?”

“What do you think? I’m not going down for this.”

Roni couldn’t believe that was his first thought. She immediately got down on her knees and began to administer CPR although anybody could see the kid was dead.

“It’s Lou Jerard,” he said into the phone. “We got a down.”

Apparently the voice on the other end of his phone asked where, he told him where, and then the call ended. But Roni was still pumping on a chest that felt brick-hard.

“You’re wasting your time, Ross,” Jerard said to her. Then he tried to pull her up. “Just stop it.”

But she jerked away from him and continued pumping. She felt as if she could have done more to protect the kid. Why didn’t she do more? But she didn’t see it coming. She just didn’t see it coming!

She looked up at her partner. He was trying to play it easy, like it was no big deal, but she could see the terror in his eyes.

And he could see the anger in her eyes. “He spit on me,” he said defensively. “That’s an assault!”

“Are you crazy?” Roni yelled at him. “You don’t shoot somebody for spitting on you!”

“He’s a thief! Have you forgotten that?”

“He stole a phone, J. That’s not a death sentence. Have you forgotten that ?”

Roni could see Jerard’s facade breaking down. He knew he had fucked up. It was all over his face. But Roni could also see that his fear wasn’t for the young man he had killed, but for his own skin. He was scared for himself.

“Who did you call?” Roni asked him.

“Who do you think?”

“Who?”

“Mulvaney.”

Roni frowned. “Ah man, why would you do that? He’ll only make it worse.”

“How could he make it worse?” Jerard blared out. “This is my life on the line.”

Before Roni could respond about the young man’s life he just took, an unmarked police car turned into the alley and sped up to where they were standing. Roni stood up as Detective Charlie Mulvaney, the kind of unethical, immoral gangster pretending to be a cop she despised, got out and walked up to them.

“I’m glad you were nearby, bro,” Jerard said to him.

Mulvaney was looking at the suspect. “What happened?”

“I didn’t mean to shoot him,” Jerard said in a whiny voice that Roni hated.

Mulvaney wasn’t crazy about it either. “I didn’t ask you that. What happened?”

Roni spoke up. “He snatched an iPhone out of a lady’s hand and took off running. We saw it and gave chase in the car, then got out and footed it. We all ended up here where . . .” Snitching was not easy for her. She was no snitch.

“Where he spat on me,” Jerard said.

But this was different. A kid was dead. “He spat on my partner after my partner beat the shit out of him,” she said.

Mulvaney was staring at Roni. “Un-hun. Then what happened?”

“After he committed that assault on me,” Jerard said before Roni could say anything, “I shot him. But I didn’t mean to shoot him.”

“Then why did you shoot him?” Roni asked him.

“I was. . . It was . . . It was self-defense,” Jerard stumbled upon saying.

“Damn right it was,” said Mulvaney.

Roni couldn’t believe it. “Self-defense?” Roni looked at the unsavory detective who had a reputation for getting cops out of trouble. “Our suspect has no weapons.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I frisked him myself!”

“Yeah but there are other ways to present a problem for a beat cop.”

“Like what?”

Before Roni knew it, Mulvaney had grabbed her gun, shot their downed suspect three more times, bent down, placed her gun in the suspect’s hand, and fired two shots just past where Roni was standing, causing Roni to slide aside lest she get shot herself. It all happened so fast, she was still reeling.

Then Mulvaney stood up and handed her back her gun. “Like that,” he said. Then he looked at her. “It was self-defense,” he said specifically to Roni. “And if it wasn’t,” he added, “what are your bullets doing inside of him too?”

Then Mulvaney’s phone was ringing again. He answered the call, got the location, and then ended the call. “Call it in, Jerard,” he said as he headed back to his car. Then he backed all the way out of that alley, and took off apparently to another “hot spot.”

Roni looked at Jerard. Jerard pressed the radio button on his shoulder. “Shots fired!” he blared into the radio. “Shots fired! Send back up! Shots fired!”

Roni could hardly believe what was happening.

She could not believe it.

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In the Manhattan restaurant, Brax finished a phone call he had with his office, tossed his phone aside, sipped his drink, and then looked at his watch. Again. It was just like Roni to be late, so that didn't surprise him. But it did annoy him.

It wasn't as if he lived around the corner. Their hometown of Victorville in upstate New York, where he helmed his massive corporation that employed tens of thousands of workers, was over six hours away by car. Flying in only took an hour, but it still took time away from his extremely hectic schedule.

Not that he was complaining. After her mother died and fearing she would ghost him forever, it was his idea to constantly fly to New York City to see her. To look deep into her expressive eyes and see for himself that she was okay. Almost every other week he was in town since her mother's death four years ago. Truth was, he'd come more often if he could swing it. But this was the best he could do. He'd come to town, they would have dinner together, and then he would fly back home.

Sometimes he wondered if he was a burden to her by coming at all.

But she always seemed pleased to see him and he always had an excuse. There were ten subsidiary companies that he personally owned in New York City proper, and he would meet with all of his CEOs as a group whenever he came to town. Although a necessary function, even his CEOs knew those meetings were excessive. Even they knew their business concerns were secondary. His main purpose for being anywhere near New York City was always Roni Ross.

"Nice watch."

Brax hadn't realized he had glanced at his watch again. He looked up. A woman, a beautiful brunette, was standing at his table. "Thanks."

"Here alone?"

"At the moment."

"So you're waiting for someone?"

"I am, yes."

She stared at him as if she knew a player when she saw one. And he was an irresistible one. "When you're whomever you're waiting for," she said, "why don't you come to my place."

Brax stared at her. He was nothing for him to find a woman anything he came to the Big Apple. It wasn't fair to them: he would pretend it was Roni lying beneath him every time he did them. But they signed up for the same one-night-stand he signed up for.

"Let's say I went to your place later tonight," he said. "What would be in it for me?"

"A mind-blowing experience," she said without hesitation.

He smiled. "Such a sweet little humble girl I see."

"Interested?"

He continued to stare at her. Oftentimes just seeing Roni again was enough. But other times seeing her again reminded him of what he'd never have and he needed somebody to scratch that itch Roni caused. "I might be," he said.

“Then let’s do it.”

“You’re an anxious one.”

“Anxious? No. Well-experienced? Yes. I know a man who knows his way around a bedroom when I see one. And I think, Mister, you’re the cream of the crop.”

Brax smiled. Then he pulled up his contact screen and handed his phone to her.

“My name is Jessica Hampton by the way,” she said as she inputted her name and address. “And you are?”

“Brax.”

“That’s all?”

He looked at her. “That’s enough, isn’t it?”

She smiled as his phone began ringing. “It most certainly is,” she said as she handed his phone back to him. “I put in my address as well. That’s where I’ll be. Unless you want me to wait around,” she added as he looked her body over. She was no Roni, that was for damn sure, he thought, but she had it going on too.

Then he looked at his Caller ID, saw that it was Roni on the phone, which made him smile, and he answered quickly. “Yes you’re late. As usual.”

But she gave no wisecrack the way she usually did. She didn’t say anything. “Hello?” he asked. “Are you there?”

Then he heard her sniffing.

“Roni, what’s wrong?”

“I can’t make it tonight.”

Brax frowned. She had never, not ever , cancelled their dinner dates. “What do you mean you can’t make it?”

When Jessica heard those words, she listened more attentively.

“Are you working late?” he asked Roni.

“No, I was . . . I’m not . . . I can’t make it tonight.”

“But why, Roni?” I came all this way , he wanted to add. “Why?”

“I just can’t make it, okay? I’m sorry, but I can’t. Goodnight.” And she ended the call.

Brax knew something was wrong. Something major. Roni always seemed as happy to see him as he was to see her. She even told him earlier that day when he phoned to check in on her that she was looking forward to their date. Now she couldn’t make it?

“Are you free sooner than you thought you’d be?” Jessica asked him with a smile in her eyes.

But Brax wasn’t thinking about her. Roni was on his mind. He stood up, dropped a fifty on the table for his drink, and began leaving.

“But you’re coming over later, right?” the woman asked him as he squeezed past her.

He stopped. Looked back at her. And suddenly his flirtations with her felt like a

betrayal of Roni, which was ridiculous. He and Roni were just friends. And not friends with benefits either. He promised her mother, on her deathbed, that much. But a betrayal was how it felt. “No,” he said firmly to the woman, and then he hurried for the exit.

But then her smile was gone, and her kind look turned angry as she watched him leave. “Keep your cool, Jessie,” she said beneath her breath. “Keep your cool. It won’t be today like you had hoped, but his day will come. That’s a guarantee. His day will come.”

She kept watching him in his fancy, tailored-to-perfection suit the way he always had to have on, his Italian leather shoes that cost more than she could make in a year, his purposely messy hair the way he knew the ladies liked it, as he all but ran out of that restaurant to fall into the arms of another unsuspecting woman. But she kept watching him. She kept watching until he disappeared out of that swanky restaurant and out of her life one more time again.

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Before the SUV came to a complete stop in front of Roni's apartment building in Manhattan, Brax was already opening the door. Before his driver could hop out to assist him, he was already running up the stairs that led to the entrance doors. Using his key, he entered the lobby and hurried to the elevators.

There was no way any beat cop in New York City would be able to afford an apartment on the Upper East side like the one where Roni resided. But it was a compromise between her and Brax. He agreed to stop bugging her about her chosen profession if she agreed to not live in one of those shabby Brooklyn apartments near her job, and instead let him pay the rent on an apartment of his choice. At least then, he pointed out to her, he wouldn't have to be worried about her during work and after she knocked off from work too. At least she would spend her off duty hours in a safe neighborhood.

But the thing he loved about Roni was that if you made a good, cogent argument, she wouldn't battle you for the sake of the battle. She would concede the best point, no matter who was making it.

The elevator door dinged open and he raced onto the elevator, pressed the button to the sixteenth floor repeatedly, and then the doors finally closed him in. He couldn't believe how hard his heart was hammering. But that was how concerned he was about her. That concern was what made him phone her every morning before she went to work, and why he made her phone him every evening after she got home from work. She used to rebel against it, and wouldn't phone him for days on end. But when he gave in and stopped phoning her in the mornings too, she began phoning him every evening to make sure he was okay. Which made him smile still. She was just as concerned about him as he was about her! And with that reality set on both

sides, they resumed their roles. He phoned her every morning, she phoned him every evening. Without fail. And although he knew she went out a lot at night with her girlfriends, he wasn't at all sure about any men she might be seeing. When he casually asked her during one of their dinner dates, she turned the tables on him and asked how many women had he been seeing. That effectively shut that line of conversation down completely and they never brought it up again.

But she also had never stood him up whenever he came to town either. Until tonight.

When the elevator finally stopped and the doors reopened, he ran out, down the hall, and up to her apartment. He knocked quickly, but when there was no quick response, he used his key to let himself in.

"Roni?" he called out as he entered her apartment and closed and locked the door.

He had forgotten the layout of the place as he realized he hadn't been inside her apartment in years. Perhaps only that one time when he and his realtor showed it to her before he rented it for her. Other than that, whenever he was in town and they had dinner together at that same restaurant, they would afterwards go their separate ways. Mainly to avoid any uncomfortable intimate moments where Brax wasn't at all sure he could contain himself, and where Roni was sure would be a disaster to their friendship if they went down that road.

But also to make it clear that even though he paid the rent for the place, it was her place, and her call as to who visited and who didn't. And since she never invited him back to her place after dinner, he never went.

But at least when he walked in this time, everything appeared to be in place. But where was she?

"Roni?" he called out again as he made his way through the living room, into the

kitchen area, and then down the hall where the two bedrooms were.

When he walked into the master bedroom, he saw her shoes kicked off and her purse and keys still on her unmade bed. But he could also hear shower water running. “Roni, it’s me,” he said as he made his way to the bathroom.

The shower door was closed, the water was running inside, and her police uniform was all over the bathroom floor. “Roni, are you okay?” he yelled out again. But still no answer.

But as he walked up to the shower door, he could hear what sounded like crying. And that was when he hurried and flung open the shower door.

At first he didn’t see her. Until he peeped further in, at the back of the shower, and saw her. It was as if she had her back against the shower wall and had slid down to the shower floor. Wearing a shower cap to cover her hair, her knees were up against her chest and her hands were covering her face. And just as he suspected, she was crying.

His heart dropped. “Roni,” he said desperately as he turned off the shower water and then hurried into the shower, moved his six-feet-two big frame down on the knees of his expensive suit, and removed her hands from her face.

As soon as he removed her hands and saw her gorgeous, tear-stained hazel eyes, his heart melted.

When she looked into his sympathetic big green eyes, she melted too, and unleashed a howl of a cry. She could not hold back any longer.

“ Oh, Roni ,” Brax said so heartfelt that it tore up Roni even more. He pulled her into his big arms and just sat there. And let her cry.

For several minutes they remained on the floor of that shower as she cried and cried. He'd never seen her cry so hard in all the years he'd known her. Even at her mother's funeral, where they sat side by side, she barely shed a tear. That was how tough she was. But now, in that moment, she was crying like a baby. It was so not Roni that it staggered him. What in the world had happened to her? But he didn't question her. Not then. He let her cry.

When her sobbing finally came to an end, he helped her to her feet. With his arms still around her, he got her out of the shower and grabbed a towel off of the towel rack. But it was in that moment, when she stood naked before him, that his body, not just his heart, react to her. As soon as his eyes looked down at her sleek, perfect black body, his penis went so hard so fast that it tented his pants before he could even try to contain himself.

It was also in that moment that Roni had composed herself enough to realize she was standing naked in front of the man she loved; the man she knew would break her heart if it ever went anywhere near where they both wanted it to go. And when she saw the outline of his obviously large penis puncturing the fabric of his pants as if it was bursting at the seams to get out, it was a gut punch. She was vulnerable and he was ready. For the first time in their lives she was not only naked before him, but he was also bare before her. He was exposed by his reaction to her body, and she was exposed too.

And in that instant they realized the position they were truly in.

It was Roni who found the strength to put an end to it. She grabbed the towel from his hand and covered herself. "I'm okay," she said.

"You sure?" he asked her. He knew it was the right thing she'd done, but he wasn't at all sure if he was ready to let go of a body, the person , he'd dream of having for years.

But Roni was firm. She dated a lot of men in her twenty-nine years on earth, and she knew he was more than likely the love of her life. But she also knew that he was not a man who could commit to one woman, or even be completely faithful to that woman. He had to have his variety. That was him. That was his father. That was every man in the McCrae bloodline. He was not marriage material pure and simple. And she wasn't settling. Pure and simple. "Yes, I'm sure," she said to him.

Brax suddenly felt awkward. Which would be a shock to his numerous friends and employees and colleagues. He was known as the ironman, because of his ironfisted approach to everything he did. But with Roni, he was like mush.

Roni felt awkward, too, as she held that towel up to her body as if she was some innocent maven. But she knew how she felt about Brax. If she allowed him to have his way with her, she'd never be the same again. She'd be weak for him. She'd settle for whatever he would give to her. She'd find him, but lose herself in the process. She could never let that happen to her.

"Have you eaten?" he asked her.

"No, not yet."

"You dry off. I'll go in the kitchen and rustle up a meal."

She wanted to say, you're going to cook? You? But she couldn't muster the energy. She was emotionally drained. "Okay," was all she could manage to say.

And to both of their relief, he left the room.

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Not ten minutes later and Roni was in the kitchen in her big, pink, terrycloth bathrobe. Her shower cap removed, her afro was stunning again.

“That’s more like it,” Brax said when she sat down at the small kitchen table.

“What’s more like it?” Roni asked as he sat a sandwich on a plate in front of her.

“Your hair. I like it big.”

Roni smiled. “My big hair and your messy hair. Some pair we are.”

Brax smiled too as he sat down across from her at the small table. “Enjoy,” he said as she lifted the top slice of bread to see what was inside of the sandwich.

She smiled. “A baloney sandwich? Really, Brax?”

He laughed and hunched his shoulders. “What did you expect? I never rustled up a meal in my life. That’s the best I can do.”

“Thanks,” she said as she bit into her sandwich. She was starved. “You aren’t eating?”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on. I’ve never seen you so emotional.”

Roni glanced up at his big green eyes, and then she sat the sandwich down on the plate and stared at the plate.

“Veronica, what’s wrong? Is it your health?”

She looked at him. “My health?” Then she realized how much he worried about her. She quickly reassured him. “No, nothing like that. I’m quite healthy. I haven’t received any bad reports or anything like that.”

All kinds of thoughts had already gone through Brax’s mind. “Then what is it?”

“My partner shot a suspect tonight for no real reason.”

It was that job of hers. He already figured that would ultimately be it. “What happened?”

“We saw this kid snatch a lady’s phone and then he took off running. He couldn’t have been no more than nineteen if that, but he did steal her phone so we gave chase. We started the chase in our patrol car, but then we got out and chased him on foot, all the way to the end of this long alley. It was behind a housing project and we knew, if he got into those projects, he could easily disappear. So we gave it our all. But he still had the upper hand. Until he tripped and fell. I was able to catch up to him then. But when my partner, when Jerard got there, he was angry that the kid made him run. So he started beating on him.”

Brax shook his head. “Cops,” he said derisively. They were never his favorite people with their overinflated views of their power. It was why he never wanted Roni to become one. But ever since she was a kid it was her dream to be a detective someday, and to solve crimes.

“I tried to stop him, and I think he was going to let up, but then the kid spit at him. He spat on my uniform more than he spat on Jerard, but the next thing I knew Jerard pulled out his weapon and shot the kid twice. Killing him.”

Brax was shocked. “Damn,” he said. But he could tell by that distressed look in her eyes that there was even more to the story. “Go on.”

“Then Jerard calls Detective Mulvaney. He’s like the fixer for our precinct. Any time a cop does something he has no business doing, they call Mulvaney. So Mulvaney, who’s always nearby it seems, shows up. And even though I told him what happened, he suddenly grabbed my service revolver and shot the already dead suspect three times with my own gun.”

Brax frowned. “He did what ?”

“Then he put my gun in the suspect’s hand and fired a shot as if the suspect had stolen my gun, I got it back, and we wrestled and I had to shoot him just as Jerard was shooting him. It’s all so that we can claim self-defense. That’s the story they told the brass when we were all called in for interrogations.”

Brax was angry. “Didn’t I tell you that kind of bullshit went with the territory of being a cop? Didn’t I tell you that, Veronica?”

“I’ve been a cop for seven years now. Straight out of college. And I know the territory. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before in all of my seven years on the Force. It’s not like what you see on TV. This kind of shit don’t happen all the time, I keep telling you that.”

“But it happens,” said Brax. “And now it’s happened to you. Now they got you roped in it.”

Roni couldn’t argue with what was a natural fact. “Yeah, it’s happened to me.”

“I take it they wanted you to sign your name to the falsified report?”

She nodded. "That's exactly what they wanted me to do."

"Did you?"

"Hell no! I called Internal Affairs."

But that distressed Brax even more. "Why would you call them?"

"What do you mean why? That's protocol when a cop misbehaves."

"But their asses are crooked too! They aren't gonna help you."

"Then what will? Signing that report so that Jerard can get mad again and shoot another petty thief? So that he and Mulvaney can get away with what they've done?" She shook her head. "No way. He can't be a cop anymore. That's the bottom line. Mulvaney either."

"And you think going to Internal Affairs will get them fired? You actually believe that, Roni?"

Roni exhaled. "After my conversation with them, probably not."

"But guess what it will do for you? It'll put a target on your back, that's what it'll do for you."

Roni was distressed. "But I followed protocol. What else was I supposed to do?"

"You call me dammit!" Brax was angry. "Or you quit this cop and robbers bullshit altogether!"

"It's not bullshit! It's what I want to do with my life, I don't care how much you

disapprove. I'm not quitting. I passed that detective's exam and I'm going to become a detective one day and change this shit from the inside."

"You passed that exam last year and they passed you over for some other guy."

"He had more years under his belt. He was more seasoned."

"But think about it, Roni. After what happened today, and after it gets out that you didn't stand up with your fellow colleagues in blue, do you really think they're going to promote you to anything but the backburner? Get real, Veronica. Get real!"

The emotions returned and Roni covered her face. She knew her career, her dream was over. She knew it when it happened. She knew it when she was talking with the brass and they weren't trying to hear the truth. She knew it when she hung up with Internal Affairs and they were making excuses for Jerard already.

As soon as Brax saw that Roni was anguished again, he rose to his feet. "Okay that's it," he said affirmatively.

Roni, with tears in her eyes, looked up at him. "What's it?"

"You're getting out of this town."

"What?"

"You heard me. You're getting out."

Roni was baffled. "And going where?"

"Home. You're coming back to Victorville. To our hometown. Yes, I know it's no New York City. But it's in upstate New York and it's a half-a-million people strong

with crime running rampant there too. You can be a cop there. You won't have a target on your back there."

"And I'll have to start over there when I'm so close to promotion here, Brax. Once I become a detective I can move up the ranks faster. I can make changes then."

"So what's your plan? To stay here? To need backup and they don't show up? To keep putting in for promotions that will never happen? To be a twenty year veteran cop still pounding the pavement?"

That look came over Roni's beautiful face that Brax knew so well. She was facing the truth. The hard, cold truth. And she shook her head. "You're right. I knew it after I left the precinct earlier. I knew my career was over then."

"Then come home, Veronica. You'll get promoted there."

She looked at him hopefully.

He knew he couldn't oversale it. "I don't run the police department, or any other governmental agency in town, but I do have some clout. I do have connections. I'll see what I can do. You know I will."

"But if I quit, they'll win. I can't let them get away with what they did to that innocent kid. Yeah, he was a thief. But stealing an iPhone is not now nor ever will be a capital offense. Jerard and Mulvaney turned it into a capital offense. And I can't stand by and let them get away with that."

Brax placed his hands in his pockets. He exhaled. "If they pay, will you come home? Because whether they pay or not, you'll still be the cop that snitched. You'll still be the cop with the target on her back."

“I know that.” She exhaled too. “I can’t live through another day like this.”

“If you stay here, there will be other days like this. Especially now that your own fellow cops will be gunning for you. I don’t put my foot down nearly enough when it comes to you, Veronica, but I’m putting my foot down now. You are not staying in this town. Nobody’s going to be targeting you and I’m on the other end of the state. It’s too damn dangerous for you to stay here.”

Roni stared at him in that serious, thoughtful way that was more her usual look than not. “I know my mother told you to look out for me, but I thought you said she told you, on her dying bed, that you shouldn’t discourage me from my chosen profession. A profession I love, by the way.”

“But that profession doesn’t love you back. Not anymore. Not in this town. You’ve got to face that fact.” Then he realized something else she said. “Your mother never told me to look out for you.”

Roni was surprised. “She didn’t?”

“No! She told me to stay away from you.”

Roni stared at me. “Why would she tell you that?”

Brax didn’t want to admit it. Especially not to Roni.

“What? Tell me. Why would she tell you to stay away from me?”

“She said when it came to women, that I’m no good.” He said it and looked at Roni. “She said it’s in my bloodstream.”

Roni’s heart sank. Her conclusions about Brax wasn’t just the little snippets she’d

seen of him with other women, but it was actual fact if her beloved mother said it too.

Deep down, Roni had always hoped it wasn't true. Now she knew it was absolutely true. She had called it right. "But if she didn't tell you to . . . Why are you . . ."

"Looking out for you?" Brax asked her.

She nodded. "Yes."

"I don't know if your mother ever told you about this. My mother certainly never talks about him ever. But you remember my twin brother."

Roni nodded. "Of course I do."

"He moved away from Victorville when he went to college, and he only returned for holidays and birthdays, things like that. But on his twenty-eighth birthday, he was to be married to this woman that I thought was pure perfection. Everybody thought so. But two days before their wedding date, he caught her in bed with another man. That perfect woman was a piece of trash. And it broke my brother. It broke him to a point that he killed himself."

When he said those words, Roni's heart dropped. She remembered that hellish time well. She stared at Brax.

He still remembered it like it was yesterday. "When he died, it broke something in me too. It was that day that I knew I could never trust any woman ever. It was like the beginning of the end for me in that department. It was traumatizing. That's why I hit and run with every woman I fool around with. And that's why I intend to keep it surface like that forevermore."

Roni and Brax shared a look that said it all. And neither one of them wanted to go

there.

He frowned. "Let's focus on tonight. Come home, Roni. It's time for you to come home."

He knew it sounded as if he was begging her, but he realized in that moment that having her in Victorville again would be his dream come true. He could keep an eye on her anytime he wanted to see her instead of only when he could get away to see her. She wouldn't be in the kind of danger she would face in this town. "Will you come home?"

Roni exhaled again. She had no good choices. Just one bad choice after another one. Because going back home for her, after securing a job in the big leagues called the NYPD, would be like going backwards for her.

But she had to face facts. "When it gets out that I refused to go along with the big lie, then you're right. I won't be able to live that down. But they've got to pay, Brax. If Jerard and Mulvaney pay, then yes, I'll go back to Victorville. I'll go back home until I decide what I'm going to do next." Her face scrunched up. "I don't see where I have any other viable option."

Then she looked at Brax. "But how will they pay if I'm quitting?"

Brax was so inwardly pleased that he didn't consider the mountain he had to climb. "You leave that to me," he said. "Now eat."

She stared at him. He was a billionaire businessman with a lot of clout in the world, let alone Victorville. But what if news traveled fast and he couldn't even get her a beat cop gig in her hometown? What would become of her then?

But the idea that she would be in the same town with Brax again was enticing to her

too. It was as if she knew the truth about him and why he distrusted women, and that changing a grown man was damn near impossible, but she still had faith. That perhaps somewhere, deep within herself, that he would someday come to realize that she could possibly be enough for him and turn his life completely around. It would take a miracle she knew. And she knew she was probably living in fantasyland. But living in faith was far better than living in fear.

She ate her sandwich.

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Later that night they sat down in the living room side by side and watched a movie neither one of them even tried to follow. Mainly because they both had serious issues on their minds. Brax was worried about Roni. Roni was worried about the young man Jerard killed, his mama and family, and how it was already affecting her career. And the weight of all of that worry caused both of them to feel emotionally drained. And within minutes, Brax was nearly sleep and Roni had already slumped against him fast asleep. He knew she was just that drained.

He easily lifted her up into his arms and carried her to her bedroom. Pulling the coverings back, he placed her in bed. But he knew how she slept, and it wasn't in that big, bulky, uncomfortable terrycloth robe. He got her to admit to him once that she, like he, always slept in the nude. It took him weeks to get over that sexy picture in his mind, just as he knew it was going to take him even longer to get over seeing her naked in her bathroom. But since he'd already seen her that way, and since he knew a bed nudist would be super-uncomfortable in that big robe, he slowly removed the robe, careful not to awaken her from her peaceful sleep.

But seeing her in the nude again awakened him. "I must really love you," he found himself saying out loud as he quickly covered her naked body.

But then he realized that what he had actually verbalized, and was stunned himself. I must really love you ? Did he just say that out loud ?

Then he began to panic. Was she really asleep, or did she hear him? When he realized she was now snoring, he let out a deep exhale. He said it, and meant it, and she didn't hear it. It was the best of both worlds. Because had she heard it, what were they going to do about it then? Settle down with each other? Neither one of them, he felt, was

ready for that. Each of them, he knew, could destroy each other if they went down that road.

He loved her too much to even try.

That was why he was going to turn and leave.

But he couldn't stop staring at her angelic face. Every time he turned to leave, which turned out to be several times, he turned right back and continued to stare at her. She was the only woman who had ever caught his attention and kept it. The only one. But why, he wondered?

And that face. He couldn't help himself. He took the back of his hand and rubbed gently across the high cheekbone of her sweet, dark-brown face. It was a touch that made his heart soar so much that he smiled.

But just as he was withdrawing his hand, her big eyes opened. At first she seemed confused. Why was he standing there? And then she seemed scared.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"Why am I in bed?"

She didn't ask why was she naked in bed, which he was relieved to know. "You fell asleep."

"You're leaving?"

She seemed genuinely concerned. "Why does it matter?" He always left. They'd never spent the night together.

But apparently this night was different. “I don’t want to be alone,” she said to him.

And as soon as she said it, Brax’s heart went out to her. And without thinking about it or calculating any pros and cons, he slipped out of his shoes, removed his suit coat, and got in bed with her and pulled her into his arms.

Roni closed her eyes when he held her. It wasn’t a sensual thing for her. It was a cry for help thing for her. A young man who could have easily turned his life around was dead. Her career was in shambles. And the very people responsible were being treated like heroes. As if they took another vermin off the street. As if they were the good guys, not the victim. It wasn’t right.

Brax held her tightly. He knew he was holding the most precious woman in the world to him, and that woman just happened to be naked, but he was doing everything in his power to not even go there. She needed him. She didn’t want to be alone. He wasn’t about to exploit that.

He held her for nearly an hour before either of them eventually fell asleep. But this time it was Brax who succumbed to the drain of the day and slept.

But Roni was wide away. And thinking about every single detail of what happened in that alley. And what happened later at the precinct. Sign the report, they told her, so that she, Jerard, and Mulvaney would be on the same page. But she didn’t sign shit and wasn’t going to sign it.

Her career, inside the NYPD anyway, was effectively over.

Their actions ruined her, but she’d be damned if she was going to lay around and let those bastards get away with what they did to that kid.

When she was certain Brax was in his deepest, slow-wave sleep, she eased out of bed,

grabbed her a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, her heels and overcoat and keys, and left out of her bedroom. Closing the door, she waited to see if she heard any movement from Brax. When all she heard was his snoring, she walked away.

Because she lived on the sixteenth floor with many curtainless windows, there was always sunlight during the daytime and outside lights during the nighttime shining through. Her apartment was never dark. That was why she was able to walk easily through the rooms.

After dressing in her guest bedroom, she made her way to the kitchen where she unlocked a bottom cabinet and pulled out two fully loaded Glocks. She placed them both on either side of her hip, covered them with her overcoat, and eventually left the apartment.

The drive was a long one and her aging Mustang had just enough gas to probably get there and get back home. But halfway to her destination, she made the phone call. After several rings, Jerard picked up.

He had been asleep. “What’s up?”

“We need to talk.”

“This time of night? Ross, are you nuts? Talk about what?”

“You know what. Cap gave me until tomorrow morning to sign that report.”

“So? Sign it.”

“We need to talk first. I need to know what’s in it first.”

“Didn’t you see it already?”

“No. Cap told me what was in it, but I need to hear it from you. And then I need to make a decision. We need to talk, Lou.”

There was another pause, as if his murdering ass had better things to do than make sure the witness to his crime was satisfied. Which pissed her off even more. But then he came to his senses. “Where?”

“Where it happened.”

“When?”

“Now,” she said, and then ended the call.

For the remainder of the drive there, she put on music: some jazz on Sirius XM, and thought about Brax.

She’d never met anybody like him. All of the guys she knew were narcissistic egomaniacs who thought every woman would put up with their bullshit just to be close to them. But Roni was never every woman. As soon as she found out she was being cheated on, she bounced. She left. But it still hurt when yet another hopeful relationship went down the toilet.

But Brax was a different kind of man altogether. There was nothing narcissistic about him. And the way he made her feel as if she was the most important person in his life stunned her still. Like tonight. All she had to say was that she didn’t want to be alone, and he stayed. No questions asked at all. He hopped in bed with her and held her. Even though she was butt-naked, he never even tried to take advantage of her. What man would do that? He was just that good to her. He even said he would try to take care of this situation for her, which she appreciated. But she knew, at the end of the day, she had to handle this. Only she could handle this.

Just before she arrived at the alley, she made one more phone call. And then she turned down the long, dark path that led to their crime scene.

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By the time Lou Jerard drove into the alley, Roni was leaned against her car, her arms folded, as she watched him with unblinking eyes. When he got out of his SUV and made his way to her Mustang, looking put upon the way he sounded on the phone, it took all she had to contain herself.

“Okay I’m here. What you need to know?”

“What’s in that report?”

“What happened is in that report.”

“So you admitted to killing that kid for nothing?”

Jerard hesitated. He didn’t think Roni had it in her to do that to him, but you couldn’t put anything past people nowadays. “What is this,” he asked, “a set up? Your ass wearing a wire?”

“You know I wouldn’t do that, Lou, come on. We’ve been partners for seven years.”

“Yeah but ain’t nothing like this ever happened before. Prove it.”

Roni frowned. “Prove what?”

“That you ain’t got no wire on.”

Roni shook her head. “I don’t believe this. As if I’m the one killed that kid.” Then she held out her arms.

Jerard walked over to her and checked out the locations: her chest, her belly, her butt, her legs and ankles. Getting a good feel-up she could tell. But there were no wires, no cameras. “Where’s your phone?”

“In the car. You wanna check that too?”

“Yeah,” he said.

She opened her car door, grabbed her cellphone, and handed it to him. When he saw that it was turned off, he relaxed. And handed it back to her. “What’s with the double guns?” he asked her as she placed her phone in her coat pocket.

“You never know what a man you thought you knew might do to protect himself.”

“Okay, what’s the deal with you? What’s with you and this case? Cap told you we had to come up with the same story or we’re all cooked. Me, you, and Mulvaney. I signed already. Mulvaney signed already. But your ass still out here acting stupid. Over some got damn drug-dealing thug.”

“He was not a drug-dealing thug and you know it. So quit lying on that boy. He stole a phone. That’s his only crime as far as we’re concerned. That was why we were chasing him. And even when he decided to spit, Lou, you didn’t have to shoot him!”

“Nobody spits on me and live.”

Roni frowned. “What kind of bullshit answer is that? And that spit didn’t even touch you anyway. It hit me. But did you see me pulling out my weapon?”

“You didn’t have to. I handled that shit for both of us. Why are you so worried about it? We all get on the same page, that’s the end of that. We got brass behind us. What’s your problem, Ross?”

“The way you handled it. That’s my problem. You didn’t have to call in Mulvaney. You know how crazy he is.”

“He’s a fixer. He fixes things.” Then Jerard smiled. “The way he grabbed your gun out of your holster and shot that crackhead was boss.”

“He wasn’t a crackhead and you know it, Lou. Stop calling him names. He’s Michael Bridges.”

“He ain’t nothing anymore,” Jerard said with a grin.

Roni shook her head. “You disgust me.”

“I’m just fucking around, Ross. You know how I am. I didn’t mean to kill the kid. But shit happens. What was I supposed to do?”

“You could have called Cap. You didn’t have to call Mulvaney. Because when Mulvaney grabbed my gun and shot an already dead Michael, he implicated me in shit I had nothing to do with. And I’ll bet that report is all about me firing my weapon when I didn’t fire shit at that kid!”

“You’re worrying about nothing, Ross.”

“Nothing? So that report doesn’t claim that I shot Michael Bridges?”

“It says Bridges tried to take your weapon. There was a struggle. Then I shot him at the same time your weapon went off and you shot him too. It implicates both of us.”

“But I didn’t shoot him!”

“I know that and you know that. I shot him. He was dead before Mulvaney got there.

But Mulvaney grabbed your gun and shot him, too, so that we can have a stronger motive than him spitting on me. That's why he staged it like he did. What's so wrong with that?"

"You don't see what's wrong with that? Your ass that stupid now?"

"My ass stupid? My ass didn't go to internal affairs, now did it?"

Roni paused everything and stared at her partner. "Who told you that?"

"Don't you worry who told me. You're supposed to meet with them tomorrow. Is that what this is about? You need to know what's in that report so you can tell a different version?"

"So that I can tell the truth, Jerard. The truth!"

"Keep on with your bullshit and your ass is gonna end up shot in the back by one of your colleagues. Nobody's gonna work with a snitch. I know I'm not."

"I'd rather work with a snitch than a murderer," Roni said.

But Jerard was so offended that before she could say another word he slapped her hard across her face. "Say it again bitch!" he yelled at her.

But when he slapped Roni, she wasn't trying to say anything more. That temper she was notorious for took over and everything she thought to say were in her anger.

She kicked Jerard in his balls with the tip of her high heel, causing him to bend over in excruciating pain, and then she began punching him and punching him until he was on the ground. He couldn't believe how ballistic she was going on him. He'd never seen this side of her.

But then again, he'd never slapped her before either.

Still in agony, he reached out his hand trying to defend against her blows, but she wasn't trying to let up. "You gonna slap me?" she kept yelling at him. "Your ass gonna slap me? Slap this, bitch!" She was beating him senseless. "Slap this bitch!" She even got down on her knees beating on him.

When it was obvious he was going to continue to get his ass kicked, he gave him. "Okay okay!" he yelled at her. "I'm sorry for slapping you, alright? I'm sorry!"

It was only then Roni was able to come back to herself and stop herself. He was bleeding now, which made clear to her that she had gotten her point across. She stood back up.

"What you and Mulvaney did was wrong," she said to him, still angry. "You killed that kid for stealing a phone. A got damn phone! And Mulvaney implicated me in your crime. But I'll be damned if I'm going out like that. I'll be damned."

She stared at him longer. She was so disappointed in him that it angered her even more. But she began walking around toward her driver side door.

But when she heard movement from him, her instincts kicked in and she quickly turned around. Only she turned around with both Glocks in her hands. And her instinct was right. Jerard had pulled out his weapon and was about to aim and shoot.

"Try it motherfucker. I dare you to try it. We're light up this bitch together. I may take a hit, but you're gonna take several hits. Try it."

Jerard saw that look in her big eyes. She wasn't playing. Who was this person, he wondered. Just one slap did all this ?

Apparently it had because he immediately dropped his gun and raised his hands in surrender.

And Roni put her guns away too, got in her car, and sped away.

Only she didn't go back home trying to figure out how she was going to clear her name. She went to an all-night diner four blocks away, went inside, and sat at the table where her friend, Journalist Gus Rogers, was seated.

"You call me out here this time of night and you're late?"

She took the throwaway cellphone out of her coat pocket and slid it across the table. "I had to compile the evidence first."

He smiled. "Good old Roni. I knew it had to be business."

Roni looked at him puzzling. "What else was it going to be?"

They shared a long stare. Gus was an attractive black man who had a smile that lit up a room. Lit up Roni's heart for a minute, but just not long enough to stick. Not his fault. Hers. That was why she looked away from him and back down at the phone, sliding it even closer to him. "There's your evidence."

Gus finally blinked. She still had that effect on him. And then he picked up the phone. "Evidence of what?"

"Remember that shooting earlier today behind the Crasson projects?"

"That killed the Bridges kid? Of course I remember. It was our lead story on the six o'clock news. Why?"

“Listen to the tape.”

“What’s it gonna tell me?”

“That my precinct captain, and my partner, and Detective Charlie Mulvaney are trying to cover up the truth.”

Gus perked up. “You got video to prove it?”

“Mainly audio.”

“How did you get that?”

“I called my partner on the phone I use exclusively for work and told him to meet me at the crime scene. He did. He figured I might be wired so he frisked me, which I knew he would do because I wanted him to. That’s when he asked to see my phone. I handed it to him. When he handed it back, he was relaxed again. I was just good old Roni to him again. So he started talking immediately. As I was putting my phone back in my coat pocket, I turned it on video, got a quick shot of his face to prove that he was the voice behind the conversation, and then put it back in my pocket so that he’d remain relax. And keep talking.”

“Which he did.”

Roni nodded. “Which he did.”

Gus was getting excited. “And you’re telling me you recorded the entire conversation?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

Gus smiled and shook his head. “They already have a version out. They’re already saying he tried to steal your gun and you and your partner had to take him out. The family’s calling bullshit on that, saying the kid wouldn’t harm a flea, but the brass is sticking to their story. And refusing to let you and your partner talk.”

“I was there. It is bullshit. That’s why they won’t let me talk.”

“Have you signed off on the police report yet?”

She shook her head. “No, and I’m not going to either.”

Gus looked worried for her. “That could cause you problems down the line. You know that, right?”

Roni nodded with pain in her eyes. She knew it. “That one moment in time, when Jerard made that crazy decision to pull out his weapon, was the end of the career I thought I was going to have. My ass didn’t do anything wrong, but I’ve got to suffer for what he did. For what they did. And talk about suffering. The kid stole a phone, Gus. Just a phone. That’s bad, but to die over a got damn phone? And his mother.”

Gus nodded too. “She was devastated.”

“Just devastated,” Roni agreed. “So yeah. Everything’s changed.” And she was tired of talking about it. “It’s all there,” she said, motioning toward the phone as she began to stand up.

But Gus touched her hand and stopped her. She looked at his hand and then looked at him. They met when she was a brand new rookie cop in the NYPD. They dated a few times early on, but she still had Brax on her brain and didn’t allow it to go anywhere beyond a surface relationship. And it fizzled out. But she knew him as a good, honest man who just might have treated her right had they bothered to give it a go. But she

looked down at his hand for a reason. It had a ring on it.

“It’s all there,” she said to him again, and then she eased her hand from beneath his hand and walked away.

Regret filled Gus’s eyes as he watched her leave. He loved his wife, but Roni would have been his dream come true. She was smart, she was sassy, and she wasn’t at all self-absorbed with her beauty like every pretty lady he’d ever met had been. She didn’t even think she was all that beautiful: that was how little it meant to her. What man wouldn’t want a woman like that?

But she was honest enough with him to admit that she had her sights set elsewhere, although she wouldn’t tell him where, and when all was said and done she wanted somebody else more. That was the bottom line. They still hung out, eventually became friends with benefits, but he needed more than that. Much more. And that was why he left his queen behind and married a consolation prize. To this day he still didn’t believe he had the courage to do walk away. But he did what he had to do for his own wellbeing.

But he was no lover boy anyway. He was an award-winning, crack investigative journalist who knew how to move on. He immediately played the video she had given to him, which did show a quick glance at her partner’s face, and before it was finished he was running out of that café while phoning his news station with an urgent alert. They had breaking news.

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When Brax woke up and realized Roni was no longer beside him, his first thought was that she was in the bathroom. But when he got up and looked and didn't see her there either, he could sense something was wrong. He went to the guest room, he went up front, he went all through that apartment looking for her. But she wasn't there.

Then his heart dropped. She wouldn't, he thought. But then he knew, given that it was Roni, that she would. It was just like her to try to handle that whole crazy situation on her own.

He called her cellphone, but it went straight to Voice Mail.

He only had a few phone numbers for her friends in the city, and he called every one of them. But none of them had seen nor heard from her.

Now he was really worried.

He hurried back into the bedroom, put on his shoes, and grabbed his suit coat to go search for her himself. But when he made it to the front door, he saw a note taped up on the door:

“ If you're reading this, that means you woke up ,” the note read. “ I went to meet a reporter friend of mine. The story should be on the 11 o'clock news. Channel 12. And don't you dare come looking for me. Roni. ”

Brax had to smile. That was so her. She was going to take her story to the press, which wasn't a bad idea considering she already knew her career with the NYPD was

over. But that didn't mean he liked the idea. He was going to handle it. He already told her so. He was going to call in favors all over that state if that was what it took to clear her name. But that wasn't Roni. Even her mother told him on her dying bed how Roni could take care of herself, and to not worry about her. She was going to handle it herself.

But how could he not worry about her? That was the problem.

He read the note again. He wanted to track her down, anyway, and cuss her ass out on the spot for defying him that way, but where would he even start? He owned businesses in New York City, but he never lived there. This wasn't his town. He just had to believe in her. Her mother did, and she knew Roni better than anybody ever would. He had to believe in her too.

He pulled his phone out of his suitcoat pocket and checked the time. When he saw that it was ten fifty-three, almost eleven, he hurried into her living room, sat on the couch, and turned on the TV.

While he waited, he tried to call Roni again. He couldn't help but still be worried about her. But her phone still went to Voice Mail. He tossed his phone aside, unable to hide his anger, and waited for eleven o'clock.

When the news came on, he was pleased to see that it led the newscast. Breaking news, they called it.

"What do you have for us, Gus?" the anchorwoman asked the reporter in the field.

"Hello Lisa. We just got our hands on solid evidence, an exclusive recording, that totally blows the police version of events surrounding the shooting death of Michael Bridges completely out of the water."

Brax leaned forward as the reporter played the recording. He recognized Roni's voice and could hear the man described as her partner talk about how he shot the young man and how the detective covered it up. Everything Roni said happened, the guy admitted to doing. It was brilliantly done.

Brax couldn't help but smile. "That's my girl," he said out loud as he watched the broadcast. And although he was still worried about her and wouldn't stop being worried until she made it back home, he was proud of her.

And when the reporter made it clear how that tape "completely exonerated Officer Veronica Ross," and when they showed a photograph of Roni in her police uniform, Brax's heart squeezed when he saw her picture. It was her rookie photo, the first one she took as an NYPD officer, and she looked so young and so happy to him. Her dream was just getting started and she was so hopeful. And now those assholes had turned her career upside down.

But he was still pissed at her for taking that risk.

Yet, the more he stared at her photograph, the more he wanted her too. That was the thing about Roni. She took him on more emotional rollercoaster rides than any woman ever had. Highs to lows and all over again.

He leaned back as he watched her photograph. When she finally made it home, he was going to give her a piece of his mind and give it to her good. There was no doubt about that. Her ass knew how he felt about her pulling that dangerous shit when she didn't have to go there. When he'd already told her that he would handle it for her and had the clout to do so.

But he also knew, by just how hard he was getting just watching her photo, that he was going to give her a whole lot more than a piece of his mind, and he was going to give that to her good too.

He had to have her.

There was no way he could go another day without knowing what it felt like to be deep inside of her. In this one night alone, he'd seen more of her body, and felt more of her gorgeous flesh, than he ever had in all their years of knowing each other. He wasn't running into some other woman's arms as a substitute for Roni tonight. Not tonight. Tonight, it was going to happen. It was finally going to happen he just knew it was.

He only hoped they would be able to survive it.

But whether they did or not, his mind, by way of his rock-hard penis, was made up. It was going to happen.

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When Roni finally made it home, she entered her house as gingerly as she had exited it. She removed the note on the door that she had written for Brax's benefit, and placed it in her coat pocket as she made her way to the guest bathroom at the front of her house.

She showered quickly, getting all the dirtiness of Lou Jerard off of her, and then, naked, she tiptoed her way back into her bedroom and then into her bed. To her delight, Brax was still fast asleep.

Or so she thought.

Because as soon as she laid in bed, lying on her side with her front to his back, his voice was heard without an ounce of sleepiness in it. "It took you long enough," he said.

Roni was shocked. Her eyes stretched wide when he turned over, facing her, and she could see he wasn't asleep at all.

"Did it anyway, didn't you?"

"How did you know?"

"I woke up. And read your note. Then I watched the newscast."

Roni exhaled. She was surprised that he wasn't angry with her. "I thought you would be upset if you found out."

“I am upset,” Brax admitted. He was so relieved to have her back home safe and sound that it tempered his anger, but it was still there. “I told your ass I was going to handle that for you. Didn’t I tell you that, Roni?”

“Yes you told me, but--”

“Don’t you hand me any butts. There are no butts about it. What you did worked. And I’m glad it worked. But it could have easily went all kinds of crazy, Roni. That was some dangerous shit you pulled.”

“I know you told me you would take care of it, and I know it was dangerous. But this was my life they were messing with. And my career. And my name. I had to handle it my way. And I did,” she added, in that sassy way of hers that always dared him to object. As if she knew she had him wrapped around her pretty little finger.

And she did. Any other human being alive who defied him the way she often did he would have easily kicked to the curb long ago and never bothered with her again. She had him, alright, but that didn’t spare her from his wrath. Because he had her too. “Was that little stunt of yours worth risking our friendship?” he asked her bluntly.

Roni never liked when he dangled their friendship in front of her. Because, for her, their relationship was the most precious one she had, and there was no way she wanted to lose it. “Why would you bring that up?” she asked him. “You know good and well I wasn’t trying to harm our friendship.”

“You don’t have to try,” Brax shot back, “but that’s what you’re doing every time you defy me, Veronica. Because one of these days you’re going to take shit too far and I’m going to say sayonara baby and get the hell out of your life for good. Is that what you want?”

“You know that’s not what I want.”

“Then your ass better start acting like it! You’re twenty-nine.”

“I’ll be thirty in a few weeks,” Roni said.

“I don’t care when your ass will be fifty in a few weeks. You’re twenty-nine right now,” Brax said again. “The point is, I’m already forty-three. I can’t take all this drama you love to put front and center in my life. I rushed over here tonight because I was worried about you. I told you I would handle it and help you get a job, a detective’s job, in Victorville. But that wasn’t good enough for Roni. She has to have her adrenalin rush. She has to do it her way. One of these days, I’m telling you, I won’t be there when you get down from your high. And I mean that. I don’t have a need for speed. I don’t have adrenalin rushes. I’m not going to sit around and wait for the phone call in the middle of the night asking me to identify your body. I won’t do it and I mean that. I won’t do it!”

Roni had never seen him so worked up before. She knew he’d be pissed. He was always pissed with her about something. And he was always threatening to end their friendship, too, if she didn’t stop taking chances with her life. But he’d never come at her this hard.

“I thank you for coming tonight,” she said to him heartfelt. “I really needed you. And I know I do things that you don’t agree with. But I can only be who I am, Brax. What do you want from me? You want me to change to make you happy? Is that what you want?”

Brax could see the distress in her eyes. She had enough to worry about than to worry about him too.

He even thought about that other promise he made to her mother to never try to change her.

“No,” he said. “I don’t want you to change to please me. But could you be more careful?”

Roni smiled at the way he said it. “I’ll be more careful,” she said.

Brax managed to smile too. “At least you cleared your name, and should hopefully get justice for that poor kid.”

Roni nodded. “Yes. His mother was on the news just after it happened and she was so devastated. At least she’ll get a payday out of it, the city will have to pay up for what Jerard and Mulvaney did, although I know she’d rather have her son back.”

“Your so-called partner deserved exposure,” Brax said. “And his stupid butt exposed himself in that recording.”

“That’s why I needed to do it my way,” Roni said.

Then a thought occurred to Brax. “I hope you don’t think your exoneration will be enough for you to remain as a cop in this town.”

Roni was shaking her head before he finished his sentence. “I know I’ll forever be the snitch. I’ll never get promoted. Might even get killed in some friendly fire incident, I know all that. I’m not staying. I told you I was going back home, and I am.”

Brax placed his hand on the side of her smooth, worried face. “You’ll land on your feet, kid. Leave it to me. They won’t have to promote you. When you come back home, you’ll begin already promoted as a detective first grade and move up from there. I’ll see to that. And you’d better let me see to it, Veronica.”

Roni smiled. “I have zero clout in Victorville. Just like I have zero clout here in New York. You needn’t worry about me interfering.”

He smiled, too, satisfied that she meant it, until they both were looking into each other's eyes so long and so hard that both of their looks turned into a seriousness that changed them.

When Brax moved closer to her, he was pleased to feel her nakedness once again. She could have put on a nightgown. She could have put on any article of clothing when she returned home that night. But she didn't.

He knew it was probably because she wanted him to believe she had never left their bed. He would find out the next day when shit hit the fan, but at least he wouldn't be screaming at her all night. But whatever the reason, feeling her naked body again delighted him beyond measure.

And Brax moved even closer to her, wrapped her into his arms. They stared at each other for several seconds. And then he slowly, tenderly kissed her.

But as soon as their lips locked, it became a passionate kiss for the very first time, and it broke them both. The grunts began. Desperation took over. All those years of wanting each other, of needing each other, of dreaming of being with each other turned passion into an urgency they could not quash.

Brax grabbed Roni desperately and pulled her entire body all the way on top of his body. She was five-seven, but he was six-two. She was light as a feather to him as he wrapped her into his big, muscular arms so completely that he nearly smothered her with his affection. They were kissing so passionately that their bodies felt on fire. He began massaging her tight butt as he kissed her.

Roni was so caught up with the overwhelming emotions of being intimate with Brax for the very first time that it took several seconds before she realized just what she was feeling. And that she was feeling more than just passion. She was actually feeling every inch of him . Every naked, rock-hard inch of him. Which startled her so

completely that she pulled back and looked at him. He was naked too? When did that happen?

But Brax was still trying to kiss her when she pulled away. That was just how far gone he was into the euphoria of being with the woman he considered his forbidden fruit. But when he saw the puzzled look on her radiant face, he realized that she thought he was still fully clothed the way she had left him that night. She didn't realize that he had gotten naked himself after he saw her on TV and made up his mind to go all the way with her. And for her to suddenly realize it made him smile. "I told you I woke up," he said.

"And got up too," she said, which caused him to laugh.

But then he stared at her. All kidding aside. "And then I realized," he said as his big hands were not only massaging her tight butt, but squeezing it too, "that I couldn't hold on another day without being with you. Without being completely with you," he added, as he lifted her further and placed her nipple in his mouth. And sucked so hard it caused Roni to lean her head back with a groan so hard that her entire body felt that suck.

And everything changed again. Their looks turned into a hooded, lustful anxiousness as their bodies begged for more. As they both knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was an awful, terrible, horrible mistake for them to go down that road. The red lights were blinking all over the place urging them to stop. But they wanted to be with each other for far too long. They wanted this and had to have it. They had flirted with disaster and now disaster was upon them. They were too far gone to turn back now.

Especially Brax. He'd never moaned and groaned this much in his entire life. He was kissing her mouth and then her neck and then her breasts as if he'd never experienced anything like it before.

Because he hadn't. It was one thing to make love to a woman. It was another level altogether to make love to the woman he loved.

For Roni, it was when his fingers began massaging between her legs that took her over. The sensations rippled through her body and she let out a guttural grunt that electrified both of them.

And Brax knew he couldn't hang on much longer. He moved back up, kissing her lips again, as he guided his fully aroused penis toward her opening. But just when he touched her there, and was about to thrust it through, she touched it. He looked at her. Her face wasn't puzzled or baffled. It was scared.

He knew he had to reassure her. "I've been around, Veronica, you know that."

She nodded her head. She knew that.

"There's a reason, in all that shit I've done, that no woman alive has even tried to claim that I'm the father of her child. I've worn condoms my entire adult life. And even before then." His look turned extremely serious. "I would never do that to you."

But you are going to break my heart, she wanted to say, but didn't. This was no confession of love for either one of them. This was purely a confession of lust. And she knew she had better realize it now before she felt even more pain that she knew she already was going to suffer.

She rallied and smiled. "I wouldn't do it to you either. I've never had unprotected sex."

Brax was surprised to hear it. "Never?"

"Never."

“This is your virgin voyage in the raw then?”

She smiled. Then turned serious as if she was pleading with him to understand how this could take them to a higher place together, or ruin them. “Yes,” she said.

Brax could see her anguish. He felt it too. If only he had the willpower to stop it and stop it right now!

But Roni was naked on top of him. He was within an inch of feeling the feeling he’d been dreaming of. He had no willpower at all.

He plowed on in.

Roni arched at the forcefulness of it, and both of them felt the burn. And it felt beautiful and serene and uncomplicated to them. They couldn’t believe how perfectly they fit together. How magnificent they made each other feel.

And that began their hourlong lovemaking session.

It was no longer filled with desperation and urgency. It was now a slow, calm, tender sense of sweetness for them.

Roni was never super-experienced, but she was experienced enough to know that nothing she’d ever had could beat it. The fact that she loved Brax and believed in her heart of hearts that he was her person had a lot to do with it. But the fact that Brax was oh so great in bed had a whole lot more to do with it.

There were few men alive as experienced with women in bed as Brax was, and he was feeling it too. It was the best he’d ever had ever. That was why he made it a slow drag. He was with Roni. He was with the love of his life even if he had no right to feel that way. But he felt that way as he stroked her, as he moved inside of her as if he

was moving inside of himself. They were just that in sync. It felt just that special. He never wanted it to end.

But soon it became too much for both of them. What was slow and easy was becoming faster and faster until they couldn't control their moans and groans and grunts. Until they were back in the land of urgency. Until Roni was crying out with an orgasm so strong she could hardly contain herself. Until Brax was cumming so hard that he was straining every vein in his body.

They looked at each other. They felt it to the roots of their hair. They kissed so hard and so lovingly as they came that as soon as it was beginning to wane, they started cumming again.

They'd never experienced anything like it.

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But the morning after was another story.

Brax got up first and left the room, to avoid waking her up, and went into the guest bathroom and took a shower.

He had his phone with him, which he put on the shower shelf, and turned on what he called his morning wakeup music. Always the same easy-pop tunes, elevator kind of music, with no variations.

Except that one of those tunes, Christopher Cross singing the Bacharach/Sager-penned Best That You Can Do song, stopped him cold. He stood underneath the thick showerhead as the water battered his body and he splayed his hands against the shower wall. That song, those words, caused him to face the full reality of the situation for the first time since last night:

“Once in your life

you find her.

Someone that turns your heart around.

And next thing you know -

you’re closing down the town.

Wake up and it’s still with you.

Even though you left her way 'cross town.

Wondering to yourself, hey,

what have I found?

When you get caught between the moon

and New York City.

I know it's crazy,

but it's true.

When you get caught between the moon

and New York City:

The best that you can do;

The best that you can do,

is fall in love."

And that was when his heart began to pound. He'd always loved her ever since he saw her again and she was all grown up. But he'd never gone all the way with her before. Not ever. That was the difference. What on earth were they going to do about it? Neither one of them were ready to go down that road, especially not him, but he took them down there. His damn overworked libido took her there! And the guilt was kicking his ass.

He finished showering quickly, got out, dressed, and made his way in the kitchen: as far away from her, and the scene of his crime, as he could get.

By the time Roni woke up, showered and dressed, Brax was in her kitchen with his reading glasses on as he drank coffee and thumbed through what looked like fifty text messages from his various senior executives and plant managers. A strike was brewing at his Belgium plant and they could not reach any tangible agreement with the unions to stop it. But when he looked up and saw that Roni had entered the kitchen and was sitting at the center island fully dressed in a perfectly tailored-to-her-body pantsuit, her trademark heels, and her perfectly groomed afro, and those shades she loved to wear even indoors, his body reacted and he went hard. Which upset him again. Now that he'd had her, how in the world was he going to keep his hands off of her?

He decided on deflection. "I thought I told you not to go into work this morning. Or any other mornings in this town."

"I wear a uniform to work remember? I'm not going to work. I already emailed my resignation."

Brax was pleased to hear that. "You did?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"A few minutes ago."

He could tell it was still a very sore subject for her. "So why are you so decked down if you aren't going to work?"

Roni looked at him. He wore the same suit he had on last night, but it still looked good on him. He was always decked down too, if you asked her. “A few of my friends want to take me out to lunch. They heard about what happened.”

Brax glanced at the time on his phone. He had been so engrossed in his text messages that he didn't realize it was almost noon. “Female friends?” he asked her as he continued to look down at his messages.

Roni stared at him so hard that he could feel her stare. He looked up at her.

She was staring at him for a reason. Why would he need to know what sex her friends were? It was true that they'd gone there. That overnight they made love not once, not twice, but three full and complete times before they finally fell asleep. They didn't even try to discuss it at all because they both knew it changed nothing. There would be no confessions of love. No confessions of compromises. No promises on Brax's part to be committed to her and no promises on her part to be committed to him. None of that. But then why, Roni wondered, was he acting as if all of that had taken place already?

When her stare wouldn't quit, he held out his hands, including the one holding his phone. “What?” he asked her.

“Why would it all of a sudden matter to you if my friends are male or female?”

Brax understood entirely what she meant, but he wasn't ready to go there. “What are you trying to say?”

“You never asked me the sex of my friends whenever I went out with them before. Just as I never ask you who you go out with. That's how it goes with us. What's changed?”

Everything , Brax wanted to say, but he knew that would only be partly true. His desire for her was already high, but now it was through the roof. That part had definitely changed. But he knew he could never commit the way she wanted. He could never be that hero she needed. He would only break her heart in the end just as his father loved his mother totally but broke her heart over and over and over again. Roni was tough, but she was fragile too. Unlike his mother, who stayed in the marriage and allowed the maltreatment, one heartbreak would be too much for Roni. “I’ve always been concerned about you,” was the best answer Brax could come up with. “That’s always been there. After last night . . .” He started it, but he didn’t finish it.

But Roni wasn’t letting him off the hook. Her only hope was that he didn’t lie to her and claim he was a changed man. She knew him too well for that. “After last night what, Brax?”

“Last night was different, Roni, I can’t pretend that it wasn’t.”

Roni frowned. “Of course it was different. We . . .” Now it was her time to not go there. “It was different. But are we different? Is that what you’re saying? That you’re different?” That you’re ready to be in a committed relationship with me? was what she wanted to add, but didn’t.

Brax wished to God he could say that he had changed. That he was this new man. He wanted her in every way possible. He loved her in every way possible. But they both knew he was like a forty-three year old kid on an agonizingly long road trip. He wasn’t there yet. They both doubted if he would ever be there yet.

Brax was about to speak, although he wasn’t at all sure what he was going to say, when his phone began ringing. Roni could see the large-lettered name pop up on his Caller ID. The name of Jessica. And to both of them it was just a perfect metaphor for their reality. Especially for Brax. Just seeing that name that he allowed a female to

put in his phone while he was waiting for Roni to come to dinner last night made clear that nothing had truly changed between them. At least not where it mattered.

“Aren’t you going to answer it?” Roni asked him.

“No. I don’t even know her. Just somebody I was talking to last night. She’s just another female to me.”

“Aren’t they all?”

Brax knew it was true, but he still didn’t like her throwing it in his face. And then the phone finally stopped ringing. “I’ll say this and then I’m through with it,” he said to her in that voice she knew he used on his employees. “I don’t regret what happened last night.”

Roni didn’t expect him to say that, and to say it so firmly. “Why don’t you?”

“Because it needed to be done. Unrequited lust is just as bad as unrequited love. Unrequited means something that’s not returned or rewarded. A waste of time, in other words. I don’t like anything unrequited.”

They stared at each other. What about love, Roni wanted to ask. He talked about lust. What about love? Was her love for him returned and rewarded? Was his love for her? They never spoke of it, and even Roni wasn’t ready to put it all on the line like that either.

“Are you sorry what happened?” Brax asked her.

Roni hesitated, but she answered. “I don’t like unrequited things in my life no more than you do. So, no, I’m not sorry it happened. But it does give me some clarity.”

This interested Brax. “Clarity about what?”

“I’ll be thirty in a few weeks. The age that takes you from just being a grown woman, to a grown-ass woman. A grownup. It’s high time I get on with my life too.”

Brax’s heart dropped. One day he could very well lose her to another man because of his inability to control his need for a different kind of speed. Because he was beginning to realize that Roni wasn’t the only adrenalin junkie in that room. He was one too. Only his rush didn’t come from chasing bad guys and putting them in their place, but his rush came from variety in his bed, even though variety, at the end of the day, was another word for fear. After what happened to his brother, he was terrified of commitment and that still hadn’t wavered. He might lose Roni to another man, but at least he’d still be in her life. If they became committed, he was afraid he could lose her forever. And that was a thought he could not abide.

He wanted Roni above any woman alive. He’d take her all day long. He just wouldn’t know how to keep her when he got her. That was the problem.

But he could see that she had the same concern in her eyes too. She was worried that if they continued down the path they started down last night, he was going to break her heart. That their decision last night was going to ruin their great relationship forevermore. It was the fear of his life too. He couldn’t lose Roni. He just couldn’t. “Even if that happens,” he said to her in response to her statement about getting on with her life, “I’ll still be around. We’ll still be great pals, don’t worry. That’ll never change.”

Pals ? That word struck a chord with Roni. Was that all they were ever going to be? Just pals? Even after last night ?

She knew he was a grown-ass man who was so commitment-phobic that telling her he loved her when he thought she was asleep stunned him shitless. But after last night

she somehow expected more from him. Not a full-blown commitment. That would have been too much for even her to handle. But at least an I'll try to do better by you. I'll try to work on myself to see if we can make something of our super-strong connection. I'll try to see if we can be more than just pals. He would at least try. But she couldn't even get that out of him.

But who was she kidding? It was Braxton McCrae she was talking about. No woman alive was ever going to hold his attention long enough to get him to any altar, and definitely not to any happily ever after. Not even her. And despite last night, which started as the worst night of her life and ended as the best night of her life, she had to face facts once again. Braxton McCrae, no matter how much she wanted to make it so, was never going to change.

When she still seemed unsettled to him, he took it a step further. "Although I failed to do so last night, I'm still going to keep my word to your mother and stay away from you. At least in that way," he said with a smile, "which I know was what she meant."

A part of Roni was still deflated. Why wouldn't he even try to make it work? Did he not love her enough? Was that it? She knew he loved her above any other woman he fooled around with, but that wasn't saying much. He probably didn't love any of those other women at all.

And although she didn't smile; and although she wasn't going to pretend that it didn't hurt, she was at least grateful he didn't promise her things that wasn't in his DNA to deliver. At least he didn't lie to her. "And I promise to keep my hands off of you too," she said bluntly.

But Brax was taken aback by her pledge. "Who said that was the issue?" he asked, and both of them laughed.

He raised his cup of coffee. "To the greatest friendship ever," he said.

And although both of them wanted more, much more, they both knew it was for the best.

At least for now.

Roni picked up an empty glass, another metaphor, and toasted to whatever they could cling onto.

FOUR DAYS LATER

When his private plane landed at the Victorville airfield and he saw his flight crew walk down the airstairs carrying all of her luggage, he got out of the limo at the bottom of the stairs, buttoned his suitcoat, and waited to see her remarkable face again.

Tim his driver got out of the limo, too, and opened the trunk for the crew to deposit her luggage. He smiled at how uncomfortable they seemed around the Boss, as if he was judging their every movement. But he knew the boss better than that. He wasn't paying his workers any attention at all. He only had eyes for Roni Ross.

When she finally stepped off of the plane, and he saw her radiant face again, his heart lurched with pure joy. She was back on his turf now. After all those years living in two separate cities, they were now under the same city roof again and Brax could not have been more pleased.

They saw each other four days ago, but he missed her already. And ever since he finally made love to her after wanting it so badly for so long, he missed her and it desperately.

But he was worried, too, because he knew there was no way he was going to be able to keep his hands off of her. Not after the way she did him that night. Not after the way she made him feel even after that night. Not after the way he couldn't stop dreaming about her every time he closed his eyes since that night, or had any waking moment where he wasn't working himself to death, or especially when he was making love to another woman.

He didn't want those women. But Roni's mother was right: that itch was in his bloodstream as sure as the day was long and he always had to have it scratched. And scratched by different women who scratched it in different ways. And although any woman would do, it was Roni and only Roni he thought about while they were doing it.

He wished he didn't have that problem, but he did.

He wished he didn't have the DNA he had, but he did.

He wished he could trust himself to know that Roni would be enough for him. But he didn't trust himself at all. Not with her heart.

But as he watched her descend those stairs, his heart was filled with so much love and so much lust for her that it alarmed him. How in the world, he wondered for the hundredth time, was he going to keep his hands off of her? And the love part? He knew long ago he loved her deeply. There was no doubt in his mind about his love for her. But it was stronger too.

He'd heard all his life that the love of a good woman conquered all, but he knew that was a god damn lie. His father loved his mother with all his heart: she was his dream woman. And he broke her heart asunder. Broke it every way a heart could possibly be broken. And he was his father's son. He saw what that DNA did to his mother. He wasn't doing that to Roni.

But even his mother always told him that he was nothing like his father, and that she truly believed he could change if he went to therapy and tried.

He went to therapy so many times it was ridiculous. He tried and tried and tried to give up his womanizing ways. But it didn't work at all. Not even for one good week. And since that didn't work, what else he could do? Use Roni as his guinea pig?

Destroy everything he loved about her if the experiment didn't work? No way was he doing that to her.

He'd already broken his promise to her mother to stay away from her. He wasn't breaking Roni's heart on top of it.

That was why, long before it got to where it was too late to turn back from unbreak her heart territory, he was staying out. For her sake, yes, but for his sake too. If he broke Roni's heart, he truly believed it would break him.

When Roni saw him leaned against his limousine, looking his usual gorgeously sexy self, something broke inside of her and she hurried down those airstairs in her high heels and her above-the-knee leather dress that revealed her smooth, perfect legs, and ran to him. For some reason, she'd missed him desperately.

He stopped leaning and stood upright when he saw her running to him. Tim, his longtime driver, had never seen her so excited to see the boss in all the years he'd known her. But she seemed thrilled this time. What, he wondered, had changed?

And when she hit the bottom stair and fell into Brax's arms, it was Brax who was overwhelmed with joy. They held each other tightly. Although Roni was smiling and happy to see Brax, Tim could see that the boss had his eyes tightly shut as if it was far more an emotional display for him. Everybody in town knew he loved that girl, although he'd deny it to their faces, but neither of them ever displayed much about their relationship in public. This was all new to Tim.

It was new to Brax as well, that was why he felt every inch of her as he held her. That was why it wasn't at all about his penis getting hard, although it had gotten very hard, but it was all about her. About how happy she was to see him. About how she wasn't holding his insistence that she return back home against him. About how he was still struck by how wonderful they made love that night in New York.

When they stopped embracing, he pulled back to get a good look at her. From her perfect afro to her perfect dress style to her gorgeous face, he'd never seen a prettier picture. "I'm glad to see you happy again," he said to her.

"And I am," she said. "I'm a bit nervous about the new job and if it's going to be better or more of the same bull crap, but I'm not at all worried about coming back home. I'm glad to be back home again."

Just back home, he wanted to ask, or back home with me again? But he dared not go there. "Hop in," he said. "All that luggage you had to pack," he added as he watched his flight crew fill up the trunk of the limo, "I'm sure you're tired."

Roni laughed, said hello to Tim, and then got in the car.

After the luggage was in place, and Brax was in the backseat of the limo beside Roni, Tim drove off.

They didn't speak for several minutes as they both seemed to be adjusting to each other again. Roni had tried with all she could to forget about that night in bed, and Brax had tried to do the same, but as soon as their bodies touched, it was an impossibility.

Because sitting in that limo, as the silence reigned, they were right back in that moment yet again. It was going to be difficult, they both knew, to keep their hands off of each other.

Brax finally gave in. His thoughts of her were getting to be obsessive. "Your job doesn't start for another three weeks," he said. "What are your plans?"

"What are your plans?"

Brax exhaled. “Unfortunately, I have to go back to Europe.”

“Already? You just got back yesterday.”

“I’m in and out of the country seemingly every other week lately. That won’t be changing any time soon.”

“What’s wrong this time? More problems with your Brussels plant?”

“Brussels, no. We settled that strike to the satisfaction of everybody. But apparently word got around and now another plant, this one in Frankfurth, is threatening to strike too.”

“The one in Germany? Is it as big as your Belgium plant?”

“Bigger,” said Brax. “The largest one I have in Europe. They handle sixty percent of our European cargo in and out.”

“That’s a big number.”

“Tell me about it.”

They were both slouched down, leaned against each other, shoulder to shoulder. But Roni could tell he was a man who had too much on his plate. “Why don’t you let your executives handle it? You’ve got thousands of suits all over the world collecting those big paychecks you pay them.”

“I did let them handle it. And that’s why we’re on the brink of another strike.”

Roni laughed. “So you’re one of those if I don’t do it, it won’t get done kind of bosses, eh?”

“Better believe it. I’ll figure it out and come back to town in one piece.” He smiled. “So don’t worry about me. You have enough to worry about with this life change of yours.”

“I agree,” she said.

“Speaking of your life change, what are your plans until you start your brand new job three weeks from now?”

“Well, I’ve got a list of apartments I want to check out. That’s the first thing. A couple of them are looking really promising. I’ll stay with Jayla until I can get my own crib.”

Brax looked at her. “Jayla? And apartments? Why would you need to stay with Jayla? Why would you need to check out apartments?”

“I sold my mom’s house after she passed away, remember? I need a place to stay.”

“Didn’t I tell you I was going to handle that? You have a place to stay.”

“I’m not staying with you, Brax.”

Brax gave her an I know that’s right look. “You better believe you aren’t.”

Roni looked at him.

“I’m not about to let you cramp my style, are you kidding me?”

They both laughed, although Roni was a little hurt. Because she knew cramping his style meant his women. “And I’m definitely not staying at your parents’ house,” she said. “They’ll think I’m there to wait on them hand and foot the way my mother did.”

Brax stared at her. “They loved your mother.”

“They loved my mother’s work ,” said Roni. “And they should have. She was a great worker. But I doubt if they ever really saw my mother as anything more than that.”

“That’s not true. They loved her. My brothers and I did too. We all loved her very dearly, Roni. She was like family to us.”

Roni wasn’t about to argue with him about how white folks always claimed their black maids or nannies were family to them, even though they worked them to the bone. But that was how Brax was raised. She wasn’t trying to school him on how crazy that sounded to everybody else.

But Brax wasn’t raised like everybody else. “Had they not loved her dearly,” he continued, “they would have never moved her into their home when she became ill.”

“Hard as she worked for them? She’d been at their beck and call since she was a teenager? She devoted her entire life to them? I’m sorry if it sounds ungrateful, but that was the least they could have done for her.”

That kind of struck Brax hard. Were they that blind to how their domestic workers saw them? “Is that why you fight me every time I try to do anything at all for you?”

“I don’t fight you.”

“You certainly don’t make it easy. But is that it?”

“Yes! I loved my mother to death, but I’m not her. I don’t wanna be anybody’s maid or nanny, and I don’t want to be beholden to anybody.”

“And least of all a McCrae?”

Roni was no liar. Roni was a truth teller even when it hurt, and Brax knew that. “Yes,” she said.

A part of Brax understood her reticence, but a bigger part of him was hurt. “Well too bad,” he responded more in pain than understanding. “I have a place for you to stay and it’s not at my house nor my parents’ home, so how about that?” Then he added: “And just like you aren’t your mother, I’m not mine either. We charted our own course, you and me. I judge you on what you do and say, and you’d better judge me the same. That’s the least you can do,” he said, throwing her line back at her.

Roni stared at him. He really was the best man she’d ever known. And he was right: He was nothing like his parents. She smiled. “I promise to never compare you to your parents or your brothers or anybody else. You’re your own man and I respect that. But about this place?”

“Just say thank you, Brax, for taking the burden of finding a place to live off of my plate even though you have a zillion things on your own plate. Thank you, Brax.” He said it and looked at her.

Roni smiled. “You really are an asshole, you know that?”

He wasn’t joking. “The biggest and the best. Now say it.”

She could never dislike that man. “Thank you, Brax, for finding me a place to stay.”

“That’s better,” he said, and looked out at the world around them.

“How much is the rent?”

“Roni!”

“I have to pay the rent and I know how bougie you are. Look at that fancy apartment you rented for me in Manhattan. The rent on that place was eight thousand dollars a month, which was more than my take home pay.”

“Did I ever ask you to pay it?”

“No. But still. How much is the rent on this condo?”

“There is no rent. It’s a condo that you now own. It’s in your name. It’s paid for.”

Roni didn’t expect him to buy her a place. Even in New York, he rented her a place. But he’d already purchased her a condo? That stunned her because she knew it was going to be spectacular. And he knew her taste. He knew exactly what was pleasing to her eyes.

And the thought of it, that Brax would go that much further for her than he’d ever gone before, pleased her too. Where she should have been offended that he would take such matters into his own hands, didn’t offend her at all. Oddly, it made her love him more. He put her in a place no other woman in his life seemed to occupy. And that kind of excited her.

Instead of complaining or asking questions, she decided to go with the flow. She settled back down, too, as they rode through the streets of their hometown. It was a big city, half-a-million people strong, but it always felt closed in and small to her. Like New York without everything New York was known for. She could only pray that she made the right decision. She could only pray that she wasn’t going to regret giving up what would have been before that situation that upended the career she thought she would have. Victorville was Plan B. Because in her heart of hearts, she knew there was no comparison.

Brax knew it, too, as they rode to her new home. But she was back home. That was

all that mattered to him.

He wanted to hold her hand, so he reached over and did so.

At first Roni stiffened. She even looked down at his hand holding hers. But when she looked back up and realized his big green eyes were looking at her, they both relaxed. It was as if they both understood that their relationship wasn't on the same emotional level as it had been before their passionate night, and they needn't try to pretend it was. But they also knew that the foundation of their relationship hadn't changed at all. They were still just great pals as Brax put it, and in a lot of ways they both knew that was probably all they would ever be. But the inward sadness of it all astounded them both.

Brax looked at her. "I won't be in town for your birthday, I have a conglomerates meeting in L. A., but happy birthday in advance," he added, and handed her a key fob.

She looked at it. She saw the crest with the gold, the red, the black, and the horse in the middle, and she saw the name. She looked at Brax. "A Porsche ? You bought me a Porsche for my birthday?"

Brax smiled. "What did you expect me to buy you? A horse and carriage? Yes, I bought you a Porsche. It's waiting for you at your new condo."

Roni smiled. What was she going to do with this man? "I have a car you know. My mustang. Remember? It was the first car I ever purchased on my own. I love that car. I would have drove it all the way here if it didn't need a new engine."

Brax looked at her. "A new engine, Roni? I know you weren't driving around in a car in that bad a shape."

“It’s not in bad shape. It just needs an engine, that’s all. And eventually a transmission, but my mechanic said it could hold off for another six-to-eight months.”

Brax shook his head. “You are not bringing that hunk of junk to Victorville, you hear me?”

Roni laughed. “I’m just messing with you, boy. It’s not that bad off.”

But Brax was doubtful. He knew she purchased that Mustang after she graduated college and then the Police Academy when she started earning a decent paycheck. But it was five years old when she bought it. And that was seven years ago. Now it was twelve years old. “It’s time to put it out to pasture, Roni,” he said.

“I told you it’s not that bad.”

“Then why didn’t you insist on driving it back home?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because it’s not that good either,” Roni admitted, and they both laughed.

Then she looked at Brax. “I need a new car. There’s no doubt about it. And I appreciate you buying me one. But why such an elaborate one?”

“Because you’re elaborate,” Brax said. “Look at you.” His penis began throbbing when he looked her up and down. “There’s nothing subtle about your ass. I know your style.”

“Yes, you do. You know me better than anybody in this world,” Roni said heartfelt,

which warmed Brax's heart too. Man how he loved her.

"But how can I claim to be this independent woman if I keep accepting these super-major gifts from you? From a man?"

"Let's get one thing straight," Brax said, the boss in him coming out. "You're tough, badass, strong-willed, determined. You're all that and more that you present to the world. But with me, you don't have to carry that load. I'm carrying it for you. With me you're no she-woman who everybody expects to be all that all the time. You're just Veronica. And you needn't be any more than that with me. Got it?"

Roni could not believe her good fortune whenever she thought about Brax in her life. If only he could try to change his behavior then they could . . .

But she knew she had to stop going there. She had to accept and be glad of their relationship as it was, not as she wanted it to be. And she smiled. "Thanks. Thanks for everything," she added. She wanted to hug him again, and Brax wanted it too, but they both restrained themselves.

Brax did squeeze her hand as he continued to hold it, however, as they sat quietly in his limo. But instead of looking at each other, they looked at the road ahead of them. They were riding along that long, winding road from the airport, a road filled with scenic views of hills and streams and many dangerous twists and turns too. A veritable Beauty and Beast all in one. But somehow it seemed so fitting.

THREE WEEKS LATER

The electronic gate opened and Tim eased the limousine up the winding driveway that led to the main house on the hill. Spruce trees and dogwood trees and chestnut and red maple trees all hemmed the driveway as the limo drove through. Already sunny outside, the groundskeepers were out in force over the expansive landscape as the sounds of lawn mowers and hedge trimers and leaf blowers dominated the air space.

It was early Monday morning of a new day in a new week, but it all felt like more of the same old thing to Tim and Margo as the limo stopped at the main house. Especially when they saw, as they saw more times than they could remember, yet another gorgeous woman come out of the mansion ahead of the boss and was swiftly escorted by the house manager to a car waiting to whisk her away as if she'd never been there.

"He just got back in town late last night," said Margo. "What did he do? Go pick her up as soon as he got off his plane?"

"The man doesn't like to sleep alone, what's wrong with that?" asked Tim.

"Everything is wrong with it. Sleeping with women he doesn't give a damn about at his age? It's all wrong. I'll bet you any amount of money he doesn't even remember her name." Margo was Brax's chief of staff and executive assistant who held an iPad in her hand filled with bullet points that needed to be discussed. She sat in the backseat of the limo and watched the woman get in the backseat of the Uber or Lift or whatever car service was picking her up. "He never remembers their names."

“I’ll bet he’ll remember her name though,” said Tim. “A good-looking dame like that? Ain’t too many men gonna forget her name.” Then he looked at Margo through the rearview. She was in her mid-forties. Right around the same age as their boss. But it seemed to Tim that the weight of her enormous responsibilities made her look much older than the boss. “How much you wanna bet?”

“That he don’t remember her name?” Margo asked. “Fifty could work.”

“I thought you said any amount of money? Sounds like you’re backing out already.”

“Okay big shot,” said Margo as the double doors of the mansion opened again and the boss stepped out. “A hundred then.”

“A hundred it is,” Tim said with a smile, certain he had her dead to rights, as they looked at Braxton McCrae as he made his way across the front porch and down the steep steps to his waiting limousine. Javitts, his house manager, opened the back passenger door of the limo as Brax hurried down the final step, unbuttoned his suit coat, and hopped in.

“Good morning,” Margo said cheerfully.

But Brax only grunted. It had been another long, draining week in Europe with little results. He tried to get into it with the woman he sent for late last night, but he couldn’t even do that. What he really wanted to do was go to Roni’s house and hop in bed with her, even if they did nothing, but he knew today was her first day at work. She’d think he was checking up on her. He wasn’t going to bother her like that.

But lately he wasn’t bothering any other women either. He tried. Like last night. But he just couldn’t get it going.

“Good morning, Boss,” said Tim.

“Morning.”

“Who’s that?” Margo asked him.

Braxton looked at her. “Who’s who?”

“That woman that just got in that Uber or whatever it is. She just came out of your house.”

“Oh.”

“She looks familiar,” said Margo. “What’s her name?”

Braxton ran his hand through his hair, further messing up what was already messy hair. Or sexy messy hair as the women around town called it.

“What’s her name?” Margo asked again.

“Darla or Carla or something like that.” Margo was grinning as Tim drove away from the mansion. “How should I know her name?”

Tim, disappointed that he had lost, looked at his boss. “How should you know the name of the woman that spent the night with you, Boss? Who thought that was too much to ask?”

“Why are you two so hung up on her name?” asked a baffled Brax. “Who cares?”

“We had a bet,” said Tim. “I lost.”

“Oh yeah? How much was the bet?”

“A hundred bucks.”

“And that’s exactly how much I’m docking from both of your paychecks for getting all up in my business like this.”

Tim was shocked.

“Stay in your lanes!” Brax declared.

“Yes sir,” Tim said, glancing warily at Margo.

But Margo was still smiling. “Don’t worry, Tim, he’s kidding.”

“Oh yeah?” Brax wasn’t cracking even a smile. “Ever known me to kid?”

When Margo realized that she hadn’t, her smile disappeared. “But you do realize a hundred dollars is a lot of money to working stiffs like us.”

“That’s what you get for getting in my business. Now let’s get down to business. What we got?”

Margo and Tim were both reeling, but Tim continued to drive into town and Margo turned on her sleeping iPad and got down to business. “The head of three companies, among the biggest in the state behind you, want to throw their support behind your Better Victorville initiative.”

“Provided I do what?”

“Support the Free Business initiative that’ll be on the ballot this November.”

“The bill that will guarantee tax breaks up the gazoo for millionaires and billionaires?”

Why am I not surprised?”

“They’re appealing to the fact that you’re a billionaire yourself and they’re hopeful that you won’t side against your own best interest.”

“Does it look like I need another tax break?”

Tim looked at him through the rearview. That was what he loved about the boss. He looked out for the little guy.

“Our citizens are being choked alive by these fat cats as it is,” Brax continued, “and they want more tax breaks from our city? How about we give the citizens a tax break on us? How about them apples? What if we add that referendum to the ballot? Think the big three will go for that?”

“Not a chance,” said Margo. “And when those same rich fat cats finish producing tv ads that make it sound like giving citizens a tax cut will be the worst thing since the bubonic plague, then even the citizens will be against tax cuts for themselves.”

Brax laughed. “That’s exactly what will happen,” he said as he looked at his watch. When he realized the time, he picked up the car phone.

“Really?” asked Margo. “You’re going to make a phone call in the middle of our morning meeting? The only time I have to get up to speed with my boss? Really?”

But Brax held up a finger to shush her from talking, which Margo and Tim both knew what that meant. He was calling the one woman whose name he definitely remembered, but because of their peculiar relationship no staff member ever uttered. To everybody who worked for Braxton McCrae, and that was a considerable amount of people, she was simply her . He was calling her . He was yelling at her . He was doing everything in his power, at least in their estimation, to help her . It was a

relationship that had no real definition as if it had no beginning nor ending. Which, given the very disparate backgrounds between their boss and her , baffled them still. “Give me a sec,” he said to Margo.

Margo and Tim exchanged a glance through the rearview. Why her? What was it about that high-stepping, arrogant, afro-wearing badass of a cop that kept him so bothered , they both wanted to know.

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Roni thought she was dreaming as the screeching sound of her smartphone echoed in her ears. But when it would not stop, as it would have in a dream, but continued to screech, her eyes opened, she realized it wasn't a dream after all, and she reached onto her nightstand. Feeling around for her phone and knocking over the photograph of her mother she kept at her bedside, she finally retrieved the phone and swiped it. She laid on her back and answered it in a voice muffled by sleepiness. "Hello?"

"Let me guess: You didn't hear the alarm. Again."

She wasn't so sleepy that she didn't recognize that voice. His fussiness was easy to figure out even half awake. But what alarm? What was he talking about? "What's that again?"

"It's time for your ass to get up. That's what it is. You should have been up half an hour ago, Veronica."

Roni frowned. "What time is it?" She squinted her eyes as she looked at the time on her phone. When she realized he was right and she should have been up by now, she jerked up. "Shit," she said and threw the covers off her naked body. "I didn't realize it was that late!"

"You need to start taking your ass to bed at a reasonable hour," Brax said over the phone, "instead of partying all night with those rowdy friends of yours."

"I'm up," she said although she was still getting out of bed. "I'm getting up."

"This is your first day of your new job and promotion I might add, and you'd better

not blow it. Do you realize what I had to do for you to get that?"

Roni might have still been sleepy, but she was still feisty Roni. "I worked my butt off for that promotion so don't even try that," she said as she made her way to the bathroom. She worked in a profession that required her to go hard, and to her dismay, she always did. Even when it wasn't called for.

"Did I say you didn't deserve it?" Brax shot back at her. "I would not have gone to bat for you if you didn't deserve it. But there were fifty other cops who applied for that detective's position and deserved it too. But your ass got it. I wonder why?"

Roni couldn't argue with that. Her hard work got her to the door. His connections got her through the door. "Thank you for putting in the word for me," she said to him, although she'd already thanked him more times than she could count. Being a detective and moving up the ladder was a dream come true for her. Even in Victorville. "Thanks."

"Are you up?"

"I'm up," she said as she turned on the shower tap. "I'm prepping the shower now."

The thought of her naked body made Brax hard. "What would have happened if I hadn't phoned you? Do you ever think about that sort of thing when you're out all night partying? And that's where you were, weren't you?"

She had an excuse: she attended a bachelorette party for one of her dearest friends from childhood. Would she have preferred that the party be held on a different night? Sure. But that date was established long before her promotion and she wasn't about to be a no-show at one of her girl's biggest nights. And whenever she and all her hometown friends got together, it was always going to be a long, festive occasion. It just was. But she knew that wouldn't mean shit to Brax. It would only be an excuse

for the inexcusable to him.

In the limo, Brax waited for her response. “Did you hear me, Roni? Were you out partying all night?”

When she still didn’t respond, he exhaled. He was hard on her and he knew it. There was nothing wrong with her going out with her friends. But the world order itself, and those good old boys at that police department, all wanted her to fail and he wasn’t going to let that happen. Not after doing all he could do to get her away from the NYPD. Not on his watch. And if he had to be hard on her so be it. “I’d better not hear you were late on your first day.”

“I won’t be late.”

“You’d better not be,” he added rather harshly. And then he added: “Happy birthday,” and ended the call.

Roni looked at her phone. He never said goodbye. Not ever. And even his happy birthday sounded like a putdown. As if to say here you are, you just turned thirty years old, and you’re only just getting started in your sorry-ass career when he was nearly a billionaire by the time he was thirty. And the fact that her birthday was two days ago, while he was out of town, didn’t faze him either. But that was Brax. Always so hard on her. The asshole, she thought as she tossed her phone onto the bathroom vanity.

But that was just her bad temper being what it was. Because inwardly she knew Braxton McCrae was no asshole. Braxton McCrae was the best man she’d ever known, and the only human being other than her mother who would go to the ends of the earth for her. Bar none. Besides, what asshole would have given her a Porsche for her birthday?

But back inside the limo, as Brax ended the call, he inwardly felt regretful too. He knew he was harder on her than any human being alive when she was the last person on earth he'd ever hurt. But he somehow couldn't help himself. He was pulling for her, every bit of her, because he knew the world was pulling against her. She was black, she was beautiful, and she was proud and loud. Her confidence was always confused with arrogance. Bitch was her middle name her whole life. But she always remained true to herself, despite the negativity. That was one of the reasons why he loved her so much.

But why was he so invested in her was a mystery even to him. But there was no denying it: he was heavily invested.

As Tim continue to drive, Margo could see him glance at their boss through the rearview. And she knew what he was thinking because she was thinking the same thing. And Margo, who took more liberties with their boss than anybody else on the payroll, could hold back no longer. "Why do you put up with her insolence, Boss? You're always helping her, and she's always so ungrateful. Are you so beholden to her because her mother once worked for your family and on her deathbed she told you to look out for her daughter or something like that? Is that it?"

"Hell no," said Brax. "Her mother told me to stay away from her daughter."

Tim laughed. But Margo was offended. "Are you serious? Her daughter should be so lucky! Why would her mother say a fool thing like that to a man like you?"

"Because she knew me. Just like you know me." Then he looked at Margo, a woman who came to work for him years ago and who was very loyal. "Would you want your daughter to get entangled with a joker like me?"

"I sure would," Margo said without reservation. "Will you be faithful to her? Absolutely not. Will you neglect her and treat her as if she was an afterthought?"

Probably so. But will you care for her, look out for her, and treat her better than any of these other bozos out here would? Yes, yes, and yes.”

Brax smiled a weary smile and looked out of the window. She meant what she said as a compliment, but he knew it was another slap in his face. A well-deserved slap in the face because he did treat women like commodities. He did this for them and they did that for him and that was all there was to it. Like a stock exchange. He barely remembered their names, let alone their faces and personalities. And whenever one of them wanted to come back for seconds, he refused to let them anywhere near him even as he knew it was no way to treat a lady.

But that was why, if it took every breath in his body and denied him the pleasure he would give a limb to have again, he was going to always shield and protect Veronica’s heart from every one of these bad men out here. Especially a no good, lowdown dirty dog of a scoundrel of a man like him.

Margo could see him pulling back into himself, where cracking that shell was harder than cracking steel. Just talking about her was still off limits, she realized.

That was why she moved on. “The Chamber of Commerce requests your attendance at their annual year-end awards banquet. They happily informed me that you’ve been nominated as businessman of the year once again.”

Brax shook his head. “Do they have no shame? Am I the only person in this city of over half a million people that can see how it’s a clear conflict of interest for me, the largest employer of the city and the man who chairs the Chamber of Commerce itself, to even be nominated as the businessman of the year by the Chamber of Commerce?”

“It’s a definite conflict of interest,” said Margo with a chuckle. “But who cares? You have excellent approval ratings. The ladies in town love you. They want a piece of all that.”

“It’s that simple?”

“It’s that simple,” said Margo.

“This is a corrupt-ass town.”

“It was corrupt before you were born and will always be corrupt. But they still expect you, with your power and your money and your family name, to hold the feet of our elected leaders to the fire and clean it all up.”

“I’m contributing to the filth, but they want me to clean it up? Genius,” he said. “Just genius.” Then he looked out the window and started thinking about Roni again.

He looked at the time on his watch again.

Margo and Tim glanced at each other again.

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Jason the doorman stood in the lobby of The Horsford, the luxurious condominium building where Roni lived, and opened the door for her with pleasure. “Good morning, Miss Ross,” he said cheerfully as she made her way toward the exit. “You look beautiful today.”

“Ah, thanks Jace,” Roni said as she carried her lid-on tall coffee mug in one hand and her Hermes bag in the other hand. “You’re looking good yourself. Working out I see.”

“Yes ma’am, I sure am.” He pushed his stomach in further. “Every day after work. Thank you for recognizing that. Most people ‘round here don’t even bother to notice. Thank you.”

To Jason the doorman and to all of the numerous other black workers that populated the exclusive, resort-style condominium complex, she looked spectacular to them. Her big, curly, perfectly groomed afro against her big, beautiful bright hazel eyes, and her swelt, elegant figure on her supermodel-like five-feet-seven frame, was a stunning combination they rarely ever saw. And although she seemed to favor clothes that would look more throwback on anybody else, they looked fashion-forward on her. Like she wasn’t just a trendsetter. She was the trend.

The bottom line to them? She had style. And it was unlike any style of any woman in that building or, they would daresay, in that whole city.

But they knew she was out of their league. They kept it on the professional level because they also knew she had a man. And he happened to be a McCrae, not to mention one of the wealthiest men in the country. And although she’d declare to their

faces that he was not her man at all, but just a friend, they all knew better. They saw the way he always had his hand on her lower back so protectively whenever he would pick her up and they would be leaving the building together. And whenever any man would give her that assessing glance, they saw the way he would look back at that man with eyes that said this girl is mine clearly and unequivocally. They admired her. But they admired her from afar.

When Roni stepped out of the lobby and waited for the valet to bring her Porsche around, she stood there checking her phone messages while the other valets at the valet station were checking her out. In her heels and bell-bottomed, flare-legged slacks, and her tucked-in white shirt beneath her belly-button-length Versace jacket that flapped over and buttoned up, she looked to them as if she was suited up and ready to take on the world. She was a cop, and they didn't care for cops at all, but to a man they all liked her. She wasn't stuck up like the rest of the residents at The Horsford, and she actually spoke to them and talked with them. She was just different in every way. Refreshingly so.

Roni tossed her phone in her bag after reviewing her messages and exhaled. She was anxious as could be. She had just turned thirty a couple days ago and for the first time in her seven-year career, she was no longer a beat cop at the NYPD. She was no longer a woman who had to patrol a city and dash from one crime scene to another crime scene only to hold it down until the detectives got there and did the real work. Now she was the detective. Now she was going to do the "real" work. A different city and police department, to be sure, but the same result: she was a detective now. This was the first day of the second phase of her law enforcement career. And she couldn't wait to get started.

It didn't start out on a great note with that call from Brax, waking her up, but she was well-accustomed to his heavy-handedness in her life. As if he owned her life. Which, to anybody that knew her and how fiercely independent she was, would be a joke. Nobody owned Roni Ross, her friends would make clear, and she would shout amen

herself.

But it wasn't as if she was dismissing Brax out of hand. She wasn't dismissing him at all. She had already concluded that he was her person. Or, as her mother would say if she was still alive, her man . But she also knew that they had a long, long, long, long way to go before they ever came together that way. They took a step in that direction the night they made love, but it kind of felt more like a step backwards in the end. Because they both wanted more. And they knew that would be the problem. Even Roni wanted more. And considering the man she wanted more from, that was a problem.

That was why she would never even admit to her best friends, and she had many close friends in Victorville, how she truly felt about Brax. Mainly because they knew, like she knew, that Brax wasn't ready to leave behind his womanizing and astonishingly domineering ways, and she wasn't willing to compromise in such a major way that would give a man, even a man she inwardly believed was her person, that much control over her life. Because she also knew that to be with a super-alpha, accustomed-to-having-his-own-way male like Brax would require her to give up a lot of her independence. A lot of herself. She wasn't ready to go there, and didn't know if she ever would be.

But inwardly she loved him and wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

Very much so.

That was the main problem.

But she knew a side of him that no one else knew: a vulnerable, sweet, kind, will do anything for her side of him. But she wasn't about to expose her heart to a man who absolutely could break it. That was why, as of right now, they were only friends. Pals. And not even friends with benefits, despite that one night they spent together. But

that was just one night. And until she saw some serious changes in him, and in herself , she was bound and determined to make certain it was only that one night.

The valet slung her Porsche around as if it was his Porsche, but she didn't complain. They were good guys in the end who seemed proud to see a sister doing something big with her life. And she was glad to give them the show. She stepped high in her heels, got in her Porsche Panamera, put on her shades, and sped away, revving up her engine and burning rubber as she did. She could see the valets, through her rearview mirror, laughing proudly and high-fiving as if nobody could do it better than Roni Ross. She smiled too, just seeing their happiness, as she drove away.

And then her phone rang. When she saw on the car screen that it was her best friend Jayla, she answered. "Yes, mother, I'm up."

Jayla laughed. "If I'm your mama, did your daddy call you yet?"

"Girl you know he did. And I knew you would too. I don't know why y'all act like I don't know how to handle my business."

"Oh you can handle your business and mine beside. But you gotta get up first to do it. And you are not, I repeat not , a morning person."

Roni sipped her coffee. "Got that right," she said with a smile.

"Are you driving around in that bad-ass car he bought for you?"

"Yes, Jayla."

"Don't yes, Jayla me. That's a badass ride that cost badass cash. No man has ever treated me that good. Even though the man that treats you so good is no good."

“Stop saying that.”

“I’m just keeping it real. But I will give him credit for one thing.”

Roni was about to sip more coffee, but Jayla’s comment surprised her. “Oh really? And what’s that?”

“He doesn’t pretend to love any of those women he fool around with. He’s no cheater like a lot of men who want their wives and sidepieces too. That’s not Brax and never will be.”

Roni nodded. “I agree.”

“But he never will be marriage material either,” said Jayla. “You agree with that?”

Roni said nothing. “So what’s going on with you?” she asked instead. “Other than getting on my case?”

Jayla laughed. “I just want to confirm that you’ll be there Friday night.”

“I told you I would.”

“It’s your first blind date, and we’ll be there to introduce you, but we don’t want you getting cold feet and standing the man up.”

“I keep telling y’all this blind date stuff isn’t necessary.”

“It is necessary! Yes it is. We want our best friend to have a man too. And Brax McCrae doesn’t count.”

Why doesn’t he , Roni desperately wanted to ask her. Why did her friends always

dismiss even the thought of Brax as her mate? She knew he wasn't ready yet, but why were they so certain he would never ever be ready? Probably because a big part of her thought so too. That was why she even agreed to this blind date coming up. But she wasn't about to go there. "I never said he did count."

"You're going to love Melvin. He's a surgeon you know. And a hunk. And he's black."

"He's black? What does that mean?"

"It means he's perfect for you, Roni. Black love and all that? And let's face it: Your ass just turned thirty. You aren't a kid anymore. You haven't dated since you moved back to Victorville."

"Bitch, I've only been back three weeks."

She had dated many men in her adult life, all of which failed miserably, and thanks to her busybody friends she was about to go on what she knew was going to be another disaster. But she was thirty now. She knew she'd be unfair to herself to sit back waiting for a man who'd already shown her that he wasn't going to change. She was still going to wait for him because something inside of her told her that he was her person, even if it was just a friendship for life, and she had to see that through too.

But she also knew she could be wrong. And this blind date, this surgeon, just might be the one. Although it wasn't easy, she was trying to keep an open mind.

But the main reason she agreed to this blind date that Jayla and her other best friend Taraji had set up for her was because it was a blind date. She could easily find any excuse, within a few minutes of the date, to beg off. Which was exactly what she planned on doing if sparks didn't fly from jump. "I told you I'll be there."

“I’m serious, Roni.”

“I’m serious too. I’ll be there.”

“Bitch you promise?”

“Now look.” Roni was offended. “I’m about to hang up this phone if you keep on, Jay, now I mean it.”

“What did I do? I just wanna make certain you won’t be a no-show Friday.”

Roni frowned. “Why you got to keep asking me if I’m going to be there when I told you over and over I’m going to be there? I’m trying to maintain my temper since y’all love to claim I have a nasty one, but you aren’t making it any easier.”

“We never said it was nasty. But you do have a temper, girl. And it don’t take much to set it off. I just want to make certain you’re going to be there.”

“I’ll be there, Jayla, goodness. I’ll be there!”

“Okay okay. Don’t take my head off.”

Roni smiled. “Leave it to you to turn it all around on me.”

Jayla laughed. “I am an attorney, you know. That’s what I do. But that’s all I wanted to hear. I’ll let Taraji know that you one-hundred-percent will be there Friday. But anyway, I’ve got to be in court in a few minutes and if I’m even a half second late my client will let me have it. He’s the most obnoxious man I’ve ever defended. The judge has threatened to hold him in contempt three times already and this is only day two of his trial. And he’s looking at me like it’s all my fault. My fault! Like I’m the one that butchered that woman. It’s a mess, girl, just a mess. But I’ll talk to you later. Love

you, bye.” And then she ended the call.

Roni sipped more coffee as she continued to drive. Compared to Jayla and Taraji, who had their acts together, she was still trying to get her career on track. And now they wanted to saddle her with man drama on top of all that? It took her seven years and, Brax was right, a lot of favors called in by him to get her in the detective door as it was. She wanted to focus exclusively on that. She had to be a success at that.

But her friends wanted her to focus on more than that. A husband and kids were their goal for her. And, if she were to be honest, it was a goal she had for herself too. But not right now and not with just any man either. Brax was the one she wanted and he wasn't anywhere near ready. But Jayla was also right. Her biological clock was ticking. She was now thirty. She wasn't a kid anymore. And Brax still wasn't ready.

She turned off of Bridgegate onto McDuffy, as her new precinct came into view.

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But she had only just high-stepped her way into the precinct before she heard her name, with her brand new title, spoken out loud for the first time. “Detective Ross?”

It was music to her ears many years in the making. She smiled at the husky white man heading toward her. “Yes, I’m Detective Ross.”

“I’m Detective Carter. We’re partners. Let’s go.”

Roni knew detective work was just that fast-paced and unpredictable, but this was her first day. Could she at least sign in? “I’ll sign in and be right with you.”

Carter stopped walking and looked at her. “I said let’s go!”

He spoke to her as if she was a dog, not a colleague. And that was all it took for Roni. Her temper flared as she looked him up and down as if he had some nerve. He wasn’t even her supervisor, what was his problem? “I’ll sign in and be right with you,” she said firmly, and then she made her way to the squad room.

She knew her new partner was going to think she was an asshole from way back, but that was his problem. This was the first day of her new career. She was determined to dot every I and cross every T and nobody was going to rush her or bully her into doing anything other than that. This was still a job with protocol. And protocol dictated that she sign in. She signed in.

When she made it outside, Carter was sitting in his unmarked detective’s car as if he was royally pissed with her. His round, jowly face had even turned beet-red. But at least he had waited on her.

But as soon as she got in his car, and before she could close the door good, he was speeding away. She looked at him with a check you out look on her face. If his behavior was any indication of their partnership , she knew she was doomed to be the lone wolf she usually ended up being. Which she hated being. She loved the comradery of being cops in it together. But she never was the type to go along to get along. And that was what it usually took.

They didn't talk. Not even a how long have you been a cop , or how do feel about your new position nothing talk. Until they arrived at a rundown apartment complex in the worst part of town.

He turned and looked at her. "I know you've heard of Bruce and Gabe. They call them BG around the department."

She nodded. "I don't personally know them. But I have a friend that mentioned them to me."

"That's who's on the case. BG. So don't go telling them how to do their job. They hate that with a passion. They're legendary for a reason. And they know, like I know, that a lot of great cops were up for that detective vacancy that thanks to your rich boyfriend you just filled."

Roni's heart dropped. She knew they would think that was all there was to her: that she was some whore who slept her way to the top. That she was some slut that slung it around to Brax for favors. They were already underestimating her. But that was their problem. She didn't like it one bit, but she learned long ago to never fight against people's perceptions of her. She could show them who she was better than she could ever tell them. She was going to show them.

But Roni's silence allowed Carter to keep on yapping as if she was bending the knee and would be at his beck and call too. "You just keep your pretty little stupid mouth

shut and watch and learn. I'm the boss. I talk for both of us. You say nothing because everybody knows you have nothing useful to say anyway. So just keep that trap of yours button up. Understood?"

Roni frowned. She knew she had to get this character straight and get him straight right now. "What do you think I am? A fucking rookie?"

"I think you're an unqualified diversity hire," said Carter, "which is worse."

Now Roni was pissed. "I'm unqualified? Me? You must have me mixed up with your ass if you think I'm unqualified. I've been a cop for nearly a decade, what are you talking about? And I spent all of that time with the NYPD bitch. Which means I know what I'm doing. Which means you don't have to tell me how to comport myself like I'm some underling to you ever. As if diversity means unqualified when your ass knows it usually means overqualified but never given the access to get ahead. So boy bye. You can get the fuck out of my face with that bullshit!"

She could tell Carter never expected that kind of fire to come from what he called her pretty little stupid mouth. It took several seconds of him picking his pride off the floor before he responded.

But before he spoke, he smiled. Then he nodded. "They said you were a handful. I was just seeing who I was dealing with. But good. You can hold your own. I respect that." Then he pointed his beefy pink finger at her. "But call me a bitch again and we got a problem. Fair?"

Roni chuckled and then nodded. "That's fair," she said.

And then they were about to get out of the car. But Carter stopped and looked at her. "But I'm not kidding about BG. The public thinks they're legendary because of their case success rates. The criminals know they're legendary for an entirely different

reason. And it ain't never by the book reasons either. Just be aware of that."

Roni knew that detectives, especially those in Robbery/Homicide, could be assholes extraordinaire. But rep or no rep, they weren't manhandling her.

But when they took the rickety elevator to the fourth floor and knocked on the door of apartment 813, and Bruce of the infamous Bruce and Gabe dynamic duo opened the door and gave her a hard look over, she had the feeling she was about to be initiated. She was about to be tried by fire. If she wasn't careful, and if she ceded even an inch of her self-worth to any of them in that apartment, she was going to be hung out to dry. She could feel it.

"Who's this?" Bruce asked Carter.

"Veronica Ross. Brand new detective. Today's her first day. I was the unlucky bastard to draw the short stick."

Bruce grinned. "They must hate your guts putting you with a diversity hire," he said to Carter.

But Roni answered for Carter. "He's not so bad," she said to Bruce's shock. "He's no worse than all the other white guys that got their positions because they were guys and white. I'm used to it."

Bruce's grin was gone. "You got jokes I see."

"You got bullshit I see," Roni shot back.

Bruce gave her a hard look, and Roni matched his look. So much so that it was Bruce that backed down from the ledge and then he opened the door further. And allowed her and Carter to walk on in.

When they walked in and Roni saw that they had a suspect in that apartment that they had already beaten up pretty badly, a part of her wanted to turn around and walk back out. She hated that part of the job. But she was a detective now. She was in the big leagues now. Roughing up the bad guys to get intel on the even worse guys went with the territory. She stayed where she was, steeled herself, and watched the dynamic duo earn their rep.

By the time she and Carter left that apartment, blood was everywhere and the suspect was nearly unconscious. But BG got out of him that one name they needed to move their case along. To once again live up to the hype. Roni and Carter had to clean up their mess and take the suspect to the hospital.

Carter was celebrating when they got back in his car. “Did you see how they took his arrogant ass and cut him down to size? Did you see that? It was textbook, man. The best interrogation I’ve ever seen. And they want us with them on other assignments too? They want us, Ross, when they could pick any other detectives to accompany them. But they want us. Your first day and already we’re moving on up! You’re my good luck charm, Ross. That’s what you are.”

Roni smiled, although she knew that lucky charm business was nonsense. But she also knew that BG had serious clout in Victorville and if they liked you, moving up the ranks was all but guaranteed.

But the way they went about it, nearly killing somebody no matter how despicable he was, didn’t sit right with her. Not that she was some innocent. She’d roughed up plenty of rotten fish in her day to get intel on the sharks too. She knew this was how the game was played. And she knew if she expected to stay on the field, she had to play it too. That was why she was smiling. That was why she was agreeing with Carter. If she played it just right, then one day she would be in BG’s shoes and could call the shots herself. Then one day she could kick all the BG types off of the police force and clear the whole place of their stench. What she learned, after that shooting

in New York, was that if she expected to remain in the profession she loved, she had to play the long game. The ends had to justify the means for her. And she had to accept that getting to that end was by its very nature going to be a bitch.

When they arrived at the precinct, and while Carter was bragging to their colleagues about their excellent morning, Roni was in the bathroom in one of the stalls, bent over the toilet throwing up.

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It was Friday night and Jayla Jefferson and Taraji Spencer couldn't believe it as they made their way to the booth in the back.

"You showed up," Taraji said when they made it up to the booth where Roni was seated.

"And the bitch showed up on time," said Jayla happily. "I don't believe it."

"I don't know why y'all trippin'," Roni said as her two close friends hugged her neck and then sat on the booth seat across from her. "I told y'all I was coming."

"You told us you were coming other times, too, and were a no-show. But we're glad you're here, girl," Taraji said as she reached out her hand and squeezed Roni's. "We just want you to be happy too."

"I am happy. Just because I don't have a man doesn't mean I'm unhappy. I'm very happy. Especially," she said happily as she flashed her brand new badge in their faces, "since I'm a detective bitches!"

They high-fived her and laughed like their normal, boisterous selves, causing others in the restaurant to glance their way. "You did the darn thing, Roni," said Taraji. "You did that girl!"

"I was the same way when I got my bar card," said Jayla. "I wanted to run down everybody that said I wasn't lawyer material and shove it in their faces. And up their asses too," she added. "'Who knew, bitches, who knew,' I wanted to scream."

They laughed. “Girl you crazy,” Roni said.

The waiter came and took their drink orders, their rowdiness getting his attention too. Within a couple minutes, he was back with their drinks. Jayla nearly drank half of hers with one gulp. “I needed that,” she said, and then belched. They laughed again.

“So,” said Taraji, an OB/GYN who made it her business to stay out of her best friends’ business. But in Roni’s case she stayed plugged in. Roni had a tough exterior. Even tougher than Jayla’s. But she was the sweetest girl Taraji had ever known. She so wanted her to get married and have a houseful of babies just like she knew Roni wanted. In Taraji’s eyes, nobody deserved it more. “Once Melvin arrives, we’re going to take our leave and hope for the best.”

“What Miss Prim and Proper is really saying,” said Jayla, “is that we hope you don’t blow it like you know how to do.”

Taraji ignored Jayla’s dig. “What I want to know is how do you plan on handling this date?” she asked Roni.

“I don’t plan on handling it or him. I’m going to check him out and see where it goes from there. That’s all I can do. Besides, you’re missing the other part of this. It may not be me this time. He may be the one that says no thanks and leave.”

Jayla and Taraji looked at each other and shook their heads. “To be a cop, you are so na?ve.”

“Na?ve?” Roni was shocked. “How in the world am I na?ve, Jayla?”

“No man is going to say no thanks to you, okay?”

“Oh here we go,” said Roni.

“She’s telling the truth,” Taraji chimed in. “You just don’t believe it.”

“I don’t believe it because it’s not believable! If I’m so all-that why has every relationship I’ve ever had failed?”

“Because of Brax McCrae!” Jayla and Taraji said together.

“Which I never understood,” said Taraji, “because every single time you two are together all you do is argue with each other. But I’m with Jayla. He distracts you, Roni.”

“That’s not true.” Roni wasn’t buying it. At least not like they meant. “That’s not true at all. My problem with men has never been because I was distracted with Brax or anything like that. It was because they cheated.”

“Gus Rogers didn’t cheat on you,” said Jayla.

“I was a rookie cop,” said Roni. “All those times we talked on the phone I kept telling you I was trying to figure out how to be a good cop. I didn’t have time for any hot and heavy romance in my rookie year.”

“The one that got away,” said Taraji.

“That’s what you say,” said Roni. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

“What are you saying then?” asked Jayla. “And what does it have anything to do with you not being able to see your beauty because Brax’s mean ass is always in the way?”

“I’m telling y’all to stop blaming Brax for everything that goes on in my life with these men. That’s what it means. And all this beauty talk is just talk because other than Gus, every single man I’ve ever been with cheated on me. Which is the ultimate

no thank you, we don't want you, we aren't interested in you. So damn right I don't believe all that talk about how beautiful I supposedly am. My experience tells me not to ever think for a second that I'm some bad bitch every man wants. That I'm somehow rejection-proof."

"That's not what we're saying," Jayla said. "No woman is rejection-proof. What we're saying is that you underestimate your beauty."

"Which you do," Taraji added.

"I mean look at you," said Jayla. "Five-feet-seven. Got that perfect body. That badass hair. That badass face. That flawless brown skin. Girl bye! You've underestimated your uniqueness ever since we've known you. And we've known you since grade school, so we know your ass," she added to laughter.

"But we see how men look at you. We see it with our own two eyes. They want your ass," Jayla added, and they laughed again. "You don't be wanting them. That's the problem. Let's just keep it one-hun'ned. Let's just keep shit real."

"Any who ," said Roni. "Moving right along."

Taraji and Jayla looked at each other and shook their heads. "She'll never believe it," Jayla said. "So let's move on too."

"How was your first week as a Robbery/Homicide Detective girl? Can we at least talk about that?"

Roni nodded. She had no problem with that subject. "It was alright. I'm overall pleased. Although it started out rocky."

"How so?"

“I had to get my first partner straight within the first few minutes of our acquaintance when he threw that you’re just a diversity hire bullshit in my face.”

Both ladies were shocked. “He said that?” Taraji asked.

“He said it girl. As if diversity means unqualified. Which it doesn’t.”

“I know that’s right! I hope you checked him right then and there.”

“Oh I checked him. He was red-hot when I finished checking his ass,” she added, and they high-fived. “But other than that,” Roni continued, “it went okay. I got to meet the infamous BG.”

“Bruce and Gabe?” Jayla asked.

“The one and only.”

“Who’s Bruce and Gabe?” Taraji asked. “Sounds like rock stars.”

“That’s what they think they are in the crime business,” Jayla said. “They’re two robbery/homicide detectives known as the dynamic duo for how fast they close cases. I’ve had to cross-exam their lying butts many times. But I have to admit they’re great on the witness stand. They’re liars. But nobody’s better at it.”

“Wait a minute,” said Taraji. “Didn’t I hear you say your first partner?”

Roni exhaled and nodded. “That’s what you heard.”

“So you aren’t with your first partner anymore?”

“Nope. They paired me with a different detective.”

“In just one week?” asked Jayla. “How did that happen?”

“Don’t ask me. I thought Carter and I had come to a truce. He keep his bullshit to himself, and I keep mine to myself. But then the next thing I know, my precinct captain calls me into his office and introduces me to this brother named Demetrius Dixon But everybody calls him Dean.”

Taraji and Jayla looked at each other. Then they both nodded and said Braxton McCrae in unison.

Roni frowned. “What does Brax have to do with my new partner?”

“Did you tell him what your first partner said about you being a diversity hire?”

Roni thought about it. “Yeah I told him. I tell him everything going on in my life. So what?”

“So he probably contacted the brass and told them to eject Carter from being your partner.”

Roni shook her head. “That’s ridiculous. It doesn’t work that way.”

“And I guess he had nothing to do with your promotion either, did he?”

Roni was offended. “I earned that promotion.”

“We know you did,” said Jayla. “You earned it at the NYPD. But you never got promoted there. You come already promoted here. Come on now, girl. We aren’t deaf, dumb, and blind.”

“Yes, he put in a word for me. But I had to be worthy of that word or Brax would tell

me to go fuck myself. That's what y'all don't know about him."

"Oh please," said Taraji. "We know he's mean as a junkyard dog. We know that, honey."

"We know that in spades," added Jayla. "But do you know it is the question."

Roni couldn't win with those two.

"Again, wait a minute," said Taraji. "Didn't I hear you say your new partner is a brother?"

Jayla was shocked. "You've got a black partner now?"

Roni nodded. "I sure do."

"Don't tell me he's an asshole too. Please don't tell me that."

Roni smiled. "No, he's actually pretty cool. We've only been together a few days, mind you, but I like him."

"Describe him," Jayla said.

"He's a nice guy."

"Describe him, Roni," Taraji said.

"I don't be paying attention to that man like that."

"How old is he?"

“How would I know? I never asked him.”

“How old does he look?”

Roni was only guessing. “Late thirties. Maybe forty.”

“Older men like sassy women you know.”

“What in the world does that have to do with me?”

“Brax is much older than you.”

Roni frowned. “And?”

“Is he tall?”

“Is who tall?”

“Dean Dixon.”

“Yes, he’s tall.”

“Taller than you?”

“Yes, Taraji, he’s taller than me.”

“Is he as tall as Brax?” Jayla asked.

Roni rolled her eyes. “I’m not even dignifying that.”

“Is he good looking?” Taraji asked.

Roni didn't want to say so because she knew how they were. But she was no liar.
"Yes. He's very good looking."

"Great body?" Jayla asked.

"Yes, he has a great body."

This seemed to excite both of her friends. "What church he attends?" Jayla asked her.

Roni had to think about it. "I think he said Bethel Baptist. Why?"

Jayla and Taraji looked at each other and smiled.

Roni was baffled. "What?"

"Roni likes Dean," the ladies sang. "Roni likes Dean!"

"What did I possibly say to make y'all even think that?"

"He's your type."

"I don't have a type."

"Yes you do. You don't fool with the younger guys, or guys your age, either, because they're too immature for you. So he fits your type. He's older, well-built, good-looking. And you already knows what church he attends. That ain't no random dude if you asked him what church he attends."

"I'll bet you invited him to our church," Taraji said.

Roni ignored them.

“Did you?” asked Jayla.

Roni, instead, picked up the menu. “What’s on the menu?” she asked, and they all laughed.

But then Taraji noticed something. “Uh-oh,” she said, and they all looked at her. “We got company.”

“He’s here?” Roni asked nervously as she and Jayla looked toward the entrance where Taraji was looking. But Roni didn’t see her blind date. She, instead, saw Braxton McCrae with a female on his arm as the waiter escorted them to a table. They were both laughing as if they were having a ball.

Roni’s heart dropped as soon as she saw him, which she hated. She knew he still had his barnyard of women and would continue to do all sorts of things with them, but after what they did that night in New York just seeing him with another woman kind of stung her more. She’d been with him. She knew what that lady was going to get from him later that night. Especially when Roni knew that what she and Brax did that night didn’t help their relationship at all. It might have even set it back further than it already was, as they both had been trying to avoid each other. Which saddened her. She promptly looked away from them.

But as Jayla and Taraji continued to watch them, the waiter pulled out a chair for Brax’s date while Brax sat down across from her. The waiter gave them menus and took their drink orders, and then he left.

But the date, who was facing the back of the room, quickly noticed Roni and kept taking peeps at her.

Finally, she had to ask it. “Isn’t that her?”

Brax continued to check out the menu. He was starving. “Say again?”

“Isn’t that that girl?”

“Isn’t that what girl?”

“The black girl. The one with the big afro who thinks she’s all that. The one they say you like.”

When she said that last sentence, Brax’s mind immediately flew to Roni. She was the only woman on earth that anybody would declare he liked . He looked up, saw where his date was looking, and turned around to see for himself. As soon as he saw Roni sitting in that restaurant with two of her friends, his heart squeezed. Just seeing her did that to him. And even more so after that night in New York.

Without saying a word to his date, as if she didn’t count at all anyway, he got up and began making his way to the back of the restaurant where Roni was seated.

But before he got up, and before he knew Roni was in that restaurant too, Jayla and Taraji were already shaking their busybody heads as they watched him and his date take their seats. Then they looked at Roni. But Roni wanted no parts of any pity parties over Braxton. She continued to sip her wine. They were just friends even if her friends didn’t believe it. That was why she never told them about what happened in New York. They figured she and Brax had slept together long ago anyway. That was why she ignored them. But that was also why Jayla and Taraji continued to stare at Brax and his date.

“That man and his women,” said a disgusted Taraji.

“At his age you’d think he’d settle down by now,” said Jayla.

“And you never see him with the same one twice. I wonder why is that?”

“Probably because he has to have every skirt in town before he’s done. He’s so full of himself. As if he’s God’s gift to women.”

“That doesn’t even sound like Brax and you know it,” Roni said to Jayla.

Jayla looked at her. “Why do you always defend him?”

“I’m not defending anybody.”

“Then what’s his problem, Roni? Why is it that you never ever see him with the same woman twice unless you’re the woman?”

“Keep me out of that mess,” Roni said, and her friends laughed.

“But answer Jayla’s question then,” Taraji said. “Why is it that you never see him with the same girl twice?”

“How should I know?” Roni asked. “Apparently they can’t keep his attention long enough for a second date, is my best guess.”

“Well apparently you can keep his attention,” Jayla said as Brax got up from his seat and began heading their way.

Roni looked at her. “Why would you say that?”

“Because he spotted you and he’s on his way to our booth.”

Just as Roni was looking, he was upon them. “Scoot over,” he said to her, which caused Jayla and Taraji to look at each other as if they wanted to say out loud the

nerve of that man talking to her like that . Especially when Roni dutifully moved over and he sat down in their booth beside her.

They were shoulder to shoulder against each other, and just their nearness and touch had her heart pounding and his heart hammering. He couldn't even look at her until he inwardly settled his emotions back down.

That was why he looked at Jayla and Taraji instead.

He knew neither lady cared for him, and both would be thrilled if he just left Roni alone. But that wasn't happening. "Hello ladies."

"Hi," Jayla said dryly.

"How are you?" Taraji, who always respected decorum, asked.

"I'm well, Dr. Spencer. Thank you for asking." Then he looked at Roni. As soon as her big, milky eyes looked at him, a soothing, warm feeling came over him. "And how are you, young lady?"

"I'm okay."

"I'm surprised to see you here."

Jayla bumped Taraji's knee under the booth table when Brax's eyes moved down to stare at Roni's breasts.

"I didn't think a place like this was your speed," Brax added.

Roni considered him with his large green eyes and his sexily messy hair, and with his five o'clock shadow. She could easily see why so many women wanted him, and why

he had so many to choose from. And why, she also thought sadly once again, he was really not marriage material. “It’s a nice restaurant. Why wouldn’t a nice restaurant be my speed?”

“I’m saying,” said Jayla beneath her breath.

Brax knew to ignore Jayla and her hostility. “I didn’t mean it that way,” he said with that smile Roni found so charming that she smiled too. “But there you have it right? Our expectations of others. What’s the occasion?”

Roni was still smiling. “Ah let me see? Dinner?” The ladies laughed.

Brax had to smile at that one too. “Okay, you got me there. But I mean I come here often. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you here.”

“No, you’re right. It’s my first time.”

He wanted to kiss her. It was that same impulse he had that night in New York City, an impulse he knew he had to control. But it was still strong. “Give me your phone,” he said to her instead.

“Don’t tell me you’ve got another save the date ,” Roni said as she began fishing her phone out of her purse.

“I’m afraid so.”

Taraji and Jayla looked at each other. It was no secret that whenever Brax had to attend a big event in town, he always had Roni on his arms. Not any of those other women, but Roni only. She used to come all the way from New York City to be his date for that night, and he’d fly her in as if he’d do whatever it took to have her by his side. Which always baffled her New York City friends, and her Victorville friends

too, who knew her even longer.

But it didn't seem to baffle Roni at all. She loved being his date on those big occasions. It made her feel as if she and she alone held that special place in his heart. She handed him her phone. "What's the occasion this time?" she asked him as he put in her password, which Taraji and Jayla could not believe he knew by heart.

Brax pulled up her calendar. "The Chamber Awards banquet," he said, responding to her question. "You still haven't told me why you decided on this particular restaurant." He had a feeling something was up if Jayla's ass was involved. He just couldn't figure out what it was. "Just decided to try something new?" he asked Roni.

"She's on a blind date actually," Jayla said happily as she and Taraji gave Brax a hard look. His eyes told everything, and they could see his interest was piqued.

And it was. He looked up from the phone. "A blind date? What is this, a thropple? She's on a blind date with the two of you?"

"Boy bye!" said Jayla. "You have the wrong ones baby."

"Her date isn't with us, silly," Taraji said. "We're only here to hold her hand until her date shows up. And then we're out of here."

Brax felt an uncomfortableness deep within himself when he heard the news. He took a second, but then he looked at Roni with a hard, concerned look that had Jayla and Taraji bumping knees beneath the booth table so hard that they were hurting each other. Jayla even said ouch as they stared at him. And the way he was looking at Roni as if he was some lost puppy said it all to them. Just friends their asses.

And they were right. It was royally serious to Brax. "You agreed to a blind date?"

Roni could see how it bothered him, which made no sense to her. He was on a real live date himself! “Apparently so,” she said.

“Who with? Somebody I know?”

“His name is Dr. Melvin Crenson,” said Taraji. “He’s a colleague of mine at Saint Catherine’s who saw Roni visit me at the hospital one day and was intrigued enough to ask about her.”

“He’s a neurosurgeon,” added Jayla. “The chief of surgery at Saint Cat’s in fact. Taraji, being a doctor herself, thought he’d be perfect for Roni.”

It was the kind of news Brax knew was always possible. She was, after all, free to date whomever she pleased just as he did. But it still hit him harder than he thought it would. Breathtakingly so. He looked at Roni again. “This blind date is your idea?” he asked her.

Roni looked at him. It almost seemed as if he was jealous. Which would be crazy to her. How could a man on a date be jealous of her on a date? “What difference does it make whose idea it was?”

But Brax had to know. “Was it yours?”

Roni was staring deep into his eyes. He had the look of a man who could run the streets like there was no tomorrow, but he expected her to sit at home and do nothing. Especially if it involved a man! And that just pissed her off. “Speaking of dates,” she said to him, “yours is waiting.”

Taraji and Jayla were knocking knees again, thrilled that Roni told his ass something real. But Roni could see the anger, but also the hurt, in Brax’s eyes. He inputted the Chamber Awards on her calendar, handed her back her phone, and then got up and

went back to his table.

“That’ll serve him right,” Taraji said. “The nerve he has questioning you.”

“The nerve,” Jayla agreed.

But Roni wasn’t feeling so triumphant. Brax was hurt. That wasn’t her intention.

But back at his table and his date, Brax was pissed. His date was asking what took him so long, but he was too steamed to respond to her.

“I was almost going to file a missing person’s report you were taking so long,” his date said jokingly.

But Brax pulled out his phone and began searching for a particular number. When the person on the other end of his phone call picked up, he got up and began walking toward the restaurant’s vestibule for privacy. His date sat down her drink. Now she was pissed.

But Brax couldn’t care less. “Hey Wes,” he said into his phone.

“Well if it isn’t Braxton McCrae. I haven’t heard from you in a very long time, my friend. How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks for asking. How are you?”

“As if you care.” He chuckled. “What can I do for you?”

“I need a favor.”

“Why am I not surprised that the great Braxton McCrae isn’t calling me just to

inquire about my good health? But sure, if I can help, I'll be glad to do you a favor."

"You're still chairman of the board of governors over at Saint Cat's aren't you?"

Wes chuckled again. "As far as I know I am."

"Who's Dr. Melvin Crenshaw?"

"Crenshaw? I don't know any, uh, wait a minute. Do you mean Melvin Crenson, our chief of surgery?"

"Yeah him. That's the one. What you know about the guy?"

"He's a great surgeon. And when I say great, it's not hyperbole."

That concerned Brax. "Describe him."

"Very nice-looking young man. Well-built. In his mid-thirties I think. African American. A mover and shaker."

Brax exhaled. But what did he expect? He wasn't the only man that saw what she had to offer. But at the end of the day, Brax was going to put Roni's best interest over all else. "Okay he's a great doctor and a great looking guy. But is he a great guy?"

"Great in what way?"

"In the woman way."

"No way," Wes said quickly. "Absolutely not. He's a bona-fide player for sure. I would put him in your league, Brax," he added, chuckling once again.

Brax exhaled again. There was no way a guy like that was getting within a hundred yards of Roni. Unless it was Brax himself. “He has a blind date tonight with a friend of mine who’s not that kind of girl. Tell him to send his apologies.”

“Ah,” said Wes. “Let me guess who this friend of yours is: Veronica Ross?”

Brax didn’t respond. He knew it was a well-known “secret” all around town that he and Roni had a special relationship.

“I’ll give him a call right away,” Wes said, understanding it was still an off-limits topic for Braxton.

“Thanks Wes,” Brax said, and ended the call.

Then he stared over at Roni as she sat there so dignified and sophisticated waiting for that player to show up. She was so free-spirited and kind-hearted despite the obstacles always thrown her way. She deserved a great man. If anybody deserved one, she did. But he’d yet to meet one that lived up to the standard he set for Roni.

He wished to God he could be that man.

He wished to God he could live up to that standard.

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Later that same night, the doorman and the head of Valet were standing outside under to portico of the condominium building where Roni lived. They were joking around about the prospects of the Buffalo Bills when the big, black Mercedes-Maybach S580 sped in and stopped at the curb. The valet chief quickly elbowed the doorman because they both knew who that car belonged to. The doorman even looked at his watch. It was passed midnight.

“Do I hear booty call?” he whispered to the valet chief and they both grinned.

But the valet chief hurried over and opened the door for Brax as he got out of his Mercedes, and the doorman ran across the sidewalk and quickly opened the door as Brax walked in.

When Brax walked past the doorman, and before the door had closed him inside the lobby, he could hear the two men snickering like teenagers. But he didn't give a damn. He and his date didn't hang around for dinner and left that restaurant after he got off of the phone. The plan was for them to hook up at her place, but he couldn't do it. Couldn't even try to do it. The idea that Roni's great-looking, younger-than-him date could have shown up and she could have been hooking up with another man still riled him. It bothered him deeply.

That was why he ditched his date and met up with friends for drinks at a club. They met up weekly, but Brax rarely showed up. They were astonished to see him tonight. But even though they laughed and talked and had a ball, Roni was still on his brain. What if that guy showed up anyway? What if she was at that very moment making love to a player like him who treated women like a commodity too? Who would treat Roni that way?

Brax couldn't stop thinking about it. That was why, after hours of hanging out, he left his friends, before the get together was over, and headed to her place. He had to see it for himself. He knew that doorman and valet would gossip their asses off, but that was too bad. He had to see Roni.

Although he purchased the condo for Roni and it was all hers now, she graciously gave him a key to her place the way he had given her a key to his home, but he usually didn't take advantage of his privilege and barge on in. He wouldn't disrespect her that way unless he was royally pissed with her. But he used his privilege and went in unannounced this time. Not because he was pissed with her, but because if she was with that guy, he wanted to catch her in the act.

Which was ludicrous on every level and he knew it. They weren't exclusive like that. They weren't even an item like that! He had no right to be possessive of her whatsoever. Just as she had no say in what fish he caught. And he caught plenty.

But when he entered her condo, it triggered her silent alarm. Roni, who wasn't asleep but was sitting up in her bed reading a police procedural on her iPad, quickly pressed the security icon on her tablet to see who had entered. She was also opening her nightstand to grab her gun. But that was when she saw Brax on her security screen. Her heart, that had suddenly began pumping harder, immediately settled back down. And she closed her drawer.

What pissed her off was that he was heading straight for her bedroom. The condo was dark, but it had curtainless floor-to-ceiling windows that allowed the vast lights outside to shine through. But Roni had a suspicion that he would have continued unannounced even if it was pitch-black in there. He appeared to be a man on a mission. And she knew exactly what his mission was.

When Brax first came to the bedroom door, he was surprised to see that the light was on. Which meant she was awake. And he didn't hear any sounds that would make

him think that more than just her was in that room. Which pleased him, but it made him feel foolish too.

Since he was the one caught red-handed, he might as well face the music. He eased into her bedroom.

When he saw her sitting up in the middle of her bed with her back against her headboard, her iPad on her lap, her reading glasses on her face, he knew he had made a big mistake. Roni wouldn't have slept with a man on the first date anyway. She wasn't that kind of girl and never would be. What was he thinking???

“Hey.”

Roni didn't respond. She continued to stare at him.

She was upset, as so she should be, he thought, as he continued walking further into the bedroom. When he got to the side of her bed, she spoke up. “What are you doing here, Brax?”

“I was in the neighborhood,” he started saying with a smile on his face. But Roni didn't crack a smile. She continued to stare at him as if he'd lost his damn mind.

He got serious. And sat on edge of her bed. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“You wanted to make sure my blind date didn't come up to my condo and kill me?”

That was a better excuse than the truth, Brax thought. “Exactly,” he said.

“Bullshit,” said Roni. “You eased your ass into my condo to see if I was fucking my blind date. That's what this is about. He can kill me, but he'd better not fuck me. That's it, isn't it, Brax?”

Now Brax's temper was flaring. "What did you expect me to do? Let some man touch you?"

"Yes! Just like you let all those various women touch you! You don't consult my black ass on your love life, why would I consult your white ass on mine? If I want to sleep with a man, I'll sleep with a man. That's my business, not yours!"

Brax knew she would be pissed, but this red-hot?

"You can't even commit to trying to change, but you think you can monitor me? You got life bent if you think I'm down with that."

"Settle yourself down."

Roni frowned. "You don't tell me what to do!"

"I'm telling you! Settle your ass down."

Roni realized the anger now in his eyes was shielding something else. Like embarrassment and hurt. Which caused her to exhale. She knew he wasn't there to be malicious or nosey. He was there because he genuinely cared for her, despite how clumsily he showed it. She settled back down.

Then an anguished look came over his face. "If only I could somehow change and--"

But Roni was already shaking her head. "No, Brax, no. You aren't going to change and neither am I. So let's not play that game. We're two stubborn, hardheaded individuals that will always be who we are. I remember as a kid helping my mom on some days when she was working at your parents' house. I would see how you were with your brothers. And even then, you were as hard and stubborn as you are now. You were their big brother, but you ruled over them as if you were their father when

you were just a few years older than they were! And I used to see you with so many different women that it was mindboggling to me back then.”

Then she smiled. “My mama knew I had a crush on you. Here I was this fourteen year old kid and you were like twenty-seven or something. And every time we saw you with one of your lady friends, Ma would say see there, you think he’s hot stuff? Well so do a hundred other women.”

Brax was surprised. “Your mother said that to you?”

“She sure did. Because she saw you in action with other girls.”

“I would never treat you like that.”

“She didn’t know what you would do, Brax. All she knew was what she saw. Because that’s how you were. And you’re still that way today.”

“You think I treat you badly?”

“No. Of course not. You try to boss me around all the time. You try to run my life half the time. But you treat me better than any man ever has. As far as it goes,” she added with that dose of real she was known for, and they both shared a quick look.

Brax quickly looked away. Being reminded of who he was never seemed like a good conversation to him.

But Roni kept going. “But guess what?” she said. “I was who I was, too, back then. I was a stubborn child who was going to do what I was going to do and nobody was going to stop me, and I’m still that way now. That’s how I became a cop against my mom’s wishes, your wishes, and the wishes of every friend I’ve ever had.” They looked into each other’s eyes. “We are not going to change, Brax. Let’s just keep it

real. Many people change on a daily basis I'm sure. But we aren't in that category. We just aren't."

Then she let out a harsh exhale. "What are we, Brax? Because I need clarity on this. You need clarity. What exactly are we?"

It was the question of the year for him too. And just the thought of something that heavy drained him. He kicked off his shoes and laid down on her bed beside her. She remained sitting up, but he laid down. "It's a good question," he said.

"A good question that needs an answer," she said.

He was on his back staring up at her ceiling. It really was a luxurious place. He was glad he found it for her.

But he knew he was distracting himself from the reality in his face. What were they to each other?

It took another several seconds, but he finally spoke. "I'm afraid," he started saying, which stunned Roni already. Brax was afraid? He never displayed those kinds of emotions to her before. Not ever. She stared down at his handsome face. A face she'd adored since she was a kid. What was he going to say? What was he trying to say?

He didn't continue. But she wasn't letting him off with silence. "You're afraid of what?" she asked him softly.

There was another pause, but then he spoke up. "I'm afraid that if we attempt to become anything more than what we are now, it could destroy us. Or, more truthfully, I could destroy you . And if I ever destroy you," he said as he turned his head and looked up at her, "I'm going to be destroyed too."

Roni's heart squeezed with a kind of pain that only truth could produce. She knew exactly what he meant. She felt the same way too.

Although he was laying on her side of the bed, she placed her iPad and glasses over on the opposite nightstand and then laid down beside him. She was on her side facing him. He turned onto his side and pulled her into his arms. They were face to face. Both of them had a look of love, concern, and even regret on their faces.

"How do we manage our situationship," Roni asked, "without destroying each other with this kind of stuff?"

Brax smiled, trying to play off his embarrassing move. "What kind of stuff?"

But Roni wasn't going to sugarcoat it. "Sneaking into somebody's house to catch them with somebody else. Because had I been with somebody else, what then, Brax? What then?"

Brax's smile slowly dissipated into a look strained with sincerity and anguish. "The way I see it," he said, "is that we have two choices if we're going to stay together. We're either going to be friends only, and I mean only, or friends with benefits. And I mean nothing deeper than that." He stared at her. "Those are our choices."

Roni had that thoughtful look he loved. Because she wasn't dismissing it as him attempting to have his cake and eat it too kind of bullshit, but she was accepting it for what it was: Their reality.

"I want desperately to change for you, Veronica," he continued, "but I know already. I know," he said as she appeared to be poised to object. "I am who I am. I know. But I still believe I love you enough to change."

"Brax," Roni started saying as if to get him to face the truth.

But he was already there. “For a minute,” he said. “I would change for a minute. But then all that crap I carry as my nature will eventually resurface, I’m afraid, and change everything. Because one thing I know about you for sure is that you aren’t going to take anybody’s bullshit. Especially not mine. It’ll devastate you. And if I hurt you, it’ll destroy me. There’s just no best case scenario in this if we try to handle our situation any other kind of way.”

Roni stared at him. “Would you really cheat on me, Brax?”

Brax stared at her. He took her soft hair and wrapped a strand around his finger. “No, baby, I wouldn’t. But it’ll show up in other ways. And resentment will build.”

“And we’ll turn against each other,” said Roni. “Which is worse.”

“Far worse,” agreed Brax.

Roni looked at him. “What’s your choice?” she asked him.

“Friends,” he said. “With benefits. Not having you after having you? There’s no other choice for me.”

Roni smiled, which made him smile. “We finally agree on something,” she said, and a look of relief washed over his face. he pulled her into his arms.

For several long minutes they just laid there in a peaceful silence that suited them. But oddly enough, throughout that entire night, they didn’t take advantage of their benefits. They were still trying to process their new normal. They loved how they felt in that moment and didn’t want to upset the vibe.

Eventually they both fell asleep, and they slept all night.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:10 am

TWO WEEKS LATER, around three in the morning, and Roni drove her Porsche up to the electronic gate of Brax's mansion. The guard in the booth opened the gate, allowing her passage through without hesitation. But it was Roni who stopped at the booth and pressed down her window to ask the guard a question.

It wasn't her first time coming over in the last couple weeks, although it was still rare for her to drop by, but she had the same question every time she came. "Is he," she started to say, but the guard always finished the sentence for her.

"He's alone, Miss Ross. No sleepovers."

Roni smiled. She hated to enlist the aid of his gate security, but she didn't want to call Brax and wake him up either. Not this time of night. She thanked the guard and drove on through to the main house.

She had just left a particularly messy homicide where the victim was an infant, and she didn't feel like going home. She couldn't bear to be alone after such a heart-wrenching experience. She had many friends she could call on in times like this, but for some reason she always felt she needed Brax in times like these.

She got out of her Porsche, utilized her code that also knocked off the alarm system, and went inside his mansion.

Once inside, she re-entered the alarm code on the wall keypad and then went to his bar, poured herself a shot, and drank it all in one gulp. She stood there momentarily, trying to let it all sink in, and then she made her way to one of the downstairs bathrooms and took a long, cold shower. Then she put on the terrycloth bathrobe and

made her way up the spiral staircase to his master bedroom.

Brax was fast asleep, and alone in bed as the guard had assured her. She walked over to the opposite side of the bed, removed the robe, and got in bed beside him.

She tried to stay away from him. Just be glad to have somebody in bed with her. But that wasn't good enough. The look of that victim kept haunting her. And she felt lonelier with Brax in the same big, custom-made King bed.

She turned over, moved her body all the way over until the front of her naked body was spooning the back of his naked body, and she immediately felt his wonderful body heat. It was enough. She wrapped her arms around him and was able to fall asleep.

It was the darndest thing to her. For the past two weeks they had defined their relationship as friends with benefits. But in all those two weeks, he'd spent the night at her house several times, and she'd spent the night at his house three times already, but they had yet to take advantage of the benefits. Mainly because they both viewed it as a special privilege not to be taken lightly or overused. But also because whenever they were together, they just wanted to be together. No strings, not even benefits, attached.

When Brax realized she was in his bed, her presence alone warmed his heart and he turned over and pulled her sleeping body into his arms. He knew why she was there. She wouldn't have come but for some terrible crime she had to investigate. At least that was why she came those other times. But whatever the reason, he was glad to have her in his arms.

It was enough.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:10 am

LATER THAT MORNING , Tim, with Margo in the backseat, drove the limo through the security gate at Brax's estate. It had been a while since they had to pick up the boss, but he was heading back to Europe that morning and Margo needed to brief him on stateside matters on the drive to the airport. She was remaining in town. But the fact that they hadn't been to the boss's house didn't stop them from their usual game.

"Wanna bet again?" Margo asked Tim.

Tim glanced at her through his rearview. "What this time?"

"The same thing all those other times. That a woman spent the night with him once again, and I'm willing to bet serious cash that he doesn't remember her name."

"Which is crazy."

"You wanna bet?"

"Yeah I can go for that. How much?"

"A hundred?"

Tim looked through the rearview again. "Have you forgotten when the boss docked our pay for making just this same kind of bet a month-and-a-half or so ago?"

"Who's gonna tell him? You? Or are you scared of losing again?"

Margo knew Tim was a betting man. He went to Vegas every vacation he took. He had a poker game going every week. “Are you in?” she asked him.

It didn’t take much for Tim to agree. He was always going to be in. “A hundred it is,” he said. “But if the boss finds out, you’ll pay me every dime he docks from me.”

“Don’t worry. If you don’t tell, I won’t.” Then she smiled. “It’ll be like taking candy from a baby.”

“That’s what you think,” said Tim.

But when the double doors of the mansion opened, and the estate valet came out with Brax’s luggage, it all seemed to be going according to plan. But just after the valet had placed the luggage in the trunk of the limo, the doors opened again.

“Here she comes,” Margo said.

But when Brax came walking out with Roni beside him, Tim turned all the way around to get a good look at Margo’s shocked face. He couldn’t stop grinning.

But it was no laughing matter to Margo. After her initial shock at seeing Roni walking out of that house, she watched Roni as she walked down the steps with the boss. She was high-stepping in her high heels and her short leather skirt and her waist-high leather jacket that buttoned in a crisscross along her sizeable chest, all adorned to give her the look more of a high-class supermodel than a cop. She looked more like a high-class whore than a cop, if you asked Margo, but that was apparently what the boss wanted. And that Angela Davis-looking afro? It made no sense to Margo. Why her? Many of those random women he fooled around with had more class in their pinky than she had in her entire body. But what did she know? She was just his flunky. She was just a working stiff. And he liked what he liked.

But Tim, on the other hand, had no distress about it. He was enjoying every second of her dismay. “Still wanna bet he don’t know her name?” he asked her.

“Ah shut up,” she said, and he laughed.

They both watched as Brax walked Roni to her Porshe that was parked along the driveway, too, and he sat her down on the front driver seat.

Roni looked at him as he buckled her seatbelt. “When will you be back in town?”

He crouched down inside her car’s open door. “I should be back by Friday.”

“In time for the Chamber of Commerce Awards.”

“That’s right.”

They stared into each other’s eyes. Being apart was becoming harder and harder.

“Call me when you get to Belgium. It’s tough out there for a pimp.”

Brax laughed. But then they both turned serious again. “Your ass better stay safe too. It’s tough out there for a cop.”

She nodded. He kissed her on the lips. She gave him a hug. And then he stood up, stepped back, closed her door, and watched as she drove away.

“They’re kissing now,” Tim said.

“They’ve been kissing all along,” said Margo. “Just not in public.” Then Margo shook her head. “I still don’t see Lady Millicent letting a maid’s daughter, a policewoman no less, become a member of her hoity-toity family.”

Tim looked through the rearview. “Who says she wanna to be in old girl’s family? A woman like Roni Ross got prospects of her own okay? A girl like that don’t be on nobody’s begging list.”

“You don’t even like Roni. Why are you acting like you do?”

“What like got to do with it? She’s the boss’s girl. Which makes her my boss too. I tolerate my bosses because they pay my ass. I don’t have to like them. But the truth is still the truth,” he added, and Margo rolled her eyes. Tim laughed as the valet opened the passenger door of the limo, and Brax got inside.

“Top of the morning to you, sir,” a satisfied, hundred dollar richer Tim said to his boss.

“Good morning, Boss,” Margo said. “Don’t mind Timmy. He’s full of himself this morning.”

“Just this morning?” Brax asked and Margo laughed.

“Very funny,” said Tim as his smile evaporated.

“Okay, what we got?” Brax asked Margo and she began handing him, one by one, all of the contracts that needed his signatures. A man that read everything before he signed, it became a slow, arduous process. But by the time they were on the long stretch of highway to the airport, he was nearing the last one.

“Boss !” Tim screamed with a bloodcurdling scream that scared Brax and Margo so completely that the contracts they were holding flew from their hands. By the time they looked up to see what was terrifying Tim, they saw it for themselves: A big SUV was barreling down the highway, on the wrong side of the road, heading straight for their limo.

“Swerve!” Brax yelled, but Tim panicked and jumped out of the limo, leaving it driverless and causing Margo to begin screaming from the top of her lungs too.

Brax was attempting to crawl over the seat to grab the steering wheel when the SUV slammed into the limo with a head-on collision that caused the limo to spin like a toy on a top and then begin speeding out of control down an embankment that led to a cliff.

Brax, like Margo, had been tossed around with the hit and the spin, causing him to fall onto the backseat once again, but he knew he had to get control of that limo before it got to that cliff.

He crawled over the seat again, hopped onto the front driver seat, and slammed on brakes just as the limo was within twenty feet of going over the cliff.

Only the limo was still sliding as if the brakes no longer worked. It slid and slid. Brax began turning the steering wheel as sharply as he could. He was half out of his seat trying to steer that limo from that cliff and hold down the brakes, although he knew, if he steered it too harshly, it could flip the entire car.

Within inches of the cliff, it finally swerved. But it was so close that the backend of the limo was hanging over the cliff.

“Crawl up front!” Brax yelled to a still-screaming Margo as he knew they only had seconds to get out of that car. “Crawl up front!”

With one foot out of the car for leverage, Brax reached back in for Margo to grab his hand. She was panicking, and still screaming, but she nervously began crawling over the seat.

But her movements caused the limo to move and it was slipping further and further

over the cliff. Brax reached in as far as he could and just as the ground that was supporting the limo's weight gave way, Margo grabbed hold of Brax's hand and Brax, with everything within him, flung her over that seat and out of that limo. They fell backwards to the ground as the limo completely gave way and went over the cliff.

Brax leaned over and saw his limo crash against the rocks and then flip into the sea.

Terrified, he laid back down, with Margo still holding onto him as if her life was still endangered. She was still screaming. She was still as panicked as she was inside that car. But as Brax laid there, all he could do was thank God Almighty that Roni wasn't in that limo with them.

“Let’s go, Ross.”

Roni was laughing with a fellow detective about a fumble in the endzone by their archrivals New England Patriots when her partner, Detective Demetrius “Dean” Dixon hurried to her desk. “Where are we going?” she asked as she grabbed her leather jacket and began hurrying behind him. “Another homicide?”

“Car accident.”

That made no sense to Roni. “A car accident? Why would we be going to a traffic case?”

But when they got out of the precinct, Dean turned to her. “It’s a car accident involving your friend.”

Roni had so many friends she didn’t know where to begin. “My friend?”

“Braxton McCrae, Roni,” Dean said.

And as soon as he said that name, her heart dropped. And she ran so fast that she got behind the wheel of their unmarked car and was driving off before Dean, who had to hop in on the passenger seat, could close his door.

After being given the location, Roni drove to the scene so fast that she hardly remembered turning a corner. All she could think about was Brax. She kept asking Dean if Brax was okay, but Dean didn’t know any more than she did. Just that it was called in and when he heard the name, he immediately knew Roni would want in on

it.

It did occur to Roni how her brand new partner would know anything at all about her relationship with Brax. But when they arrived on the scene, and she saw the mangled SUV and the pieces of the limo that she could see from the street had traveled down the embankment and disappeared over the cliff. But where was Brax???

“Over there,” Dean said when he spotted Braxton McCrae standing next to one of the many ambulances on the scene. A police officer was also standing beside him questioning him. Roni’s heart soared when she saw that he was still alive, and she and Dean ran to him.

“Are you alright?” she was saying before she even got to him.

Brax was so happy to see her, and she was so relieved to see him that as soon as they met they embraced vigorously. It was as if their usual protocol was out the window. They didn’t care anymore. “I’m okay,” he said to her. “I’m fine. Please don’t worry.”

“What about Tim?” she asked as she pulled back.

But Brax kept his arms around her waist. “Tim’s in bad shape. He bailed on us.”

“What do you mean he bailed?”

“That SUV was coming straight for us. He panicked and jumped out.”

“He jumped out?” Even Dean was surprised.

“And left you in the limo?” asked Roni, surprised too.

“He was scared, Roni, so yes, he left me and Margo inside.”

“Margo was in that limo too? Where is she?”

“She was hysterical. They took her in an ambulance too. They’ll probably keep her overnight for observation, but she was physically okay.”

But Roni looked even more distressed than she had. “I can’t get over what Tim did. He could have killed you by his action alone.”

“It was each man for himself.”

“Bullshit! He works for you. He’s your driver. It’s his job to protect you, not bail on you.”

“I know that too. He’ll be dealt with.”

“Dealt with my ass. He’ll be fired. He could have killed you.”

Brax exhaled. “I agree, okay? I agree.”

“We still want you to go to the hospital to run tests, Mr. McCrae,” the paramedic said.

“Didn’t I tell you I wasn’t going to any hospital?”

“Oh yes you are,” said Roni.

“Oh no I’m not,” said Brax. He looked at the officer. “Is there anything else?”

“No sir, I have your statement.”

“Then I’m going to catch my plane,” Brax said and began heading away from the

ambulance and the paramedic.

Roni and Dean hurried behind him. Roni caught up with him. “You need to get checked out, Brax. You could have internal injuries.”

“I told you I’m not going to any hospitals.” He continued walking. They didn’t know where he was going until he made it to their unmarked vehicle. “This your car?” he asked Roni.

“Yes.”

Brax began getting in the passenger seat. “Take me to the airport.”

“Sir, that’s against protocol,” he started to say, but Roni stopped him.

“No worries,” she said, giving Dean that look. “I’ll take him where he needs to go. You stick around and get more intel.”

Dean nodded. He didn’t like it, but such was how it went working with a diva like Roni Ross. “Okay,” he said, Roni got in behind the wheel, and she and Brax rode away.

But Brax found out quickly that she wasn’t taking him to any airport. “That’s my turn,” he said.

“You’re going to the hospital.”

“Don’t start with me about that, Veronica. Now I mean it. I’m fine.”

“You don’t know that until they run tests.”

“I do know it, now turn this car around!”

But Roni ignored him.

“I’ll jump out if you don’t turn this car around.”

“Then jump. Tim did it. See what that got him. Talk about hospitals. You’ll be laid up for days.”

Brax knew she had him over a barrel.

Roni looked over at him. “Now settle down and do as you’re told.”

Brax gave her a look. “Check you out.” But then he smiled. “Yes, mother.”

“The first time in history that the son is way, way older than the mother.”

Brax gave her a sidelong look. “I could do without that way, way part. Older was good enough,” he added, and Roni laughed again. She was just happy to have him in one piece.

But the wait at the hospital was so long that Dean was able to get all the info that was available and catch a ride to the hospital himself.

“How is he?” he asked as he made his way into the best suite in the hospital that Brax was placed into.

“They just took him to take another test. They’re still running tests. Found out anything?”

Dean sat down beside her. “The driver of the SUV was an elderly gentleman who,

according to his daughter, had dementia and had no business driving at all.”

“Wow. I take it he was the fatality?”

Dean nodded. “Died on impact.” Then Dean added. “I got the CCTV. I knew you would want to see it.”

Roni wasn’t so sure if she could handle it, but she steeled herself and nodded.

Dean pulled out his phone, pulled up the video he uploaded, and fast-forwarded it to the actual crash.

They leaned against each other looking at the video. They saw Tim bail, which only angered Roni all over again. But when the two vehicles crashed into each other, Roni flinched so much so that her sudden movement caused Dean to nearly drop his phone. But it was just that devastating. And the way the limo was spinning and then speeding down that embankment until it was out of sight, and Brax was in that car, was pure terror to watch.

“It was worse than I thought it was,” Roni said, her heart hammering.

“Me too,” Dean agreed.

“But . . .”

Dean looked at her. “But what?”

“It didn’t . . . It looked . . . Rewind it, not to the crash, but further back if you have it.”

“I have it,” Dean said. “This isn’t one camera view. It’s video from three cameras

strung together. I got it from the cops who compiled it.”

Dean rewound the tape until it was showing the SUV driving toward what would ultimately be the crash scene, and Roni realized what was bothering her. “That’s what I don’t get,” she said.

But Dean wasn’t seeing anything. “What are you talking about? He’s just driving.”

“But that’s the point. He’s staying in his lane. He’s driving like any normal driver on the road. But as soon as the limo come into view, that’s when he crosses the line and head for that limo. As if that limo was his target all along.”

Dean looked at her. “Why would some elderly man target Braxton McCrae’s limousine?”

“And one with dementia no less. I don’t know. But you see what I mean?”

Dean couldn’t deny it. “Actually I do,” he said.

“We need to run a background on this elderly man.”

“And his daughter.”

“Right,” agreed Roni. “And get his medical records so that we can see for ourselves if her story checks out. A man with dementia shouldn’t be able to target limos.”

“I already saw the records.”

“You did?Why?”

“I’m a detective. I wanted to see if her story checks out.”

Roni smiled. “You’re a good cop, you know that?”

“You ain’t so bad yourself,” Dean said. They were still shoulder to shoulder. They stared into each other’s eyes.

But it was Roni who sat erect and stopped leaning against him. “How did you manage to get the records without a warrant?”

“Off the record,” said Dean. “I have a friend who has access.”

“Did the daughter’s story check out? Was he ever diagnosed with dementia?”

Dean shook his head. “No. Nowhere in his considerable records was dementia ever mentioned. And he wasn’t elderly either. He was fifty-nine.”

“So the daughter lied?”

Dean nodded. “Yes. But,” he said.

“But what?”

“He didn’t have dementia, but he had a very aggressive brain tumor that gave him only weeks to live.”

“Ah,” said Roni.

“Which would explain why he was driving normally,” said Dean.

Roni was following along. “He might have wanted to commit suicide than suffer through the agony of death. And then suddenly, he sees this limousine driving on the opposite side of the road and he decides if he’s going to commit suicide, this would

be the car I do it with. Why should he care about some rich guy going down with him?"

Dean nodded. "Right."

Roni had a pensive look on her face. "I guess that's the answer then."

But Dean was beginning to learn his partner. "Your look says maybe rather than I'm certain."

But then the nurse came into the room pushing Brax in a wheelchair. Brax promptly got out of that contraption, as he called it. "They force you to get in that contraption like I'm some fucking invalid. Hospitals and doctors. I hate this place."

"What did the tests say, Grumpy Old Man?"

"All negative. No brain bleed. No internal organs injured. Nothing, Miss Bossy."

Roni smiled. "Good, Mister Get On My Last Damn Nerve."

Brax smiled too. "Get me out of this hospital," he said and began to undress.

The nurse grabbed the wheelchair and along with Dean they hurried out of the room as soon as it appeared that Brax wasn't waiting around for them to leave. He was undressing already. Dean closed the door behind them.

But Roni was still concerned. As he removed his hospital gown and began to put back on his clothes, she decided to voice her concern. "I don't know, Brax, but maybe you should consider keeping a bodyguard with you."

"Why? Because of what some old man did? They told me who was driving that SUV

and his dementia.”

“Only he wasn’t elderly. He was only fifty-nine. And he didn’t have dementia.”

Brax looked at her. “So it was wrong information. But so what? How does that translate into me needing a bodyguard?”

“He had a brain tumor. The doctors gave him only weeks to live.”

Brax thought about that. “So now it’s a suicide situation?”

Roni nodded. “That’s what Dean and I think, yeah.”

Brax hesitated. He knew how good-looking her new partner was. “You and Dean think that, do you?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“Nothing to change,” Brax said as he put his wallet and phone in his pockets. “I’m not getting a bodyguard. End of subject.”

Then he moved up to Roni. He could see she was still distressed. He placed his hands on both sides of her face. “Stop worrying so much. I’m fine,” he said. He kissed her on the forehead. “But I’m getting out of here,” he added and then began leaving. “I’ve got a plane to catch.”

Roni was exhausted, relieved, and exasperated all rolled into one, which was the story of her life with Brax, as she followed behind him.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:10 am

THREE DAYS LATER and the limo pulled up to Roni's condo entrance. Brax, on the backseat, was on a conference call. "Hold on," he said to his managers on the call. Then he phoned Roni and told her to come on down: he's on another line. Then he continued his phone call.

But when he looked up and saw her coming out of the lobby in her skin-tight gown and her up-do, Brax stopped talking and watched her walk out. He'd seen her in gowns before. He'd seen her hair in up-dos too. But somehow he'd never felt so enamored with her the way he did in that moment. "I'll call you back," he said to his managers while they were talking mid-sentence, and ended the call. His driver had already gotten out to open the door for her, but Brax beat him to it. He got out himself.

Roni wore a satin-white pencil gown that made her lithe body look like perfection in motion to Brax and her black skin look like a vat of smooth, milk chocolate. Her gorgeous, thick, naturally-curly hair was in an up-do that highlighted her long, thin neck, and those shades she loved to wear no matter day or night made her look so cool to him that he felt insufficient when she came next to him.

But to Roni, as she gave Brax the lookover too, there was nothing insufficient about him. He wore a black tux, which was normal wear for him, but his usually sexy-messy hair had been freshly done into a conservative cut that suited him. And it made her smile. Brax was hardly conservative, but the Chamber of Commerce, whose board he chaired, was very conservative. "You're going to fit right in," she whispered to him with a smile as he took her hand. "Me, on the other hand," she started saying.

"You never fit in," Brax admitted, finishing her sentence for her. "You always fit out.

That's why I love your stubborn ass," he added, leaned against her, and they both laughed. And then they looked into each other's eyes in a momentary stare that had the valets and doorman elbowing each other. The heat between them was undeniable.

Ever since they declared themselves friends with benefits, they had yet to utilize those benefits other than passionate kisses. It was as if they were both afraid to go all the way there again. They were still afraid that too much of a good thing could become too much for both of them and ruin their relationship. Neither one of them fully understood why they felt that way, but they both felt that way. "Stay you," Brax added, "and we'll be fine."

Roni looked at him. It wasn't lost on her that he said we'll be fine, and that oneness with him made her smile. He left the country on business the same day of that limo accident and he had just arrived back a few hours earlier. Although they'd talked on the phone constantly in his absence, it was the first time she'd seen him since the accident. Tim was out of the hospital, and had submitted his resignation before Brax could fire him, and Margo had only stayed overnight in the hospital for observation. She was still badly shaken by the accident, but otherwise okay. But Roni had never felt closer to Brax than she did in that very moment standing there. And Brax felt the same toward her.

He assisted her into the limo, he got in on the opposite side, and his brand-new driver, hurrying behind him, closed the door behind him and got in behind the wheel. And they were off to the annual Victorville Chamber of Commerce Awards.

Roni, who was seated in the middle, and Brax, who had moved to the middle to be shoulder-to-shoulder with her, took her hand, rubbed it, and then held it by sitting it on his lap. She could tell he was staring at her. She looked at him.

"I know you don't like these functions."

“No, I do not,” Roni said firmly. “I always feel like a Tesla in a room of Elon Musk haters.”

Brax laughed. “But I appreciate your attendance at every function. Although I never give you a choice.”

She laughed. “No, you do not.”

“The family will be there,” he said.

Roni let out a hard exhale.

“Mom and Dad says ever since you’ve been back in Victorville you haven’t come to see them once. They wonder why.”

“You know why. Your brothers are fine, and even your Dad I can take to a point, but the way your mother goes on and on about all those things my mom used to do for her gets on my last nerve every time.”

Brax frowned. “She remembers all the happy times she spent with Miss Bea. Why would that get on your nerves?”

“She was the nanny and the maid. Which with four rambunctious boys and a duke’s daughter as her bosses, and the biggest house in town to clean up, it was a job fifteen people should have been doing.”

“Mother didn’t want strangers all over her house.”

That explained nothing, but Roni kept going. “Everything your mother talks about whenever I’m around is basically all about how my mom worked herself to death. As if she actually believes that all that hard work she was doing for her meant that my

mom was living it up like she was. And all that she was like family to us just . . . Who wants to hear that?”

“She doesn’t mean it in any offensive way, Veronica.”

“I know she doesn’t. But that doesn’t mean it’s not offensive.”

Brax looked at Roni. Roni could tell he didn’t understand what she was trying to say.

Especially by the next question he asked. “So what are you saying? You don’t want to sit at the family table?”

Roni rolled her eyes. Everything she said had gone right over his privileged head. “No, it’s fine. I’m just . . . I just don’t like these kinds of get-togethers.”

“But you do it for me.”

Roni looked at him and nodded. “Yes. I do it for you.”

They exchanged a quick glance between them. And Roni nodded again. “I’m glad you chose me to be by your side tonight. I know you have many young ladies to choose from.”

“Not really,” said Brax, squeezing her hand and rubbing it across his pants, which effectively rubbed it across what Roni could feel was his aroused penis. “Not when it matters.”

His words and his rub warmed Roni’s heart both ways. But he continued staring at her. “Mother really offends you, doesn’t she?” he asked her.

“When I was little and I used to go to work with my mom, Lady Millicent used to

always call my mother girl. Girl, come here. Girl, do this. My mom was older than she was, but she used to call her girl. Calling a grown woman girl because she was poor and a domestic worker just never sat right with me. It used to remind me of that Maya Angelou poem.”

“A poem? What poem? Still I Rise ?”

“That’s probably the only poem you’ve ever heard she wrote. Isn’t it?”

Brax smiled. It was. “What poem?” he asked.

“ When I Think About Myself .”

Brax shook his head. “I don’t think I know that one.”

Roni smiled. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Just hold the commentary and tell me what it said.”

“It said, ‘ Sixty years in these folks’ world. The child I works for calls me girl. I say, ‘yes ma’am,’ for working’s sake. Too proud to bend, too poor to break. I laugh until my stomach ache. When I think about myself .’ That’s what it said. But when I was little, every time I heard that poem recited in school or at some Black History Month program, I thought about how your mother used to treat my mother. And how my mother used to always smile all the way through it. But I could see in her eyes she wasn’t laughing at all.”

Brax was touched. “Veronica, I had no idea.”

“I know you didn’t. I’m not blaming you. And I know Lady Millicent didn’t mean to be offensive.”

“But she was,” said Brax.

Roni wasn’t sugarcoating it. “She was in my view, yes.”

Brax looked at her. “What about in your mother’s view?”

Roni shook her head. “No. Whenever I talked to Mom about it, she’d just say Lady Millicent got her ways , and leave it at that.”

Brax squeezed her hand.

Then she smiled. “But let’s not ruin the mood of the night for you because you’re looking mighty smug like you just know you’re gonna win businessman of the year.”

“The truth?”

“No, lie to me.”

“I think it’s ridiculous I’m even being considered for any award at all, considering I’m the chairman of the board. It smacks of corruption to me.”

“It smacks of Victorville politics to me. My advice? Just give it back if you win.”

Brax looked at her as if she’d lost her mind. “Give it back? Over my dead body!”
Roni laughed. “That would be your advice. You stay in your lane, young lady, and I’ll stay in mine. You just shut up and dribble, no, arrest people,” he added, and they both laughed at that.

Then Brax’s look turned serious. “I heard you called Donte and told him to assign a bodyguard to me.”

Donte Reynolds was the head of security for Brax's company. Roni was surprised that he would have told Brax about their conversation. She assumed he knew it was not to be discussed. Although they both were African American and had a bond she thought, she also realized that his loyalty would always be with Brax, not with her.

Now she had to own her shit. "I phoned him and suggested it, yes."

"He said you demanded it."

"That's his opinion."

"He's no drama king. You, on the other hand."

"Shut up and dribble, no, get on people's nerves."

Brax laughed.

"I just think a man of your stature should have more protection than you have, Brax. Real talk."

"I'm going to take your own words and throw them back at you: I can take care of myself. Real talk."

"Alright, alright, I'm through with it. I tried. But I know your stubborn ass, so I don't know why I even bother."

"Speaking of drivers," Brax said.

Roni looked at him. "Who was speaking of drivers?"

"Harry Bellamy," Brax said to his driver, "meet Veronica Ross."

Harry glanced through the rearview mirror as he drove. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Nice to meet you too,” Roni responded.

“You’ll see her a lot,” Brax said to Harry.

“Yes sir.”

“He’s my new driver,” Brax said to Roni.

“I assumed as much since you mentioned drivers and since he’s driving your new limo.”

“And my new bodyguard,” Brax added.

Roni looked quickly at Brax. “What you say now, Willis?”

Brax laughed.

“Really?” asked Roni. “He’s your driver and your bodyguard?”

Brax nodded. “Really. You looked so worried about me in that hospital after my accident, I figured it was the least I could do. Not for myself. I still know I can take care of myself. But if it’ll ease your worried mind--”

“Oh it will, Brax,” Roni said heartfelt and then hugged his neck. “It will.” Then she looked at him. “What on earth would you do without me?”

Brax was ready with the response. “Rest. Have some peace. Relax. Not worry.”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” she said, as she playfully pushed him.

He grinned. Then their look turned serious. “It’ll be okay,” he said. “ We’ll be okay.”

Roni nodded. Although they still had the weirdest, shakiest, unpredictable relationship she’d ever had. “I know.”

Then Brax kissed her with what was supposed to be a sweet, quick kiss that turned into a long, lingering, passionate kiss.

Harry Bellamy glanced at them through the rearview. He had been wondering what kind of relationship those two actually had. He wasn’t wondering anymore.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:10 am

When they entered the civic center where the banquet was being held, they could see that the McCrae family table was all the way up front as it usually was. Roni stiffened her spine. Dealing with the McCraes, especially his parents, required it.

Brax could sense her tension as they were escorted to the family table, and he placed his hand on her lower back. “I won’t let them bite you.”

“I won’t let them bite me either,” said Roni, which made Brax smile.

“Finally they’ve arrived,” Lady Millicent announced as Brax’s brothers stood up when he and specifically Roni arrived at their table. “I haven’t seen you, Braxton, since your limo accident. Tim should be ashamed of himself for what he did to you.”

“The accident wasn’t Tim’s fault, Mother,” Brax said as he leaned down and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“I did not say it was his fault. But to jump out of the car like that. Shameful.”

“Don’t worry, Mother,” Brax’s brother Scottie said, “he won’t be jumping out of too many more cars like that.”

Roni could see Brax and his whole family glance at Scottie with an uncomfortable glance. They knew he was on the shady side of life. They knew what he was capable of. But like always, they never questioned it. They moved on.

“You and Veronica are late indeed,” Edward McCrae, Brax’s handsome father, said as he stood up too.

“How are we late, Mr. McCrae?” Roni asked as he gave her a hug. “The ceremonies haven’t even begun yet.”

“You don’t come on time to be on time, young lady,” Edward replied. “You come early to be on time.”

That made no sense to Roni, and she glanced at Brax who could only hunch his shoulders. When he was a younger man he used to get into it with his father often. Now he didn’t bother with his father and his oddities at all.

“Hi, Lady Millicent,” Roni said as she leaned down and hugged Millicent’s neck.

“Hello Veronica. You finally show yourself to the family. It’s well past time, but at least you’re here tonight. You do realize it’s night, correct? Because I see sunshades hiding those gorgeous hazel eyes of yours, but I don’t see any sunlight.”

“Roni is the sunlight, Mother,” Brax said, and his brothers laughed.

Roni smiled and shook her head. “He’s just being silly, Lady Millicent. Don’t mind him.”

“Oh I do not. I have not for years,” she said, and they all laughed at that. “But you do look sweet,” Millicent added, to Roni. “Do you ever get tired of Braxton dragging you to every single function he has to attend in this town? He could easily take some of his other ladies to at least half of the functions, but he never does. He’s always dragging you to every single one.”

“It’s okay,” Roni said. She knew what point Lady Millicent was making. She wanted to remind Roni that she was only one of many women in Brax’s barnyard so don’t get it twisted. She knew her too well to not know exactly what she meant.

Roni then greeted Brax's three brothers: JJ, Fredrick, and Scottie. All three were as good looking as Brax, and all were successful too, but they were all so different to Roni.

Jarvis Jackson McCrae, called JJ, was the frat boy of the family. He had just turned forty, but he wasn't slowing down for a second. He used to be her road dog before she went away to college, and she loved being around him. He would sneak her into the clubs with him and would let her drink to her heart's content. But he looked out for her too: She wasn't allowed out of his sight and he would shut down any guy that tried to hit on her. JJ was loads of fun. But when big brother Brax found out that he was taking her to clubs and letting her drink her underaged heart out, it was Brax that shut it all down.

But JJ would always be near and dear to Roni's heart. They hugged for a long time. He even started laughing and joking around with her before she could take her seat.

But as unserious as JJ seemed, Fredrick was a very serious man. As the CEO of their family business, McCrae Aeronautics, he rarely cracked a smile. He was one year younger than Brax, and he was the go-to man when Brax needed advice, but of all the brothers, he was the one Roni knew the least. There were no hugs between them. No joking around. Just a polite handshake and a nod.

But if there was an odd man out in that family, it had to be Scottie McCrae. He was friendly enough to Roni, but he also had a ruthlessness about him, an unsavory-ness, that turned her completely off. But the McCrae family just loved him to death. He was the bulldog of their family. The enforcer. The man they all turned to when they needed off-the-record problems handled. Like when the woman that cheated on Brax's twin brother two days before their wedding, causing their devastated brother to commit suicide, needed to be dealt with. It was Scottie who dealt with her. From what Roni remembered of the case, the woman was hospitalized for over four months. But nobody, least of which Scottie, went to jail. He was as shady as shady

could get to the cop in Roni. Just bad news all around. Her mother told her long ago to stay far away from that one and she meant stay away. Roni always heeded that advice.

She didn't bother to shake Scottie's hand nor hug or air-kiss him. She just spoke, nodded in his direction, and took her seat.

After everybody were seated, and the conversations were surface for the most part, Roni was able to deal with the evening. It wasn't that bad. Brax was constantly interrupted by other businessmen coming over and shaking his hand, and his father's hand, and Fredrick's hand. It was all business for those three. Women from the higher echelons of the city were also greeting Lady Millicent, and tried to talk to various brothers, especially Brax. But Brax was more interested in business conversations than so much as giving those girls the time of day. Although JJ and Roni spent most of the time laughing and talking with each other, he was also constantly interrupted by one female after another one wishing him well. And giving him their numbers. It was only then did she realize JJ had been nominated too.

"What were you nominated for?" she asked him.

"The same thing as my brothers and my father: Businessman of the year. I say Brax should have pulled his name from contention, given that he chairs the board, but he refuses."

"I agree with you," said Roni. "It won't look good if he wins."

"But he'll win. He always does. Freddy deserves it, hard as he works, but they don't like Fredrick so much. They'll give it to Brax."

"Why not to you? They like you. They like your father too."

“They like us. But they love Brax. They love the business he brings to the city. He’ll win. Besides, Father and I are not what you would call the hardest workers in show business. Or even in this town. Or even in this room. Or even--”

“I get your point,” Roni said with a laugh. JJ was always fun.

But before any awards were handed out, Roni’s comfort was tested when dinner was served and Lady Millicent had a chance to do as she always did whenever Roni came around: She had to travel down memory lane.

“I remember when I arrived in Edward’s family home. I was just a girl of seventeen and Eddie was just a boy of nineteen, but we were married and very much so pregnant with Braxton.”

Roni glanced at Brax. His mother never mentioned that she was pregnant with twins , as if Brax’s deceased brother, and especially the way he died, was a stain on the family name.

“Bea was so invaluable to me. Just a wonderful girl. She would wait on me hand and foot until I fell asleep. Then she’d sleep on the floor in my room in case I needed her. Once she realized I was fine, she would go home. That was the kind of great woman your mother was.”

A great woman, Roni wanted to ask, or a great slave? But she didn’t go there. Especially since nobody else at the table found it disturbing at all. Except for maybe Brax, who kept glancing at Roni. But Roni wasn’t trying to hear about how her mother laid on a hard, cold floor until some spoiled, rich countess, or whatever she was, fell asleep. She wanted her mother in a soft bed too. But Lady Millicent never seemed to understand that and Roni nor Brax nor anybody else was the one to school her. You just didn’t approach Lady Millicent that way.

But that didn't stop Lady Millicent from continuing her journey down that lane. "She would sometimes stay all night, even when you were a little girl, if I needed her for any reason. She was quite devoted to me."

Roni exhaled, causing the brothers to look at her. Brax could tell her discomfort, and JJ could too, but they adored their mother. She could do no wrong, as far as they were concerned, and Roni wasn't there to deal anybody any doses of reality. She was there strictly to support Brax. Even when a gorgeous lady in the McCrae financial bracket came over to their table, and Millicent's eyes lit up with possibilities.

"Hello Braxton," the woman said.

"Hyacinth, hello," Brax replied. It was interesting to Roni how none of the men at the table stood up. "How are you?"

"I'm well and you?"

"I'm good."

"She sees none of us," JJ whispered to Roni. "We're invisible, to her, you see."

"Hello Hyacinth," Millicent said. "Are your parents well, dear? I've missed them at the club lately."

"Still on their European vacation," Hyacinth said. "They should be back in three months or so."

Monthslong vacations, Roni thought. Must be nice.

"I just wanted to wish Brax all success tonight," Hyacinth added.

“Thank you,” Brax said and then Hyacinth left their table. Roni could see Brax’s eyes assessing her figure as she walked away. Roni was surprised at how it kind of hurt her to see it. And how he didn’t bother to introduce her to Roni at all.

But it was Lady Millicent that was poking that bear, not the young lady. “She’s perfect for you, Braxton.”

“Don’t start, Mother.”

“And why not? She’ll fit right in. Your age and never married. No grandchildren from you or any of your brothers. But especially you as the eldest. It’s obvious that Hyacinth only has eyes for you. I don’t know what’s wrong with you.”

“Roni is what’s wrong with him,” said a smiling JJ. “He only has eyes for Roni,” he added, and he and Scottie and even their father laughed.

But their mother didn’t. “Ridiculous,” she said.

Roni was offended, but she wasn’t about to let that heifer know it. She kept on smiling.

But even with Lady Millicent constantly interjecting to annoying degrees about this sacrifice or that sacrifice Roni’s mother made to be the best maid and nanny she could be to the family, it turned out to be an otherwise very nice night. The McCraes, as usual, racked up the most awards, and Brax, as usual, went home with the top prize: businessperson of the year. It was to the Chamber awards what the best picture of the year award was to the Oscars.

But what made this year different was when Brax’s name was called and the entire awards attendees all stood up in applause, Brax kissed Roni on the lips and gave her a vigorous hug. It was the first time he had displayed his feelings for her so publicly.

Everybody knew they were close, but even his family didn't realize they were that close.

But oddly enough, Roni didn't mind. When Brax held her so openly and kissed her so tenderly in such a public way, it made her feel special beyond belief. He was a man in high demand in this town. So many women wanted him for themselves. For her to be the chosen one, although it wasn't as deep as everybody thought, but the deepest relationship both of them had, made her feel separated. On a pedestal. The winner.

What she won, however, was another story.

Especially when the ceremony was over, Brax's brothers were at other tables saying their goodbyes to their social circles, and Lady Millicent made a point of pointing something out to Roni and Brax. "In this life, everybody has a role," she said. "A place, if you like. Cows stay with cows. Stars stay with stars. Their servants stay with servants. It's the order of things that we all must adhere to. Don't you think so, Veronica?"

"Depends," said Roni.

"It depends on what?" asked Millicent.

"How you feel about it. As for me? If a cow wants to mingle with a horse, it won't bother me at all."

Brax grinned.

"But it'll bother the horse," said Millicent. "Don't you see?"

Brax frowned. "Mother, what is your point?"

“I’m a cop,” said Roni, “the daughter of a maid. You’re the son of a countess or duchess or whatever she is, and a billionaire. That’s her point.”

“That is not my point at all,” said Millicent. “Beatrice was family to us.”

“Yes she was,” echoed Edward.

“She was not a maid.”

“No indeed,” said Edward.

But Roni wasn’t playing along. “Yeah okay,” she said, reminding herself that she was still a Tesla and they were still Musk haters. “I’ll wait outside, Brax,” she added, and left before he could ask her to stay.

Brax looked at his mother with disappointment in his eyes. “Really? Is this what we’re doing?”

“What did I do?” Millicent asked innocently.

Brax grabbed his trophy. “Beatrice was your maid and my nanny. She was not family. Family doesn’t wait on you hand and foot. Servants do. Veronica understands that even if we don’t!” Then he frowned. “I’ll talk to you later, Mother. Father,” he said to his father, and left the room.

Edward shook his head. “He’ll go through the fire for that girl. Always felt that way about her.”

“I adore her too,” said Millicent. “But she will not do. She absolutely will not. Surely he realizes that.”

But Edward didn't think he did. Nor should he, he thought. But that was a thought, given his wife, that he was keeping to himself.

Outside, Brax was just walking up to Roni, who was leaned against the limo talking small-talk with Harry Bellamy, when he was interrupted by the President of the Chamber of Commerce. "He's a yes, Braxton."

Brax was shocked. "Since when?"

"Since right now. And he's willing to sign right now!"

Brax was floored. "Are you certain?"

"Yes! I'm certain."

Brax's heart soared. It was a get he had been trying to get all year. "Put him in the conference room. Then call Margo and tell her to set up the e-sign."

"I thought she was still recovering from the accident."

"She's okay. Call her. She can set up in two minutes."

"Will do."

Then Brax stopped him before he walked away. "Good job, Richard. Good job."

Richard smiled. And hurried away.

Brax looked at Roni.

"I know, I know." She smiled, glad he was getting something accomplished. "I'll talk

to you tomorrow.”

“Harry will take you home.”

“No, he won’t either. He’s your bodyguard, not just your driver. I’ll catch a ride with JJ.”

Brax gave her a kiss on the lips and then handed her his award trophy. “Don’t you let Jarvis get you into any trouble,” he whispered in her ear as he pulled back from her.

She smiled. “That’s between JJ and me,” she said and walked over to where JJ was laughing and talking with a group of ladies. JJ immediately hugged Roni as he continued to talk and laugh, which was his way: the life of the party was JJ.

Brax waited for Roni to look at him again. When she did, he waved at her. She stuck out her tongue at him, causing him to laugh. She really was a very special lady. And then he hurried back into the venue.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:10 am

THREE WEEKS LATER and Roni and her partner, Detective Dean Dixon, were with the infamous dynamic duo Detectives Bruce Synder, a small white guy, and Gabe Richardson, a taller, slender black man. Bruce and Gabe were already standing outside of an old, broken down apartment building near the outskirts of town when Dean and Roni arrived. Roni remembered the place as a kid. It used to be called Lake something, as she recalled, and it was a rough place to live even back then. A nest of crime and drug addiction, as she remembered, before it was condemned and the landlord sent to prison. Now it was an abandoned building with every window broken out and nothingness surrounding it. No kind of place to interrogate a suspect. Unless you were the dynamic duo who made their own rules and did their own thing. They all got out of the two unmarked cars.

Bruce looked Roni up and down. "I remember a time when cops just wore suits."

"This is a suit," Roni said. She wore a tailored Prada pantsuit, heels, and large shades even though it was early nighttime. And of course her 'fro, which Bruce seemed especially displeased with.

"Suits," he said again, "and nice haircuts too."

Roni rolled her eyes. She wasn't thinking about that bigot.

"Our advance team was supposed to have already secured the subject in an apartment waiting for us," Gabe said. "But just in case, we'll enter with some element of surprise. We want you two to go around to the side stairs. Bruce and I will take the back stairs. We'll meet up on the ninth floor."

“Damn,” said Dean. “No elevator?”

“None. Now get to it,” Gabe ordered as he and his partner headed for the back.

“Not even a how do,” said Dean as he and Roni made their way toward the side of the building. “They could have at least thanked us for providing backup.”

Roni glanced at her partner. He was one of the few cops on the Force who wasn’t enameled with BG, which she appreciated. He was turning out to be a good guy and an honest cop all around. “It’s supposed to be our honor to work with those two,” Roni said. “We should be grateful to grace their presence.” Then she shook her head. “I don’t know what they see in those guys because I don’t see it.”

“Me neither,” Dean agreed as they walked up stairs. “And who ever heard of detectives with an advance team?”

Roni smiled. “I never heard of it.”

Then Dean looked at her as they made their long way up the side stairs. Roni was in front. Dean was watching her sashay those hips, and that tight ass, as he climbed up behind her. Baby girl had it going on, he thought. “How was it?” he asked her.

Roni glanced back at him. Did she miss something? “How was what?”

“That blind date your girlfriends sat up for you. I wasn’t being nosy, but I overheard you talking to one of them on the phone about it at lunchtime. You said something about the first blind date two months ago and now they want to set you up on another one. Or something like that.”

“It’s exactly like that. Once is never enough for my girlfriends.”

“But I take it you ain’t having it.”

“I am not.”

“Which probably means the first one wasn’t so great.”

Roni sometimes wondered what was wrong with her that she could never get it right with any man ever. Even the one that she knew loved her didn’t love her enough to put up with her for life. “He canceled,” she said.

Dean hesitated and then kept on walking. Poor kid. “Sorry to hear that. I don’t know what’s wrong with these men nowadays. I found me a good woman and snatched her up before anybody else could. At least until she divorced me. But she was still a good woman. But these men nowadays?” He shook his head.

Roni knew what he meant. Although all of her girlfriends were in good, productive relationships or marriages with good, productive men, she was the outlier in her friend groups.

“I think, in your case though,” Dean said, “I know what it is.”

“Well will you let me in on it?”

Dean laughed. “I think men are intimidated by you. You don’t present yourself to the world like some weak woman who needs a man to take care of her. Some guys are turned on by that. But a lot of guys are intimidated by that. I know I am,” he added, and they both laughed.

There was some truth to what he was saying, and Roni knew it. But that theory didn’t hold any kind of water when it was matched against the one man she wanted. The one human being on earth she was intimidated by. Brax even loved her. She believed that

with all her heart. He just didn't love her enough. "Okay, we're approaching the ninth floor," she said, forgetting about Brax and men and blind dates too, and they both pulled out their weapons.

One got on either side of the door, Dean as the senior detective gave the go-ahead nod, and Roni flung open the door. Both cops assumed the position when the door flew open, but all they saw was a dark hallway.

They immediately turned on the light scope on their service revolvers and began to walk slowly down the hall, aiming quickly at every corner they came upon. Roni loved it, but her heart was pounding too. Anything could happen in situations like that. They were always prepared, but she knew they could never be fully really.

They kept on walking, with Roni tiptoeing because of her heels, until they turned down a back hall and saw Bruce and Gabe walking toward one apartment that appeared to have an open door with a light on inside. Lights on in this place? It seemed odd to say the least. Unless, she thought, this was a regular interrogation spot for BG.

BG, Roni, and her partner all met up on either side of the apartment door. All with their weapons drawn, they entered the apartment.

And there, as you turned the corner inside the apartment, was one lone man: a bulky Hispanic in a t-shirt and trousers too tight over his round belly. His hands were tied behind his back. His face looked slightly bruised, although Roni wasn't sure if he came that way. He obviously was a gangbanger from way back.

"Well if it ain't Rodrigo in the flesh," Gabe said.

"I told your boys I'm not into that shit no more. You got the wrong guy."

“Sure we do,” Bruce said. “And I’m Mary Poppins.”

“And I’m Peter Pan,” said Gabe.

“And I’m Elizabeth Warren,” said Dean, grinning.

Although Roni smiled, Bruce and Gabe looked at him. “Who the fuck is that?” asked Bruce.

Dean was shocked. “You don’t know who Elizabeth Warren is? Oh wait a minute. Maybe you know her as Pocahontas?”

Bruce and Gabe frowned. “What are you talking about?” asked Bruce. “Just shut the fuck up!”

Dean’s smile was gone. Roni felt bad for him. Those two heroes weren’t so heroic after all, just as they suspected all along. Roni had already done one job with them when her partner was Detective Diversity Hire Carter. The beat a suspect unconscious. They got what they wanted, but it still turned Roni’s stomach inside out. She was no fan of those two.

But before she had finished observing the scene, Bruce had already grabbed a metal pipe from the floor and was slamming it upside Rodrigo’s skull, opening up an instant gaping hole.

Roni and Dean were shocked as Rodrigo cried out.

But Bruce and Gabe were serious. “Confess motherfucker!” Bruce insisted.

But Rodrigo looked confused. “Confess to what?”

“Confess!” Gabe yelled as he punched Rodrigo across the face.

“Confess to what? I didn’t do nothing!”

“That kid’s in a coma and two girls are dead because of you. You’d better confess,” Bruce said as she slammed Rodrigo again with that pipe.

Rodrigo was crying and begging now. “I don’t know nothing. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know nothing!”

But they kept on yelling for him to confess as they beat his ass. Roni didn’t know what case they were talking about and she didn’t care. They were out of line. And that was why, when Bruce was about to hit Rodrigo again, who was already collapsing in pain, she grabbed the pipe just as he held it up to strike.

Bruce looked at her as if she’d lost her mind. But she was not backing down. “He said he didn’t do it,” she yelled as she held onto that pipe. “Why you keep hitting him? What’s wrong with you?!”

Dean’s heart dropped. He touched Roni on the arm, trying to pull her back. But she held her ground.

But BG were not amused. It was as if all the anger they felt toward their alleged perp immediately turned onto Roni. “What’s wrong with me ?” Bruce asked her, astounded that she had gone there. “Is that what you just said?”

Roni wasn’t trying to get into it with that man. That legend. She was just trying to be a good cop. She removed her grip on that pipe.

“Ross, is that what you just said?” Bruce asked her again.

“Yes I said it!” Roni yelled at him. “You’re out of line, Detective. He said he didn’t know anything, that has to be enough. We don’t just keep beating them. What’s wrong with you?”

Bruce smiled, but nobody in that room took it for anything joyous. “What’s wrong with me, she says. What’s wrong with me.” Then his fake smile vanished and he began beating Rodrigo so badly that Rodrigo fell out of the chair unconscious. Roni and Dean tried to grab at Bruce, but Gabe pointed his gun at them, forcing them back. “Don’t even try it,” he said to them as Bruce continued to assault their suspect until he had to be dead. Then he got in a few more licks even after that. Roni couldn’t believe it.

But Bruce wasn’t done. He tossed that now-bloody pipe aside and looked at Roni. “Here you are, some nobody asking me what’s wrong with me?” He was yelling it out. “That’s what we’re doing now? That’s what fucking nobodies like you are doing now? Questioning the authority of somebody like me? Is that how you roll, Ross? What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with your ass is the question!”

And then Gabe turned his weapon exclusively on Dean as Bruce grabbed Roni’s service revolver and threw it across the room. Then he grabbed Roni so unexpectedly that Roni at first didn’t know what was happening to her. Until she saw Bruce dragging her over to the open window inside the apartment. Her heart now terrified, especially after what she’d just witnessed him do Rodrigo, she fought with all she had to prevent the drag. And then she began flailing as much as she could to stop his progression.

But it didn’t work. He easily flung her over the window ledge, headfirst, and began dangling her out of that window that was nine stories up. The only thing stopping him from dropping her on her head was his hands holding her by the catch of her ankles.

Dean was mortified. “What are you doing?” He was pleading with Bruce. “Pull her

up, man, you'll drop her. Pull her up! What are you doing?!"

He tried to hurry over to assist her, but Gabe had his gun on him. "Try anything, you idiot, and he'll let go," he yelled at Dean. "He'll drop her like a bad habit so stay where you are!"

"Tell him to let her up," Dean was begging.

"Stay out of it."

"But this is crazy!"

"Stay out of it. He'll drop her if you don't shut the fuck up!"

Dean, realizing these two were as batshit crazy as he always thought they were, held up his hands.

Bruce was looking down at Roni as she was screaming for him to let her back up. She was terrified, but he was smiling. "Still think something's wrong with me, Ross? Still think something's wrong with me, Bitch?"

Roni was so horrified that she could hardly think straight. Dangling down on the ninth floor inside a deserted building in a long-deserted part of town was her nightmare come true. She kept screaming for him to let her up. Begging for him. But when he was laughing even harder, she suddenly realized that she was feeding the beast, and her panic might just cause her downfall.

She became still as a lamb. She knew, if she wiggled too much, he could accidentally drop her.

She could not believe her fellow police officers were putting her in this crazy

position. Again!

But only this time it was her life, not her career or the life of some phone-snatching kid, that was on the line.

“Something still wrong with me, Ross?” Bruce was screaming back at her. “Something still wrong with me?”

Roni was staring up into his big blue eyes. And they looked so soulless to her that she knew there was no appealing to his better angels. He didn’t appear to have any. Because he was enjoying it too much. He loved to see her squirm. He loved to see her beg. She was feeding his demented appetite for power and pain infliction, and she knew she had to stop it. He’d keep doing it if she kept the food coming.

She decided to starve his ass.

She stopped screaming at him. She placed her hands over her chest, to help stop her body from rocking to leverage her weight, and she stopped looking down in terror and then pleading with him even more. She stopped relying on him totally and turned her entire focus on praying to God Almighty that that idiot didn’t drop her or let her go. She was a churchgoing girl. She believed in God. She was relying on that belief.

When Roni stopped all of her antics to unnerve Bruce, and especially when she stopped screaming, too, it did seem to disappoint him. He even looked at Gabe as if he didn’t know what to do all of a sudden. Why wasn’t she going along with his show? What was wrong with her ?

That was when he decided to scare her on another level. “What do you think?” he asked Gabe. “When I drop her, what’s going to be our story?”

“Don’t do that, guys,” said a terrified Dean. “Please don’t do it! Please guys. She’s

one of us.”

“Shut up!” Gabe yelled at him, cocking his gun ready to fire it at him. Dean backed up, his hands in the air even higher.

Then Gabe looked at Bruce again. “We can always blame Rodrigo. That’s why we had to beat him to death.”

Bruce smiled. “I like that. He threw her out the window like the trash she is, and we took care of him. Sounds like a plan to me.”

Then Bruce looked down at Roni. “But what a shame to waste all this female,” he said, staring at her body. “I heard you got gold between these legs,” he said to her, opening them wider. “I heard you got a sugar daddy that makes certain nobody but him gets to enjoy what’s between these legs.”

Roni was fighting with all she had to control her terror because she was sufficiently terrified. She was praying. She continued to have her hands folded over her chest and she was praying to God to help her out of this one. She could not have been more terrified.

But Bruce wanted that rise out of her. It was as if it was his life food. “How does it feel, Detective?” He began yelling at her again. “How does it feel? How does it feel, Roni Ross? Tell me how it feels!” Only this time he screamed it out as if he was begging her to have a reaction. “Tell me how it feels!”

But when she still said nothing and did nothing, he seemed deflated. And he looked to Gabe again.

“I think we got her, champ,” Gabe said to give his partner, and himself , an out. “We proved our point.”

Bruce looked at her again. “Yeah. We proved our point. Didn’t we, Ross? Because you’re going to go along with whatever we say about what happened to Rodrigo. Aren’t you, Ross? If I pull you up, aren’t you going to go along with whatever we say?”

Roni was no fool. It was her lifeline. And she agreed instantly with her adversary. “Yes. I’ll go along with whatever y’all say.”

Bruce laughed. “I knew you was a coward in the end.” And then he pulled her up and back into the apartment.

Dean exhaled so sufficiently when he saw her back inside the apartment that he had to lean over with his hands on his knees. It was a wonder to him that he hadn’t pissed in his pants. He’d seen a lot in his career, but nothing like this.

But if Bruce and Gabe expected some kind of gratitude from Roni Ross for sparing her life, they didn’t know her. Her own notorious temper took over and all she saw was red. Because as soon as her feet hit the floor again, she was in fight mode. She wasn’t letting those bastards get away with what they’d just did to her, are they crazy? They terrorized her, there was no other way to put it, and she had to terrorize them.

She lifted her stiletto heel and kicked Bruce so hard in his groin that he fell to his knees in unbearable pain. He screamed out as blood immediately began to appear outside of his pants as he held onto his gravely distressed balls.

When Gabe, stunned by what she’d done, aimed his gun at her, she picked up that discarded pipe and knocked the legs out from beneath him, causing his bullet to sail to the ceiling. He fell onto his back in severe pain, but he was still aiming his gun at Roni ready to take her out anyway.

But Dean fired next, and took him out.

But just when Dean thought it was all over, Roni was just getting started. She was still seeing red. She grabbed a now practically incapacitated Bruce and with all the strength she should not have had, she lifted him and flung him, headfirst, out of that same window the way he had lifted her. She held onto his legs, but he was dangling just as she had been dangling. Already in unbearable pain, Bruce was screaming for his life.

“How does it feel, Detective?” Roni was screaming down at him. “How does it feel, bitch ? How does it feel?!”

But unlike her when she was dangling out, Bruce began to panic and was jerking his body wildly as he attempted to lift himself back up. “Help me!” he was crying like a helpless baby. “Help me!”

“Stop wiggling like that you bastard,” she admonished him. “I took it, your ass got to take it too!”

But Bruce was still panicking as if all he could think about was crashing to the street beneath him. He wiggled and squirmed so desperately that Roni was unable to control him.

Dean, seeing her struggle, hurried over and tried to help her pull him back in. “Stop so we can pull you in, you stupid fuck!” Dean was yelling at Bruce. He couldn’t stand his ass, either, and would not have mind dropping him. But he wasn’t that kind of man. “Just stop moving!”

But Bruce could dish it better than he could take it and he could not be reasoned with. He was in full-blown panic mode and there was no stopping him from losing complete control. And as Roni and Dean tried to pull him back in, he became the

obstacle. And just as they were trying to get a firmer grip on his legs, he wiggled one time too many, and did it so wildly, that their grip slipped.

“Nooo !” Roni cried out as first Dean’s hands and then her hands slipped away from Bruce’s kicking legs. And Bruce Synder of the infamous BG dynamic duo, fell all nine flights, screaming out into the air all the way down.

Roni and Dean leaned all the way over the window ledge in total shock. They could not believe it! They looked at Bruce as his hands were still reaching out for them to save him, as his screams still emasculated their eardrums, until his body slammed into the concrete below.

He was so badly smashed that he looked as if he’d been flattened by the wheel of a steamer, and was made one with the street.

Roni’s heart was hammering. Did that just happen? Did she just drop a man to his death ?!

“Jesus have mercy!” she decried, looking at her partner. “What have I done, Dean? What have I done?!”

Dean was so stunned himself that he couldn’t answer her.

But she wasn’t waiting around for an answer anyway. “Call it in!” she yelled at him as she was running out of the apartment. “Call it in!”

Dean went to Gabe and felt his pulse. He was dead. He looked at Rodrigo, who was long since dead. What a mess! Then he hurried behind Roni.

When he got outside, he could see her on her knees at Bruce’s side trying to feel for a pulse. Then she tried to hear for one. But there was none. He could see her pumping

and pumping on Bruce's chest trying to revive him. It was obvious from his fall that there was no way he could have survived, but she was still pumping. BG deserved everything they got as far as Dean was concerned, but Veronica Ross, he was coming to realize, wasn't built like that. They were scum of the earth human beings, no doubt about it, but they were still human beings in her eyes and she wasn't giving up on any human. She kept on pumping.

Dean was outdone too. He couldn't believe the turn this shit took. This was a mess. There were no two ways about it.

Before he went over to Roni, he pulled out his cellphone and did as he was ordered to do when he first became her partner.

She wanted him to call it in and that was exactly what he did.

He called it in.

But not to who Roni meant.

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The woman was on top of Brax. Kaci or Laci or some such name. He couldn't remember her name. But she was working it hard. Working her ass off. And she was moaning and groaning and moving that perfect body of hers as if it was the best she ever had.

But he wasn't feeling it.

Not even a little bit.

They were at her mansion, and she was putting on the show of shows for him in her bedroom. But he had a slight problem. After the night he slept with Roni, no woman had been able to satisfy him the way they used to satisfy him. It was like he was feasting on beans and wieners when he'd feasted on steak. It was a hard meal to top.

And ever since their relationship became more than just friends, even though they both knew it was more than that for years, it changed his need for speed too. He was still going out with various ladies, but nowhere near the level he used to. And he had yet to cum with one.

But just like all the others, Kaci or Laci was doing her best to impress him too. And he usually, eventually, got into it and made something out of it. But tonight was especially hard. He couldn't get into any of it. It became such a nothing burger to Brax that he eventually gave up himself and tossed her off of him just as her groans were getting louder and she seemed about to cum. He couldn't even wait to give her that satisfaction.

The woman looked at him in disbelief. Did he not realize, her look seemed to say,

how many men would literally die to be with her?

Brax saw that look too. “It’s not you,” he said. He couldn’t count the women that gave him that same look lately. “It’s not you.”

“Then what’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter. I’m just not feeling it. Something’s off. And don’t ask me what because I don’t know what. But it’s not you.”

It sounded like doublespeak to her. And she was pissed. She laid down beside him shaking her head. He looked at her. She was really a knockout in every way. But something was off. Something was wrong.

“I’m sorry,” he said to her.

“You’re infuriating,” she said to him as she reached over and grabbed her gold cigarette case from her nightstand and pulled out a cigarette. “I hope you realize that.”

His phone began ringing. “I never promised you a rose garden.”

“You never promised you’d be a dick either,” the woman said as he leaned down and grabbed his phone out of his pants pocket. His pants were still on the floor when they hurriedly undressed. “But that’s exactly what you are,” she added. “A world class dick.”

Brax looked at her. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, sister. I can show your ass what a world-class dick really is if you keep on. So watch yourself,” he added.

The woman lit her cigarette and took a long drag on it. He was full of shit as far as

she was concerned.

Brax looked at his Caller ID. As soon as he saw the name, he answered quickly. “Is she alright?” He was asking the question before the caller could get a word out.

“She’s okay.” It was Dean. “But the situation is a mess, sir.”

“What happened?”

“One of our fellow detectives dangled Roni out of a ninth floor window.”

Brax was floored. “He what ? He jumped out of bed. “I thought you said she was alright?”

“She is, sir. She’s okay. He pulled her back in.”

Brax exhaled.

“But when he pulled her back inside the apartment, her temper took over and she dangled him out of a window.”

Brax couldn’t believe it. “She what ?”

“And she accidentally dropped him, sir,” Dean added.

When Brax heard that last comment, his heart dropped too. “Good Lord,” he said softly, like a prayer, because he knew what was going on with Roni now. He knew how badly she was going to beat up herself about that awful mistake, regardless of the piece of shit that cop undoubtedly was.

“She wants me to call it in, sir. She wants me to call--”

“Don’t you dare call anybody!” Brax ordered. “Where is she?”

“She’s trying to revive the detective. To no avail.”

Brax removed his condom, tossing it in the wastebasket, and began putting on his pants. “Put her on the phone,” he said as he maneuvered.

He could hear Dean walking over to Roni and then handing her the phone. “Who is it?” he could hear Roni saying. “Cap?”

“It’s me,” Brax said over Dean’s phone’s Speaker. “And don’t you call anybody.”

“How did you?” He could hear the confusion in her voice. “How would you know about this?”

“Don’t you call anybody,” Brax said again. “I’m on my way.”

“But how would my partner have your number?”

“Did you hear me? Don’t your ass call anybody until I get there. Do you hear me?”

“Yes I hear you. Damn!”

“Put him back on the phone.” Brax didn’t want to say their names in front of his lady friend.

“I’m here,” Dean said over the Speaker.

“Text me the address. I’m on my way,” Brax said, and then ended the call.

When Brax ended the call, the now exasperated woman leaned up in bed. “Where are

you going?”

“Business,” he said as he grabbed his suit coat, shirt and shoes, and began hurrying for the bedroom’s exit.

But the woman wasn’t buying it. “What business would you have this time of night?”

“Mine,” Brax said, and hurried out of the door.

“Asshole!” she yelled at him and threw a pillow at the door.

But Brax knew the kind of trouble Roni was in. He wasn’t giving that woman a second thought.

By the time he made it to his car, he was already on the phone with the commissioner.

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But Roni was still shocked at her partner. She was still glaring at him with a baffled look on her face. “How would you know to call Brax McCrae?”

“It’s no big deal, Roni.”

“It is a big deal! How would you know to call him?”

“He asked me to call if any situation that specifically involves you got dicey. And look at us. We’ve got two dead bodies upstairs and one dead body down here. It doesn’t get any more dicey than this.”

Roni felt betrayed. She thought they were cool with each other. She never thought he would go behind her back like that. But that was why it was so hard for her to trust. “He asked you,” she said, “or did he pay you?”

Dean was offended. “He asked me, Roni. What do you take me for?”

“A snitch!”

“I’m no snitch!”

“Then why would you agree to call in my . . . friend without letting me in on it? I don’t believe this. Is everybody crooked?”

Dean knew she was projecting her pain onto him. “You know good and doggone well that I’m not crooked. So don’t even go there, Roni.”

Roni closed her eyes and then opened them again.

Dean tried to explain. “Can you imagine how shocked I was when I walked in Cap’s office and I saw Braxton McCrae standing there. He owns half of upstate New York and his father and brothers own the other half. And he’s asking me to call him if we encounter anything dicey? What was I supposed to say to a powerful man like that, Roni? No?”

“But you could have told me, Dean. I thought we were cool like that.”

“We are. We are cool. But I have a family to feed. I may be divorced, but I have custody of my children and they depend on me. I’m not letting the wrath of any McCraes come down on me and threaten my livelihood. Besides, it would be different if he was asking me to spy on you with other men or something like that. He just wanted me to make sure you’re okay. And if you weren’t, he wanted to know about it. What’s so terrible about that?”

“I’m not his child, I’m his friend. That’s what’s so terrible about it!”

“Trust me on this, Roni: That man does not think you’re his child. Bet that.”

Roni rolled her eyes. It was always about sex to them. She was just tired of all of it.

But then her look changed as she looked at Bruce’s body again. “Why did I have to dangle him out of that window?” She had anguish in her voice. “Why did I do that, Dean? Why did I do that?”

“Because he did it to you.”

“But I’m not him!” she yelled out. Then she looked again at Bruce’s lifeless body. “Or maybe I am,” she said deflatingly. “Because I sure as hell did it. Wanted to drop

his ass too. But I knew I couldn't do that." She looked at Dean. "I didn't mean to drop him."

"I know," Dean said, rubbing her arm. "It's okay, Roni. You'll be okay."

"And here I am waiting for Brax to show up. Why would I do that? We haven't called it in. What if somebody saw what happened and we haven't even called it in?"

"Ain't nobody around this hellhole and you know it. Come on, Roni. Get a hold of yourself. Just settle down."

"Settle down? I'm a cop who just killed another cop and you want me to settle down?" Then she began hurrying toward their car. "Fuck this shit," she said. "I'm calling it in!"

"Roni, wait." Dean hurried up beside her. "You can't do that."

"What do you mean I can't?"

"How would it look? We're two black cops over here."

Roni stopped walking and looked at him.

"Both of us were holding onto him when he fell. I'm in this too. And you know what's gonna happen. The union never backs up black cops. They always throw us to the wolves and you know it. We'll be on our own because just as sure as I'm standing here they'll be glad to claim we killed BG and that suspect too. They'll claim we killed them all. They'll never want to blame BG, their superstar detectives, for this craziness. Never ever. BG are heroes in this community and we're still just two black cops. We'll be the scapegoats just as sure as I'm standing here."

Roni was distressed. She knew there was truth to what Dean was saying. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to wait,” Dean said, “and see if a man with way more clout in this town than we’ll ever have can even the playing field for us. That’s all we want is a fair shake. We’ve got to see what he comes up with because this is bad for us no matter how you look at it, Roni. This is bad.”

Roni stood there and let out a harsh exhale. It felt as if it was New York City all over again. Just a few months later.

She slumped against the car, and then crouched down against it.

Less than fifteen minutes later, as if it had flown there, a big, black Mercedes-Maybach S-580 came zooming down the isolated road and sped into the pothole-filled parking lot of a badly dilapidated, abandoned apartment building. Brax sat behind the steering wheel amazed. Why in the world, he wondered, would they pick a dangerous-ass place like this to meet up?

Because they’re fucking cops, he thought angrily, as he got out of his car.

But when he saw Roni slumped down against their unmarked police car, looking as devastated as he knew she would, his anger subsided.

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Brax's heart was hammering when he got out of his Mercedes and saw Roni crouched down against her unmarked vehicle. In her heels and pantsuit, and her soft afro, she looked more like a model than a cop. He wished to God she had become a model rather than a cop.

But her mother made it clear: Roni was going to do what Roni was going to do and he had better not stand in her way. And since Roni wanted to be a detective, and because he loved her, he helped to make her dream come true. It was times like these when he wished he hadn't helped at all. But he somehow thought that being a detective would be less dangerous for her than being a beat cop. He apparently thought wrong.

Brax had to walk by Bruce's body when he first got out of his car. Dean stood up and hurried over to him, but Roni remained where she was. She didn't even bother to look up at him. Which said it all to Brax.

"Thanks for coming, sir."

"Thanks for calling me." But Brax was looking at that dead body. "What's his name?"

"Detective Bruce Synder. He and his partner were known on the Force as BG."

Brax looked at Dean. An extremely handsome man in his mid-thirties, he knew he was taking a chance by agreeing to let him become Roni's new partner. But he told her precinct captain that he wanted a good, strong, honest cop for her, not some racist follower like her previous partner. Dean was good looking, but he was a good, honest detective who would protect Roni in every way he could. Despite his fears that Roni

could fall for the divorced dad, Brax had to put Roni's safety above his own insecurities. He gave the okay to the captain for Dean to team up with her. "He's the one that dangled Roni out of that ninth floor window?" he asked Dean.

"Yes sir." In many ways it was surreal to Dean to be holding a conversation with a billionaire like Braxton McCrae. He'd known about the McCrae family all his life, from the father and the brothers who still ran McCrae Aeronautics, a company that competed with the giant Boeing Corporation, to the eldest son Braxton who branched out on his own and became even richer than his family, and that whole clan was considered royalty in Victorville just as the Rockefellers used to be royalty in America. They were just that wealthy and just that well-known in all of upstate New York.

"But why did he do it?" Brax wanted to know. "What set him off?"

"He was hitting our suspect with a pipe and Roni kept telling him to stop. He not only didn't stop, but he killed the guy."

Brax frowned. "He killed the suspect?"

"He killed him, sir. Then he turned his rage toward Roni. That's what started it."

Brax shook his head. "You said he had a partner?"

"Yes sir. Gabe Richardson."

Where is he?"

Brax could see a sudden hesitancy in Dean. But Dean told him. "When Bruce pulled Roni up from dangling her out of that window, Roni retaliated and kicked Bruce in the groin."

Brax wasn't surprised in the least. He'd seen her temper unleashed.

"Gabe tried to intervene and Roni took that same pipe and knocked Gabe's legs from under him. He fell, but he still aimed his weapon at her and was about to fire on her, so I had no choice but to fire on him. I took him out."

Brax could hardly believe it. He thought NYPD cops were bad, but got damn! Victorville too?

Then he looked at Roni. This was not what she signed up for, he knew it. He left Dean with the body and walked over to her. "Hey."

It took a moment, but Roni finally looked up at him. In the light of the streetlamps, her face looked drawn and drained. These cops had broken her heart.

But he steeled himself. Her friends always said he treated her harshly, but that was because he had to. Because her mother told him right: the worst thing he could ever do was baby Roni. She'd rebel hard against him if he did. "I'm not asking if you're okay, because I know you aren't. But looking like this is not going to fly. Stand up. When you start looking dejected you become dejected. Get your ass up."

Roni continued to stay where she was. She didn't feel like being bothered with his controlling ass, not today. But she knew Dean was right. The Brass could really railroad them if they weren't careful. She stood up.

"Dean told me what happened."

"We need to call it in. This is obstruction of justice, which is a crime."

"I know what it is. And I did call it in."

Roni stared at him. "To whom?"

"Who do you think? The police."

Roni was baffled. "I don't understand."

"What did you think I was going to do?"

"I don't know, but I didn't think you would call it in."

"Well I did," Brax said. But before he could say anything else, two police cars drove up. Dean, surprised, held his hands out to the side in bafflement as he looked at Roni. "You called it in?" he yelled over to her.

"No," Roni said. "He did."

Dean was as dumbstruck as Roni was. What the what , he said out loud.

But it was too late now. The patrol officers got out and began to cordon off the area as if they were already given their assignments. Dean couldn't believe they didn't ask his permission, since he was a detective on scene, but he didn't interfere. This was how the rich folks did it, he assumed, and left it alone.

But then another patrol car drove up and instead of a uniformed officer getting out, Roni's precinct captain, a slender white man, got out. But when Police Commissioner Arnie Lambert got out, too, Roni and Dean were floored. It was as if her captain picked up Lambert and brought him to the scene.

Roni looked at Brax. "You called the Commissioner ?"

Brax looked at her. "Your ass in trouble. Who else was I going to call?"

But what amazed Roni even more was that Commissioner Lambert actually came out to a crime scene himself. She'd only been a cop on his force a few months, but she'd already seen for herself and heard about how arrogant and obnoxious he was, and how he belittled the rank and file all the time. For him to be at the scene was a real shocker to her. But Dean was right again: Brax had clout.

While the two heavyweight cops talked with Dean to hear everything that happened, Brax was more concerned about Roni's wellbeing. "None of this is your fault," he said. "You know that, right?"

But Roni didn't give her sassy retort the way she usually did.

"Roni?"

"I shouldn't have dangled him out of that window," she said. "That's on me. That's all on me." Then she looked at him, her face unable to shield her agony. "Isn't it?"

Brax's heart felt for her. But he wasn't going to lie to her. "You're a cop. You have to be able to control your anger, which sometimes your ass just can't do. So yes. That's on you."

Roni continued to stare at him. She could always count on him to tell it to her straight. That was why she loved him.

But when Dean came over, along with Lambert and her precinct captain, her heartbeat quickened. And she stood erect. Although she felt dejected and guilty, she wasn't letting them see it. "Hey Cap. Hello Commissioner Lambert," she said.

"Let me tell you something, young lady," Lambert said to her. "I was attending a very important function not far from here when Braxton called me. Had it been anybody else and I would have told him to go fuck himself. But his father and I go way back,

and I've known Braxton for years too. That's the only reason I'm here. I don't give a damn about you or anybody else at this scene. But he gives a damn about you. Why, I'll never know. But he does. Maybe because your old dead mammy who used to work for his father has something to do with it. I don't know and I don't care. But you may be hot stuff to Braxton, but your ass ain't shit to me."

Roni's temper flared, mainly because of how he referred to her mother, and she frowned. "Your ass ain't shit to me either," she shot back at him.

Dean wanted to jump out of his skin. As did her precinct captain.

But Lambert only stared at her as if he didn't know what to make of her. Then he smiled. "Braxton told me you were a handful. For you to come back at me like that?" He nodded his approval. "You're more than a handful, I'll tell you that."

Her precinct captain laughed nervously, and so did Dean, but Roni didn't crack a smile. She didn't like Lambert and she couldn't pretend she did.

"Since I have a function I need to get back to, I'm going to make this fast and simple and sweet. Here's what happen," he said to Roni and Dean. "Everything Dixon told us that happened will stand. Except for the window-dangling bull crap. That didn't happen."

Roni knew a lie was about to be concocted. "What do you mean it didn't happen?"

"It didn't happen," said Lambert. "BG were already here when you two got here. They were under attack by the suspect when you two got here. The suspect shot Gabe, and then he and Bruce fought. Bruce fell out of the window in the struggle. When you and Dixon made it up to the ninth floor, the suspect was hiding behind a door and came at you with a pipe. Dean tried to grab the pipe from him, and there was a struggle. You, Ross, tried to shoot him, but you was afraid you'd shoot your

partner so you let them fight it out. Dean had to continually hit the suspect in his head or wherever his injuries are, until he finally was knocked unconscious. That's how the suspect died. BG go out as heroes still. You, Detective Dixon, will be a hero for saving Ross's life. The department won't have any cops gone bad scandals on their hands. And you and Ross gets out of this unscathed."

But before Roni could object to the lies, Brax was objecting. "That's not going to work," he said. "It's too risky."

"What's risky about it?" the precinct captain asked. "It's a good story."

"Both Dean and Roni have guns, but they have to beat the suspect to death with a pipe?" He shook his head. "No. No way. That's not going to fly."

"Then what's your version?" Lambert asked Brax.

"Roni and Dean split up for lunch," said Brax. "Dean get the call from BG, tries to get in touch with Roni, but her phone goes to Voice Mail. And before you mention the phone company, don't worry about that. I own tech firms. I know how to make sure her phone records disappear. Never to be discovered again."

"Okay, that'll take care of that part of it. But go on," said Lambert.

"Dean couldn't reach Roni, so he came to the scene alone. And all that shit you said happened is what happened, except Roni wasn't here. It'll be more plausible that only one cop had to fight off that madman suspect, than two cops standing around with guns and then they had to bludgeon him to death. That two-cop scenario is not going to fly. But my version will."

It was all about protecting Roni Ross and everybody standing there knew it. Including Dean. But they also all agreed that it was definitely more plausible than the

commissioner's version.

Even the commissioner agreed. "That does make more sense," he said.

"A lot more," said the precinct captain.

"Okay then," said Lambert. "We'll go with your version, Braxton. Understand that, Dixon? You showed up alone. You had to handle the suspect alone."

"Yes sir, I understand it," said Dean.

"And you're okay with it?"

"Yes sir. It's more plausible. I'm definitely okay with it."

"But I'm not okay with it," said Roni with a fixed frown on her expressive face. "You're asking us to falsify records. To lie about what happened. To commit all kinds of crimes."

"Your ass already committed crimes," said Lambert. "You're the one that dropped Bruce Synder out of that window. Why would you even dangle him out of that window?"

"Because he dangled me out of that window after I objected to him beating our suspect to death for no good reason!"

Everybody looked at Brax. He had to control her or they all could face the music.

But Roni wasn't even finished. "You can sugarcoat this shit anyway you want to," she continued. "You can try to make BG out of heroes all you wish. But everybody on the Force and many of the citizens of this town know that BG were nothing but

murderous thugs with police badges who cleared their cases by concocting confessions out of innocent people or killing them and putting the blame on them for crimes they never committed.”

Lambert was outdone. He looked at Brax. “Are you going to handle her or will I have to remind her of her jeopardy.”

“What jeopardy?” asked Roni.

“If your ass don’t cooperate, I’ll fire you and slap a murder charge on you and Dixon so fast it’ll make your heads spin. That jeopardy!”

Roni and Dean both looked at Lambert. “What murder?” Roni asked him.

“The murder of Bruce Synder. You two dangled that man out of a window and then dropped him, Ross.”

“After he dangled me out of a window.”

“But he didn’t drop you, now did he?”

“That’s because Roni was still and didn’t panic,” said Dean. “But Bruce panicked.”

“Whatever the reason,” said Lambert,” that’s the jeopardy. You can both get fired and fight it in court, which I doubt you’ll win, but what do I know? Or you can cooperate. Your choice.”

Everybody looked at Roni. Even Brax. Which made that guilt hit Roni again like a ton of bricks. But to her what they were asking her to do was worse. “When this case goes before the review board, I will have to swear before God and testify that I wasn’t at the scene. I can’t do that. I’m not doing that.”

“Then cuff her, frisk her,” said Lambert to the precinct captain, “and haul her ass downtown. I don’t have time for this shit!”

Roni held out her hands to the captain, ready to be cuffed, but Brax grabbed her by those hands and began dragging her away. “My version stands,” he said to the commissioner and the captain as he dragged Roni to his car.

When they got to his Mercedes, he opened the passenger door and all but threw her inside.

But Roni was angry too. “You’re upset with me because I’m not willing to coverup multiple murders?”

“Do you want to spend twenty years in prison, Roni?” Brax angrily asked her. “Because that’s what you’re looking at. And because you’re a cop, you might just get thirty years. And not just you, but Dean Dixon too. Do you want that, Roni? That man has children, do you want that? The courts will be glad to hang both of your black asses out to dry. Do you want that?!”

Roni knew it was a Hobson’s choice. She knew there was only one true choice. “No,” she said defeatedly to Brax.

He felt awful that she had to compromise her principles. But this was the profession she decided to go into. This was the field she chose to play on.

He was angry too. Because her dream was her nightmare. Because the field she thought was lined with gold was nothing more than a cesspool of crime and lawlessness. And they loved to scream law and order. Law and order his ass! He didn’t know cutthroat tycoons as ruthless and as crooked as most cops. And the good ones, like Roni and Dean, didn’t stand a chance.

He slammed the door, walked around to his driver side, got in, and sped her away from there.

Since he was taking Roni home, Brax sped away in the opposite direction than his arrival. Because when he first arrived at the scene, he sped right by an old Chevy that was parked on the side of the road. He didn't notice it; Roni was his only focus. But it was there.

The owner of the car was further back in the woods. He put up his camera equipment and lugged it back to his car. Once he and his equipment was inside the car, he drove off too, making the phone call as he did.

"Got anything tangible?" asked the voice on the other end.

"Are you kidding me? I just got a goldmine of video like you wouldn't believe," he said. "A veritable goldmine. The end is near. And I'm not overselling it either. Our troubles are soon to be in our rearview, and theirs will just be beginning."

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:10 am

Brax kept looking over at Roni as they drove. She was still distraught.

He knew he was going to ask a rhetorical question, but he had to say something.

“You okay?”

“No I’m not okay.”

“It’s a bad situation, I’ll admit that too. But this is the only way out for you.”

Roni looked at him. “Did you pay Dean to keep you informed about me?”

“If you’re asking me would I have paid him to keep me in the loop? Yes, I would have. But no. I didn’t pay him. He wouldn’t have accepted it anyway.”

“But why did you do it? I told you I can take care of myself. You know I can.”

“Yes, you can. But that’s not the issue.”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“I keep feeling that had I had somebody to protect you in New York, what happened to you wouldn’t have happened to you.” He glanced at her as he drove. “I feel like it’s partly my fault.”

Roni figured he felt that way. “It’s not,” she said. Then she frowned. “All I want to do is be a good, professional cop. It shouldn’t be this hard,” she added heartfelt. “I’ve had more trouble with other cops than I’ve had with all the crooks I’ve encountered

combined! At least I know where the crooks are coming from.”

Brax felt her anguish. He held her hand and squeezed it. As soon as he got her to her condo, he was going to make her pain go away if it was the last thing he did. He only hoped she would let him.

The first sign of resistance was when she wouldn't let him go around front to let the valets park his car. “Big gossipers,” she said, and she didn't need any more controversy.

She, instead, told him to drive around back, to the private residence entrance, where they would park in the garage and take the elevator up themselves.

Brax wasn't used to that, and Roni seldom parked her own car in the garage too, but he understood why she didn't want her valets to think any less of her than she probably already thought of herself. He went around back.

They were silent on the ride up, and because others were getting on and off of the elevator as they made their way up, Brax refrained from holding her hand. But as soon as they got into the beautiful condo he had purchased for her, he locked that door, slammed her body against his, and looked deep into her eyes. “I'm sorry this happened to you again, but I'm not sorry how I'm going to make you feel. You need it and so do I. You understand that, don't you?”

Brax was looking from one of her gorgeous hazel eyes to the other one, hoping that she understood too.

When she nodded her head, Brax exhaled. Pulled her closer. And began kissing her in that way that made her collapse in his arms. It could not feel better to Roni.

They continued kissing all the way to the sofa. They weren't going to make it to the

bedroom. At least not in the first round. Brax pulled down her clothing and massaged her as he kissed her.

But that didn't last long at all. Neither one of them could hold out much longer. He pulled it out and enter her with a shove so forceful and exacting that it took her breath away.

She wrapped her arms around him as he laid on top of her and grind and gyrated and gave her that same wonderment he'd given to her before. It was unrelenting, but it was controlled.

Until they couldn't control themselves another second. And they were going at it fast and furious. Neither one of them were able to keep it in. They were moaning it out. And then they were cumming, and cumming hard. Even better than the last time they came.

They both were beginning to realize a remarkable truth: Whenever they came together, it was always going to be better.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:10 am

The next morning, Brax woke up to find Roni already up and showered and putting on a pair of what he could only describe as lime-green panties. Lying on his back looking at her, he was smiling. Spending the night with her always put a smile on his face. And waking up to her wonderfully sculptured body always got him in that mood again.

But those panties caught his attention. They were the prettiest color he thought he'd ever seen. "Where did you get those from?"

Roni didn't realize he had awakened as she finished putting on those panties and began walking over to the nightstand on his side of the bed. "Where did I get what from?" She stooped down at the nightstand drawer.

Brax leaned over, reached inside her panties, and gave the seam a flick. "These," he said.

"From some store, I don't know where. Move."

He was leaned over the bed and thereby blocking her ability to open the nightstand drawer. "Why are you on my side?" he asked as he moved his body out of her way.

"Because it's my side."

Brax was surprised. "You sleep on this side of the bed?"

Roni looked at him. "Uh-hun," she said as she searched for the matching bra.

“Why did you put me on your side?”

“You put your own ass on my side,” Roni said and he laughed as she pulled a matching bra out of the nightstand drawer.

Then he looked at that bra. “Who keeps their underwear in a nightstand?”

“I do.”

“Might I ask why?”

“My lingerie drawer is full.” She sat on the side of the bed and began to put on her bra.

Brax removed the covers off his body, revealing his nakedness, and then pulled her into his arms and then half across his chest. She laughed as she was turned sideways cuddled in his arms. Then she looked into his piercing green eyes and she could see how serious he was.

“Why do you always smell so good?” he asked her.

She continued to smile. “I bathe?”

“You do more than that,” he said as looked at her sultry lips, leaned in, and kissed her. When he realized that wasn’t going to be enough, he snatched that bra from her hand and tossed it onto the nightstand. Then he began kissing her harder. So hard that she could hardly breathe. So hard that she didn’t want to breathe. She just wanted to feel that great feeling he gave to her from just kissing her alone. And when he moved down, to her breasts, and began kissing her and sucking her, her eyes closed with that fluttering feeling of floating; of being one with him once again.

Then he pulled her all the way on top of him, with her naked chest against his naked chest, and he removed her panties all the way off and tossed them on the nightstand too. He kissed her on her lips for a long, passionate time.

But when he laid her on her back, and went between her legs, her entire body began twisting and squirming from the intensity it felt. She'd never felt it the way Brax made her feel it, and she was on the verge of cumming almost immediately.

And then he moved back up, wrapped her into his arms, and entered her. And they were in a deep dive of passion once again.

They made love with a crescendo effect that neither one of them were able to achieve with anybody else. From a slowness to a moderateness to fast and faster, they were in a groove that kept them on the verge. And then they'd go slow again. Prolonging it. Stretching it out. Forgetting jobs and responsibilities and all of that craziness last night. When they were in that zone, nothing else mattered.

Brax held her tight as they moaned and grunted their way through. The bed was shaking almost to the point of collapse whenever they went hard, and then it calmed back down, too, when they slowed. It was a rhythm that was masterful. It was a joining that was as if they were built for each other.

But they knew they couldn't last much longer.

Roni came first, but Brax wasn't that far behind her. And the grunts from both of them highlighted just how wonderful they made each other feel. And how badly they needed that feeling.

When they finally stopped pulsating and were able to come back down to earth, Brax remained inside of Roni and they continued to embrace each other. They still didn't want it to end.

But the reality of life, including what happened last night at that apartment building, set back in. And Roni moved out of his grasp, he pulled out of her, and she moved off of him. She sat on the edge of the bed.

“You know what’s weird to me?”

Brax looked at her. “What?”

“Is how you never ask me if I’m on birth control.” She looked over at him. “Why is that?”

Brax was well aware that he never brought up the subject. The main reason was that a part of him wanted her, above any other woman, to have his baby, and he knew that. He was forty-three years old. Like his brothers, he wasn’t getting any younger and none of them had given their parents grandkids yet. Not one of them. They were all still out there playing the field until they dropped. And their parents were pissed about it. But if anybody was going to carry Brax’s baby, it was going to be Veronica. There was no doubt in his mind about that. Even though he knew he wasn’t ready to be anybody’s daddy.

And practical Roni knew it too. That was the other reason why he never asked her about birth control. “I know your ass,” he said. “There’s no way you’re going to let me get you pregnant. Not with so many unanswered questions about our relationship.”

He was right. Roni was on birth control.

She stared at him with a stare that seemed sad and poignant at the same time. “What’s the matter?” he asked her.

Everything was the matter to Roni. Her job was in shambles again. Yes, they kept her

out of the mess, but that didn't erase the mess and her part in it. And every single time she made love to Brax, she wanted him more. But he wasn't ready for her. And she knew, deep down, she wasn't ready for him. Both of their asses were stubborn, already set in their ways, and perhaps neither one of them were marriage material. That was the sadness to Roni. Because Brax was too larger than life in her eyes, and too controlling, and she was never going to get herself lost in somebody else's shadow. Not ever. That was the saddest part for her.

She grabbed her bra and panties off the nightstand and was about to stand up.

But Brax stopped her. "After last night at that apartment, why don't you take the day off?"

"Why should I? I wasn't even there, according to you guys."

Brax turned her face toward his face. "Still pissed with me?"

Her look was sincere. "With you? No. But I wish I could just do my job without all the bullshit."

"I wish that, too, sweetie, but bullshit comes with the territory in your line of work. I told you that."

"Yeah, you told me. Ma told me. Everybody tells me. I just never thought . . ." Then her look turned into a fuck it look and she stood up and began heading to the bathroom. "Get up," she said. "My car is still at the precinct. You've got to take me to work."

"What if I wanted to sleep in, Miss Bossy Lady?"

"Tough," she said as she entered the bathroom.

She smiled as she could hear Brax getting out of bed. But she was so full of him and drippy that she knew she had to take another shower. She turned on the shower tap as he came into the bathroom. He went over to her, kissed her neck, and then stood at the toilet and began peeing.

“You heard from Dean?” he asked her as he peed.

“I called him this morning to check on him. He says he’s on paid leave pending the outcome of the investigation, which he says they assured him is just a formality. And it is standard procedure whenever there’s an officer-involved incident resulting in a death.”

“How’s he taking the scapegoat role?”

Roni grabbed her shower cap from the towel rack and began putting it on. “He’s okay with it. I’m not, but he is. He says he’s glad to get a few days off.”

Brax, still peeing, looked over at her. “It’ll be okay, Roni. Alright?”

“Think so?”

“I know so. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t like coverups, Brax. They always blow up in your face.”

“This one won’t. You have the top of the top brass on your side. Stop worrying about that.”

Roni exhaled. “But I am careful when I’m talking on the phone to Dean or with anybody else for that matter.”

“Why would you be careful with Dean?”

“Because his phone might be bugged.”

Brax found that an odd thing to say. “Bugged? Why on earth would anybody bug his phone when we all agreed to the facts?”

“I just don’t put anything past folks, that’s all.”

“But don’t be irrational about it either, Veronica.”

“Uh-hun,” she said as if she wasn’t at all convinced. She got into the shower. “And damn,” she said, looking back at him. “You’re still peeing? How much water you got in that big body of yours?”

Brax laughed. “More than what’s in that little body of yours, that’s how much,” he said, as his peeing finally began to slow. And then it stopped. Once he shook his penis for the final trickle, he then washed his hands and went over to the shower. He got in with Roni.

He entered her again. There was no way either one of them could resist. But mostly they bathe.

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Because Roni was now running late for work, they called downstairs for the valet to bring Brax's car around. They knew it would promote more gossip about them as a couple, but it couldn't be helped. Neither one of them felt like going through that obstacle course to get to the garage and retrieve the car themselves. They made their way out of the lobby exit.

As a testament to the kind of pull Mr. McCrae had around town, the valet had Brax's big black Mercedes waiting for them when they came downstairs. Roni always had to wait for her car. But not Brax.

But that didn't lessen the stares, however, and they knew the gossip would come even before they drove away. But they didn't care anymore. Brax put Roni on the passenger seat, got in behind the wheel, and took off. And Brax took her hand and held it.

She noticed how Brax kept glancing over at her. Which caused her to finally look at him. "What?" she asked him.

"Just admiring your style," he said as he glanced down at her clothing.

Roni glanced down too. She was wearing only a pair of light-green trousers with a tucked-in white blouse, a dark-green blazer, and a green-and-white scarf: nothing spectacular to Roni. "Looks like a normal outfit to me," she said.

But it was the pairing of the colors and the way she wore it was what caught Brax's attention. "That's the beauty of it. It's understated chic."

Roni laughed. "If you say so."

Brax smiled, but was still taking peeps at her. She looked at him again. "What's with you this morning?"

"Any plans for tonight?"

Roni had to think about it. "Some friends want to take me clubbing tonight."

"Why do they want to do that?"

"The fact that the dynamic duo are dead is big news in Victorville. They saw the story on the news last night and that Dean was involved. They know he's my partner. They want to cheer me up, as they call it."

Brax stared at her. "It's still bothering you, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, Brax."

"It never would have happened if he didn't dangle you out of that window first."

Roni nodded. "I know that. And that helps. But it still hurts."

Brax understood that. She wouldn't be Roni if it didn't hurt. "Is Jayla involved?"

Roni was confused. "Involved in what?"

"The cheering you up party tonight."

She looked at him. "What if she is?"

“She doesn’t like me.”

“She likes you. She just thinks you’re a tad controlling when it comes to me.”

“Yeah right. Nobody controls you.”

“Except you, if you ask any of my friends. It’s nonsense to me, too, but not to them.”

“Taraji’s sweet. She doesn’t think that way.”

Roni smiled. “Oh yes she does.”

Brax didn’t expect that answer. “Why would she of all people think I control you?”

“That surgeon she set me up with for a blind date told her that he cancelled our blind date because the chairman of the hospital’s board of governors called him and told him to back off of me. That I was your girl. That’s why he canceled our date.” Roni said this and looked at Brax, daring him to deny it.

He said nothing. Then he glanced at her. “You knew that all this time?”

“Yup.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Nothing to say. It was done.” Then she looked at him. “Why did you intervene like that?”

“I wanted to find out what kind of man he was.”

“What kind was he? Like you?”

“In the woman department, yes.”

Roni stared at Brax. “You do realize one day I may fall in love and get married. Right?”

Brax couldn’t bring himself to look at her. “Of course I realize that.”

Roni waited for him to say more, but he didn’t. So she didn’t either. That was the story of their situationship. Even with benefits.

“So is it Jayla and Taraji tonight?”

Roni shook her head. “No. Another group of friends.”

“Which friends? You have so many.”

“You have tons of friends too.”

“Which friends, Veronica?”

“Just friends.”

“Male or female or both?”

Roni looked at him. She didn’t dignify that question with a response.

“Did you hear me?”

“What are we doing?”

“Excuse me?”

“What about Lorraine?” Roni said.

Brax glanced away from her, a telltale sign, and then he looked at her again. “What about her?”

“She called while you were asleep. When you didn’t answer, she left you a text. She said she’s looking forward to being with you tonight. What about her?”

Brax frowned. “How did you get into my phone to read my text messages?”

“The same way you get into mine. I used your password.”

“I didn’t give you my password.”

“And I didn’t give you mine, but that never stopped you.”

“But how did you figure out what password I had?”

Roni looked at him. “The same way you figured out mine. My password is your birthday, and your password is my birthday. It doesn’t take a genius, Braxton.”

Brax smiled, and then laughed. “I guess you’re right.” But the reality of their passwords was just one more link in that seemingly unbreakable chain that kept them together.

Then his phone began ringing. When he saw it was Margo, he pressed the speaker. “Yes, Margo, I know I’m running late. I’ll be there soon.”

“A package just arrived for you, sir. It was labeled urgent and open upon receipt.”

“Which means you opened it.”

“That’s the protocol, yes sir.”

“And what was so urgent about it?”

“It’s a video, sir.”

That surprised Brax. “A video? Did you view it?”

“No sir. But I read the note that accompanied it.”

“And? What was the note about?”

“Veronica Ross, sir.”

Brax and Roni looked at each other. “What about Miss Ross?” Brax asked.

“I am unable to discuss this matter over the phone, sir,” said Margo, which stunned them both.

But Brax knew protocol also dictated that highly sensitive matters were never to be discussed over the phone. And highly sensitive was stressed. “I’m on my way,” Brax said, and ended the call. He looked at Roni again. “Anything I need to know?”

“No. Nothing. You know everything about me. I don’t know what she could be talking about.”

“Call the precinct. Tell them you’ll be running late this morning. Better yet, tell them you won’t be coming in today.”

Roni pulled out her phone and did just that. And then she and Brax drove all the way to his corporate headquarters in worried silence.

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Harry opened the door for Roni, Brax walked around the limo and placed his arm on her lower back, and the couple entered the massive McCrae Dynamics corporate headquarters building in downtown Victorville and made their way through the expansive lobby. Hundreds of people were coming and going, but every lobby employee, from doormen to security to receptionists, didn't hesitate to say hello.

“Good morning, Mr. McCrae.”

“Good morning, Miss Ross.”

Over and over and over again. Which astounded Roni. When they got on his private elevator that would take them to the top floor, she asked about it. “How would all of them know my name? I've only been here a few times in my entire life.”

Brax placed his arm around her waist. “You're hard to forget.”

Roni smiled. “Sure buddy.”

“No, I'm serious,” he said, but he knew Roni didn't believe him.

But as they climbed up to the twenty-fifth floor, Margo and the twenty-five other assistants to the Chairman were sitting behind the desks positioned in the suite outside of his office. They made up his personal staff. When Margo's phone rang, she assumed it was the receptionist downstairs. “Hey girl.”

“He's in the building.”

“Okay thanks for the heads up.”

“He’s got her with him,” the receptionist added.

Everybody at McCrae Dynamics knew who her was. But Margo was still surprised that she would be with him first thing in the morning again. “Thanks, Carol,” she said, and ended the call.

When the elevator dinged, Margo quickly stood up, grabbing the small vanilla envelope, and made her way around her desk. She watched as Brax and Roni got off the elevator and headed for his office. She was no fan of Veronica Ross. To Margo, she was just too young and too stubborn and from the wrong side of the tracks to be suitable for a man of Braxton McCrae’s stature. But there was no denying the girl had style, she thought, as she watched Roni rock those contrast green colors that suited her well.

“Hello, Margo.”

“Good morning, sir. Miss Ross.”

“Hi Margo.”

“Is that it?” Brax was looking at the package in Margo’s hands.

“Yes sir.”

“Come on,” he said, and headed for his office. Roni and Margo followed behind him. Roni closed the door behind them.

As Roni made her way around the desk and stood beside Brax, Margo was handing him the package. It was much smaller than they expected, but it was supposedly a

video.

“How did it get here?” Brax asked.

“A courier left it at the package desk downstairs.”

“Did you inquire to see if anybody remembered what courier or from what company he or she worked?”

“I checked,” said Margo, “but the package desk says it was slotted in.”

“What’s that?” asked Roni.

“That’s when a package is placed in the outside slot without the courier coming inside. We get hundreds of packages that way on a daily basis.”

“Have you seen the video?” Brax asked her again as he pulled out a flash drive and a letter.

“No sir. After I read that letter, I didn’t go any further.”

Brax was seated behind his desk and Roni was sitting on the arm of his chair as he leaned back, put on his reading glasses, and opened the letter. It had been typed on a computer:

An embarrassment to Veronica Ross and yourself at the least ,” the letter read, or a crime punishable by death at the worst for your ladylove Veronica Ross. We want two-hundred-and-eighty-seven million dollars or we take it straight to the public. No law enforcement, other than the one who committed the murder, is to be contacted or we go straight to the public. We will be in touch .

“They must be out of their minds,” said Roni. “ Two-hundred-and-eighty-seven million dollars ? They can’t be serious!”

But Brax was taking them seriously. “This was the only letter?” he asked Margo.

“Yes, sir. That and the thumb drive.”

“Okay, thank you, Margo. That’ll be all. And remember,” he added and Margo turned around to him. “This is not fodder for gossip in any way, shape, or form. If you mention anything about this package to anybody other than Roni and myself, you will be terminated. And receive a visit from my brother.”

Margo glanced at Roni. She was the one who caused this trouble to come upon him, not her. Yet she would be fired? Scottie would pay her a visit? But she understood. Veronica gave him bed action. All she gave him was work action. “I understand sir,” said Margo, and then she left, closing the door behind her.

“They can’t be serious,” Roni said again, but Brax wasn’t in the talking mood. He put the flash drive in his desk scan, checked it for any viruses, and then, once cleared, placed it in his desk computer and played the video.

Both of their hearts sank when they saw that it was the video of Roni angrily hanging Bruce Synder upside down out of the ninth floor window, with Bruce jangling in uncontrollable panic and Dean Dixon hurrying to the window to help Roni control him. Roni could hardly watch it as she and Dean lost control and Bruce slipped away. Brax could hardly watch it either. Not because of that bastard dropping. But because he was terrified for what this would mean for Roni.

“I see they failed to record when Bruce had me dangling out of that same window,” Roni said. “They skipped over that part.”

But then her defiance turned into fear. “This is bad, isn’t it, Brax?”

Brax exhaled. “It is, yes.”

“Should we call the Commish? He’s in this cover up too.”

“Stop calling it that,” Brax admonished her. “And no, we aren’t calling the commissioner. Not yet.”

Roni looked at him. “I know you aren’t thinking about calling in Scottie on this.”

Brax didn’t respond.

“Brax we can’t!”

“I know we can’t. But this tape exists. If this video comes to light, you could go to prison for the rest of your life.” He looked at her. “That’s not happening. That will never happen as long as there is breath in my body. And whatever it takes to ensure that never happens, then that’s what we’ll doing. Understand me?”

Roni just sat there fighting tears. All she wanted was to be a great detective. All she got was bullshit after bullshit. And she was tired of it. She stood up and went to the window behind his chair.

Brax exhaled. He felt for Roni. He knew how long she wanted to be a cop, and as soon as her dream came true, assholes came into her life and were doing everything in their power to snatch it all away. But who could be doing this?

“What if it’s somebody in on it?” Roni asked without turning around.

“You mean like Commissioner Lambert?”

“Or my precinct Captain, yes.”

But Brax was shaking his head. “You’re too paranoid, Roni. Those men know better than that. No.” Then he paused. “But I can get Scottie to find out.”

“I don’t want him to know about this,” Roni said. “I don’t want to owe him.”

“He’s my brother. He does a favor for family, you don’t owe him anything. He doesn’t operate like that.”

“I’m not family,” Roni said.

“You’re my family,” Brax said, “and I don’t wanna hear about your mother and my mother. That’s not what I mean.”

Roni leaned her head back. She knew his brother was the last result.

Then it occurred to her. She turned around. “The angle,” she said, and hurried back to his chair.

Brax looked at her. “What angle?”

She grabbed his mouse and rewound the video again. “Whoever took that video took it from the right angle.”

“Meaning?”

“You came in from the right angle. Your Maybach might have passed right by whomever it was, if they were still there.” She looked at Roni. “Please tell me that two-hundred-thousand dollar car you drive is equipped with dashcam.”

“It’s built-in, but yes.” Then he realized where she was going with it. “And I can pull it up on the computer,” he added as he clicked on the Mercedes icon and pulled up the dashcam video for around the time he arrived at that apartment building last night.

They rewound back several minutes leading up to his arrival on the street, but then they both saw a car parked on the side of the road. But Roni saw more than that. “Back it up,” she said. He did. “Now stop right . . . right there!” He did.

“You see that figure in those woods,” she asked, straining her eyes for a closer look.

Brax looked closer, too, and that was when he saw what she was seeing. “I’ll be damn,” he said. “It is somebody there!”

“Zoom in on the car’s license plate,” Roni said.

Brax rewound to when the back of his Mercedes was showing as it drove down the highway, and then he zoomed in and froze the shot. It was a New York plate, which meant the owner of the vehicle could be local, and there was a plate on the front and back of the vehicle. Brax zoomed into the back plate.

Then he looked at Roni when the numbers were clear as day. “We got the bastard!” he said.

Roni was relieved too. “I’ll call it into the precinct so they can run the number.”

But Brax nixed that idea. “Donte will run that tag,” he said as he picked up his desk phone. “We should know in ten minutes or less.”

But after Brax made the phone call to his head of security, Roni began pacing around his office. He could see she was worried sick. “We’ll figure it out, babe.”

“But who would follow me around and be prepared to take a video of my activities? Who does that?”

“And here you were thinking somebody was targeting me,” said Brax.

“That’s because that daughter was lying about her father.”

“Lying or assuming facts not in evidence?”

Roni looked at him. “You sound like Jayla. What do you mean?”

“He knew he was dying. Maybe he was being forgetful around her and she thought it was dementia. Maybe it was just depression. Maybe it was just him trying to figure out how he was going to get out of the situation he found himself in.”

Roni exhaled. “Maybe so,” she said, although her instincts were still telling her maybe not.

Then Donte phoned with the information they were waiting on. “Who’s the car registered to?” he asked his security chief.

“It’s an address from the City.” Victorville residents always referred to New York City as “the City.”

But that information surprised Roni. She and Brax assumed it would be a local address. “Out of New York?” she asked, to be clear.

“New York City, yes ma’am,” said Donte.

“What name?” Brax asked. He and Roni were halfway expecting one of her colleagues from the NYPD. That would make sense to them.

“The car is registered to a Gus Rogers,” Donte said.

Roni was floored. “Gus?”

Brax looked at Roni. “That’s all you got, Donte?”

“That’s all so far,” Donte said. “But I’ll keep searching. I’ll text you his address.”

“Okay, thanks,” Brax said and ended the call. He was still looking at Roni. “You know him?”

“Yes, I know him. I’ve known him for years. He was the reporter I gave that tape to when I met up with Jerard in that alley. He’s a friend of mine.”

Brax stood up. “Not anymore he isn’t.” He phoned his pilot. “Prepare the plane for takeoff,” he said. “I need to take a quick trip to the City.”

“Yes, sir,” his pilot said, Brax ended the call, and then he grabbed the flash drive and the letter.

“Let’s go,” he said to Roni. “The best way to capture these assholes is to capture them in their tracks.”

“But what if he’s still in town?”

“Then we’ll come back and look for him. But somehow I doubt that he is.”

“Why you say that?”

“He already got the money shot. Why would he stick around to get the payday when he can easily misdirect us to another town between here and the City, six hours of

towns?”

“Or use the internet to get their money,” Roni said.

Brax nodded. “Right. He’s back home. Worms always go home.”

He placed his hand around Roni’s waist, and they hurried out of his office.

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They weren't ten minutes on that plane when Brax started looking at her in that way Roni knew so well. They were both worried about the implications of that video getting out, but she was especially stressed when she realized her friend was most likely the one who filmed her lowest moment as a cop, and then he made that ludicrous ransom demand. She knew he was smart enough to pull it off. She just never dreamed he would even attempt to betray her that way. But the truth of it was setting in and it only made her more stressed. And Brax was getting horny again. And he wanted to relieve her stress again. And she needed it relieved.

By the time they were twenty minutes into their flight, Brax had taken Roni by the hand, led her into his bedroom onboard, locked the door, and undressed her and himself in seconds flat.

He laid her out on his bed, got on top of her, and kissed her, sucked her, massaged her as if there was no tomorrow. And then, with an easy glide-in, he ultimately entered her.

As soon as he entered her, and he felt her tightness and she felt his hugeness, it was such an ah-ha moment for them that they both let out their own ahs . And began what was an half hour of constantly on-the-verge-of-cumming lovemaking.

Brax eventually got on his back and, with her still on top and with him still deep inside of her, he continued to make love to her. He wrapped her into his big arms, she wrapped herself around him, and they continued to make love. But as soon as he began pouring into her with a burst that turned into unbridled sensations that turned into heaving pulsations and vein-popping throbbing that could not have felt better or been more intense, they came together. It was such an electrifying cum that it took

several more minutes before all of those feelings finally eased away.

But when it was all gone, and they were still lying there in each other's arms, reality set in again. Somebody had that video. That somebody appeared to be Roni's friend. And a ransom of over a quarter of a billion dollars was requested.

Brax looked at Roni, rubbed her hair out of her face, as anger washed over him. He hated that she had to go through this shit. He hated the fact that they were coming for her when she thought they were coming for him. But it was all the same to Brax. You get one, you get the other one. They come for Roni, they come for him. Which meant, in Brax's eyes, they were coming for them .

And he wasn't having it.

He kissed her and held her even tighter. Until they both knew they had to get up, take a shower, and get ready to face the music.

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Two hours later, when they landed in New York and went straight to Gus's brownstone in Brooklyn, they discovered that he was not at home. And his wife wasn't there either. They went to the news station where he worked. He was "working" in the field. And even the editor used air quotes when she told them what he was supposedly doing, as if what working meant to a crack journalist like Gus wasn't ordinary work. It included sitting around thinking about angles to stories, calling his sources, hiding their methods. But he was good, their best reporter, so they tolerated it.

But as they left the station and got back into their SUV, Roni said she knew where he spent a lot of his time. "It's not far from here," she said as Brax buckled her onto the front passenger seat. "Just go to that second corner and hook a left."

Brax looked at her after he buckled her in. Whenever they were that close, he had a tendency, she noticed, to look from her left eye to her right eye as if he was looking for something deep inside of her. As if he was just waiting for her to reveal a side of herself that would make her just like all the other women he'd known before. She never understood why he would still be suspicious of her.

But he was. And he proved it, in her mind, when he got in behind the wheel and looked at her again. "How would you know where this guy hangs out?"

"I told you we were friends."

"But I thought you just meant a working relationship. You talk as if you guys were close."

“We were. We are. At least I thought so.”

“Just get to the point. Have you ever slept with this guy before?”

“Oh my goodness. No you are not doing this. Stop, Brax. Just stop.”

“What do you mean stop?”

“Stop acting as if your ass didn’t get out of a woman’s bed to come see about me last night. Stop acting as if you can do anything you’re big enough to do, but I’m not supposed to do shit. Stop acting as if we have a different relationship than we both know we have. Just stop. And I mean it.”

But Brax was as stubborn as she was. “Did you sleep with him?”

“None of your damn business! Now are we going to find out why he followed me to that apartment building, and why he was taking a video of our activities there? Or did we come all this way just to argue?”

Brax pressed the Start button. “Next time we’re about to be in the same room with one of your former lovers, you’d better let me know that he’s a former lover. Or is he former ?”

“Oh for crying out loud, Brax!” Roni couldn’t believe that was what he was worried about. “Can we just go?”

Brax knew he was being irrational too, given his history and current behaviors, but it still did something to him every time he thought of another man touching Roni. He couldn’t help it: It did something to him. But he drove off anyway. He had no exclusive digs on her and probably never would. He picked up speed.

When they arrived at a storefront bar, Brax was surprised as they got out and walked across the sidewalk. “Who hangs in bars this time of day? It’s not even noon yet. Who would be at a bar?”

“Lonely people. Alcoholics. Gus comes here to call his contacts or talk with some of his sources. He sometimes submit articles to The New Yorker and Vanity Fair, and he says he gets ideas for those articles by sitting in this bar.”

Brax shook his head. “He sounds like a piece of work.”

“He’s a good guy,” said Roni. “And an award winning investigative journalist.” But then she scrunched up her face. “At least I thought he was a good guy.”

Brax could see on her face the cognitive dissonance she was going through after discovering that her friend and probably lover wasn’t who she thought he was. He placed his hand around her waist. “Sorry about earlier,” he said. “I was out of line.”

Roni stopped walking and looked at him. He told her to let him know, and she was going to let him know. “I met Gus when I was a rookie. We dated for a while and yes, slept together a few times. But I moved on and he got married and that was that.”

Brax appreciated her honesty. “You’re right. It wasn’t my business. But thanks for telling me anyway.”

She gave him a smile that didn’t shield her anxiety, he squeezed her waist, and then they entered the bar.

It had far more people inside than even Roni expected, but it didn’t take long for them to spot Gus. He was seated on the opposite side of the bar, near the restrooms, and he was smoking a cigarette and taking another swig of his drink. “So that’s how great journalists work, eh?” asked Brax. “I’d go bankrupt working like this.”

But Roni's anger was kindled toward her friend and she began heading in his direction with a determination that made clear she was getting answers today. Brax hurried behind her.

They were still on the opposite side of the room when Gus looked up and saw Roni. And as soon as their eyes met, she could tell he was guilty as sin. And he did what any rat would do: he took off running.

Roni began giving chase and Brax was running behind Roni.

Gus ran to the back of the bar, through the kitchen, and then out of the backdoor. Roni was right on his tail.

But when he jumped down the steps and began running through the backyards of brownstones, Roni was losing ground. She ran track and field in high school, but she was never a star. She rarely won a race. But Gus was smoking her. He was easily outrunning her. And they both, much younger, were easily outrunning Brax.

With dogs barking and children running out of the way of the Speedy Gonzales' coming their way, Gus was on pace to get lost within seconds. Roni and Brax didn't seem to stand a chance.

But when Gus ran into a dead end in the form of a ten-foot brick wall, they saw their opportunity and Roni seized upon it. She was able to get a second wind.

That was why, when Gus began scaling that wall, Roni began scaling it too. But she kept slipping down. It was Brax who had to scale the wall, too, but not to catch Gus. He was there to make sure Roni didn't fall. He was there to keep hoisting her up by her heels when she slipped, to keep her on the wall.

And it worked. Because as soon as Gus had scaled his way to the top and was trying

to climb over, Roni grabbed him by the shoe just hard enough that he fell off the wall, and Roni and Brax fell with him. They all hit the ground together.

Gus tried to get up and run again, but Brax pulled him back down and Roni the cop pulled her weapon, straddled him, and put that gun in his face. “Try it,” she decried more out of hurt than anger. “I dare you to try it!”

Gus, knowing Roni was not the one to trifle with, immediately put his hands in the air.

“I’m dead as a journalist if this ever gets out,” was the first thing that came out of his mouth.

Roni was floored. “That’s what your ass worried about? Your career ? Are you serious?”

But Brax, who was now crouched down beside them, wanted answers. And he began with the proposition that somehow Gus was involved with his accident too. “How did you get that old guy to crash, head-on, into my limousine?” he asked him.

“I had nothing to do with that. She knew the daughter, and the daughter was talking about how her father was suicidal because of his cancer diagnosis. He only had weeks to live. So she agreed to pay the daughter millions and her father agreed to do it. She made like you were this horrible person for what you did to her family, and the old guy fell for it. I had nothing to do with that. My job was to tail Roni and get whatever incriminating evidence I could get on her. I took that video. That’s all I did.”

“What about the ransom note?” Roni asked. “You knew about that?”

“Yeah I knew about it. It was the only way I was gonna get paid. Because of my addictions, and I’m not going into what they are, but because of my addictions I owe

some very nasty loan sharks a lot of money. I need that cash.”

“How much did she agree to pay you?”

“Five million if I came up with something big. And I did.”

Roni frowned. “You actually believed that somebody was going to give you that much money? Come on now, Gus!”

“I believed it because it wasn’t about the money for her. That’s why she tried to kill your boyfriend in that limo crash. That was her main plan. When that didn’t work, she decided she would go after the two things he loved most, at least according to her: and that was you and his money. She found me after you gave me that recording of your partner killing that Bridges kid. She knew you probably trusted me if you gave me that video. She also knew I owed big league money all around town. So we made a deal. But I had nothing on you until I followed you and your partner to that apartment building. When I saw what I saw at that apartment building, and filmed it, she knew then she could get you and his money, and thereby hurt him, with one fell swoop. It was about revenge for her.”

Now the question they both wanted to ask. Brax asked it. “Who is this person? Who is she?”

“Her name is Jessica Hampton. I never heard of her before she approached me.”

Brax looked at Roni, but Roni was shaking her head. “I never heard of her.” Then she remembered. “Wait a minute.”

Brax looked at her. “What?”

“The name Jessica came up on your phone.”

“She said she was your plaything before,” Gus said to Brax.

Brax didn’t remember that name at all. But that wasn’t unusual for him. He was in contact with so many females.

He stood up, pulled out his phone, and looked up names. There were strolls and strolls of names in his contacts. “There it is,” he said, surprised. “Jessica Hampton. I met her the night I was in town to take you to dinner.”

“And I was a no-show,” said Roni.

“Right.” Then Brax looked at Roni. “And I have her address.”

Roni was surprised. “Here in town?”

Brax nodded. “She put it in my phone.”

Roni stood up, pulled Gus up with her, and then frisked him. “Let’s go,” she said, grabbing him by his shirt. “You’re going with us. And you better pray your story checks out.”

Roni kept her gun to her side as she pulled Gus along, Brax followed behind them, and they made their way back to the SUV.

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Roni picked the lock at Jessica's Manhattan apartment and then Brax looked at Gus. "Say one word," he said, "and it will be your final words."

Gus would have dismissed this guy as just some lackey for Roni, but looking in Brax's eyes told a different story. He was nobody's lackey. He took his finger and made the lip zip sign. Brax then looked at Roni. Roni nodded. And they slowly, with Roni's weapon drawn, entered the apartment.

But nobody was home. Brax held onto Gus as Roni made a sweep of the one-bedroom apartment. When she got into that bedroom, however, she saw many McCrae promotional brochures all over the bed and dresser, along with old photos of a woman and a man, presumably her father, and other family members. She grabbed up a few of those brochures and photos and made her way back up front.

"What's that?"

Roni handed the brochures and photos to Brax. Brax frowned when he looked at the first brochure. "This thing has to be twenty years old. Geez. Why would she be holding onto this?"

But before anybody could answer, the sound of somebody unlocking the apartment could be heard. Brax put the brochures and photos away, Roni aimed her gun, and Jessica Hampton walked into their ambush.

At first she seemed shocked, as if there was no way they could have found out. Until she saw Gus with them. "Don't blame me," he said. "They tracked me down too."

As soon as Gus made it real for her, Jessica dropped her bag of groceries and tried to run back out of the door, but Brax ran her down, grabbed her hair, and dragged her right back inside. “Not so fast, sister,” he said as he threw Jessica inside and slammed the door shut. Roni then tossed her onto the sofa next to Gus.

“You told them?” Jessica said to him.

“I didn’t tell them anything. They found out on their own.”

“Through your sloppiness I’m sure,” Jessica said. But then she turned her attention to Brax. “Hello Braxton.”

“We meet again,” he said. “Funny how I didn’t remember your ass.”

“But I remembered yours. After what you did to my father, I remember yours.”

Brax frowned. “Your father? Who’s your father?”

But his lack of knowledge only angered Jessica. “You know who he is, you bastard!”

“How should I . . .” Then Brax realized her last name. “Cal? Cal Hampton is your father?”

Roni was baffled. “Who’s Cal Hampton?”

“The man he robbed!” Jessica cried out. “He became a billionaire and my daddy died virtually penniless.”

Brax frowned. “What did I have to do with how he died?”

“He was your partner and you pulled the rug right from beneath him. You destroyed

him!”

“He was never my partner, let’s get that straight right now.”

“That’s a lie!”

“It’s not a lie! He worked for me and showed potential, yes he did. But when he started stealing from me, then yes, I fired his ass. But he destroyed himself.”

“That’s not true. You locked him out of his own company!”

“His stealing locked him out. And it was never his company. He worked for me period. I don’t know what he told you, but his ass was never my partner. I don’t have partners in any aspect of my life, and I never will.”

Roni heard the words, and they registered with her, but she had bigger fish on her plate. “Why did you get that old man to crash into Brax’s limousine?”

“To kill him,” said Jessica matter-of-factly. “Why else? I want him dead. But he cheated death again.” Then she looked at him with venom in her eyes. “I hate you. I hate you and your bitch!” she yelled out just as she pulled out a gun they didn’t know she had and aimed it at the unsuspecting Roni.

But Brax saw the gun before Roni saw it and jumped in front of Roni, pushing her down as Jessica fired. But he wasn’t nimble enough to get himself out of the way too. He took several bullets for Roni and fell to the floor.

Gus had jumped up and moved out of the way as Roni realized Jessica was still aiming her gun directly at an already downed Brax, as if she was going to finish the job if it was the last thing she did. Roni, on her back, began firing her service weapon at Jessica, shooting her in every spot on her body she could shoot her. She was doing

as she was trained to do: She was shooting to kill.

And it worked. Jessica was dead by shot number two, but Roni didn't know it. That was why she kept firing round after round. Jessica had only fired three more rounds. All three of her final shots missed Brax altogether, but two of her shots hit Gus squarely in the heart. Roni didn't realize it until she fired her final round and saw that Gus was on the floor too. He wasn't moving at all.

But Brax wasn't moving either. And her heart sank. She pulled out her phone as she crawled over to Brax. She called 911. She held him in her arms. She cried out in pain as she rocked his lifeless body. He couldn't go. She would have no one on the face of this earth if he was taken too.

Help, she kept crying out in what she thought was a traumatic scream, but was barely a whisper.

Help !

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The ambulances and police officers finally arrived, and Brax, the only one of the three downed people still with a pulse, was rushed to the hospital. But Roni wasn't allowed to leave until she answered every single question her former employer asked of her. It took several hours. And then she was allowed to leave.

By the time she made it to the hospital, Brax was in surgery. She called his family, and they all flew out immediately, but once they arrived it felt as if they were holding a vigil for Brax in that private waiting room. It was just that morbid.

She didn't realize how much Lady Millicent and Mr. McCrae loved their son until she saw them that day. They were beyond devastation. It got so bad that Lady Millicent passed out, had to be sedated and checked into the hospital herself. Her husband stayed by her side.

JJ sat on one side of Roni and Fredrick sat on the other side of Roni as if they were holding her up. Because she was beyond devastation too. She was barely holding on.

And then the surgeon came into the waiting room and informed the brothers and Roni that Brax was out of surgery and was in recovery. They started to celebrate. He got through surgery. That was a big deal.

But when the surgeon said, in answer to Fredrick's question, that given the trajectory of that bullet Brax had less than a five percent chance of pulling through, that did it for Roni. She was done.

The last thing she remembered was screaming out, and falling to her knees. She felt hands trying to lift her up. Big, strong hands like JJ's and Fredrick's. She heard

conversations, as if they were all in her ear, but it was as if everybody was talking all at once and nobody was making any sense. She could not make sense of any of it.

But then she felt lifelessness in her body, as if everything was fading away, and she was hanging there like a dangling doll. Like an object rather than a person. Until her entire world as she knew it became total darkness. Until her entire world as she knew it faded too.

She was later placed in the same room as Lady Millicent, on the insistence of the brothers and Mr. McCrae, so that they could attend to both of them together. As if Veronica Ross, the daughter of the maid and nanny and nothing more than a cop herself, was her equal.

And she was her equal, as Lady Millicent and the entire family would come to realize, in her love for Brax.

They waited on Roni hand and foot with the same zeal as they waited on their matriarch. Not because they were suddenly humble men. But because they knew their beloved son and brother, who despite the enormous odds stacked against him, would still somehow pull through. Because that was what Brax did. And he would be extremely vexed with them had they treated her with any less reverence and respect.

Roni remembered very little of it as she, like Lady Millicent, was heavily sedated.

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THREE MONTHS LATER and winter had arrived. Heavy snow had turned into heavy snow flurries that kept the landscape white like sheets and the trees that lined the passageways like black and white paintings in an art gallery: Bare. And where wearing sunglasses during that time was as nonsensical as wearing shorts. Roni didn't wear shorts, but she still wore her shades.

She drove her Porsche past the guard booth as the electronic security gate opened and allowed her passage through. She stopped at the main house, got out, and went inside.

As soon as she walked in, she stared at the staircase for several seconds, as if she was frozen in time, before going up. She was still dealing with the aftermath of that day in Jessica Hampton's apartment. How Gus went down. How Brax went down. How she never ever wanted to step foot in New York City again for as long as she lived because of all of that going down. Nothing but bad memories met her there. Nothing but pain and agony and death and destruction. She was done with the City.

She slowly walked up the winding staircase with what felt like lead in her boots. Everything felt heavy to her, and like a climb. Even her heart was still heavy. Especially when she got to his bedroom and thought about how he took those bullets for her. For her. How none of this never would have happened had she remembered to frisk that bitch.

But what was done was done. Even JJ, who visited her often, told her so. Even Brax's father and his other brothers and even Lady Millicent told her too. It wasn't her fault. She was beating herself up for nothing. It was something Brax would have told them to do. "Reassure Roni," he would have told them. "I don't want her ever blaming herself."

Now that was a hero, she thought, not those paper tigers like BG and Mulvaney.

She opened the double doors of his bedroom, steeled herself, and then walked on in.

Brax was sitting up in the middle of his bed with his back against his tall headboard. He wore pants pajamas and a top, when he never wore anything to bed, but he had company. He was dictating instructions to Margo, and she was updating him on various contracts that he still needed to sign.

“Those doctors didn’t release you to come home and work, Braxton,” Roni said as she began walking toward his bed. “Hey Margo.”

“Hello, Miss Ross. I told him it can wait. But he insisted I come over and come over to work.”

Roni stood at the side of his bed. “You’re supposed to rest, and you know that man. It’s only been nine days since they released you.”

Brax looked at her over his reading glasses. “Take off those shades in my house,” he ordered.

Margo was wondering why she always loved to wear those sunglasses too, especially indoors, especially on a dreary winter day, but she dared not ask her. Brax would have her hide if she said anything untoward regarding his little princess.

But Roni didn’t even dignify his order with a comment. She’d been wearing her glasses and dressing in her various styles all her adult life. He knew she wasn’t changing to accommodate him.

But he apparently felt, because he saved her life, that he was entitled to run it more than he already tried to.

“Did you hear me? Why are you wearing sunglasses in my house? There’s no sun in this house.”

“I thought you told your mother I was the sun.”

Margo glanced at her. Say what now , her look seemed to say.

“I told my mother you were the sun light , not the sun, so take’em off.” Then his voice softened. “I want to see your eyes.”

Roni started to ask why, but she didn’t. He was looking at her with such sincerity in his own eyes, as if seeing hers somehow mattered greatly to him, so she decided to just go with it. She removed her shades, sitting them on the top of her hair, and then she sat on his bed beside him, with her back to his headboard. They were shoulder to shoulder.

He waited until she looked at him. When she did, his heartbeat quickened. When he finally came out of his coma and ended up spending nearly three months in the hospital, Roni was the first face he searched for. When he saw it, his heart relaxed. And she never left his side. Day and night, she remained in that hospital as if she had been gunned down too.

She resigned from her job to stay by his side, although Brax, knowing what that job still meant to her, later got the VPD to grant her an unpaid leave of absence instead. The family loved her presence by his side, too, because they were not hospital people, as his father put it, although Roni never heard of such a term. But she wouldn’t have it any other way. Brax would do the same for her. He had, in fact, done everything for her including taking those bullets for her. It was the least she could have done.

He was still in pain. His wounds were slow to heal because they were so extensive. But he was grateful to see her dancing eyes again. He took her hand and squeezed it. “How has your day been going so far?” Brax asked her.

“So far okay.”

“Any bad cases?”

“I’m a homicide detective. They’re all bad.”

“I don’t know why you chose a profession that’s all bad.”

“Don’t start.”

“Okay, okay. Just giving my opinion, that’s all.”

“You’re supposed to be resting. How’s that for an opinion? The doctor’s opinion.”

“I spent damn near three months in the hospital. I’ve been out nine long days. That’s nine straight days of doing nothing but resting. After what I’ve been through, I need to get back in the swing of things.”

“I’m just glad we got out of there alive,” said Roni. “That crazy woman thinking you destroyed her father. And for Gus to go in with her for money?”

“As if I was giving up that kind of money to them.”

“You would have to help me,” said Roni. Then she looked at him. “Right?”

“Let’s just say Scottie would have been contacted.”

“Not for my sake, he wouldn’t.”

“If he couldn’t help,” Brax continued, “then I would have considered paying up. But to answer your question, yes, I would have given it up.”

Roni smiled. "Thought so," she said. Then she saw Brax grimace. "Did they send another nurse over to change your bandages?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Show me?"

"Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"Show me, Brax."

"Last I looked I have thirteen years on your ass. Fourteen because I just had a birthday. Who should be bossing whom?"

"Boy just show me."

"This child thinks she's my mother," Brax said to Margo and Margo laughed. But he lifted up his shirt and showed Roni a fresh wide bandage across his stomach.

"Okay good," Roni said. "The other nurse said you brought her to tears with all of your yelling."

"I wasn't yelling. She tried to kill me the way she yanked that bandage off that time. This shit hurts when you take it off like that."

"She said she's never coming back."

"Because I'm not letting her back. She's too heavy-handed. I thought she was trying to skin me alive."

Margo laughed again. Roni shook her head. "Mister Big and Brave, he is. Scared of a nurse."

“She lives in the Amazon. She’s no typical nurse. You should see the size of her. Pulling it off like that. This shit hurts.”

“That’s because it’s only been nine days since you left the hospital. You aren’t fully healed yet. That’s why you need to tell Margo goodbye and get you some rest.”

Margo began to pack up her papers. “Fine by me,” she said.

“Don’t you go anywhere,” Brax said. “Veronica’s the one who’s going.”

“Going where?”

“Downstairs to get me a drink. The doctor said a little wine will do me good.”

“He did not say that.”

“Just go get me one. We’re almost done. By the time you come back up we’ll be through.”

“Sure you will. But I can use a drink myself,” she said as she got out of bed. “You want something to drink, Margo?”

“Nothing for me, thanks. After he signs those contracts I’m out of here.”

“That’s what you think,” Brax said, Margo laughed, and Roni made her way out of the bedroom and back downstairs.

As she went behind his bar downstairs and poured two drinks, she couldn’t help but think about how far Brax had come. She spent every night in that hospital with him. It got so bad that every time Lady Millicent showed up, she was at first flustered to find Roni still there. “Well my goodness, Veronica. You’re choking him. Let him breathe.”

Roni felt embarrassed and exposed when his mother said that to her. But she still wouldn't leave his side. But when his mother realized his stay was going to be months, not weeks, she was pleased to have Roni there all the time.

And when he was released and returned home, she went back to work, but she spent every single night at his place. Waiting on his hand and foot. Becoming the very person her mother was to his mother, and the very person she declared she'd never be to anyone. But that man saved her life. That man was her world. And although she knew she was sounding just like Lady Millicent sounded when talking about Roni's mother, but Roni couldn't help it. That man was Roni's family.

As she was about to grab the drinks and head back upstairs, she saw those brochures and photos she had taken from Jessica Hampton's apartment in a slot on the bar counter. Apparently one of his brothers, who brought his clothes home from the hospital that day, had found them and placed them on the bar. She looked at those photos of Jessica with her family, but mainly those shots of Jessica with her father. With the man that led her to try such foolish things.

They found out that her father had died five months ago, and died penniless as she said, and that his death began her quest to destroy Brax in whatever way she could. But like always with revenge, she just ended up destroying herself.

But then another photo caught her eye. This one presumably of the whole Hampton family. The father, the mother, Jessica, and her sibling. Roni turned the photo over and saw a handwritten note : Me, my dearly departed wife, and our beloved daughters. Stay strong, Jess. Stay loyal, Margo. You two are my world. Love, your father .”

But when Roni saw that word, her heart slammed against her chest and she quickly turned the photo back over again. It had to have been over twenty years ago when the photo was taken, but it was her. Roni could see the resemblance fairly easily. It was her. Jessica Hampton's sister was Margo Norris!

And her sister, who had to have believed Brax wronged her father too, was upstairs alone with him at that very moment!

The glasses fell from Roni's hands, spilling over, and she ran.

As soon as Roni left upstairs, Margo knew she had no more time to waste. She had just arrived at the house when Roni showed up, and it was the first time Margo had been alone with Brax. She had to end this now!

She went over to the bed and handed Brax another contract. "This is the main one, sir," she said as he took it from her hand. But as soon as her hand was free, she pulled out a big butcher's knife and showed it to him.

Brax leaned back as soon as he saw it. "What are you doing with that?"

"You killed my sister."

"Your sister? Who was your sister?"

"You killed my father."

Brax was floored. Was she related to Cal Hampton too? "But how could she be your sister? She was the one that paid that man to crash into my limo. You were in that limo with me. You were nearly killed."

"She didn't know I was in there. She was devastated when she found out. But that's how she was. She was the pretty sister. I had the brains. She never got it right. That's why I worked for you. To figure all your weaknesses and how I was going to get back at you someday. But then Daddy died. And you never said a word."

Brax was trying to figure out how he was going to get that knife away from her. "I didn't know he had died."

“Liar! You did know!”

“How would I know, Margo? I didn’t keep tabs on him.”

“You know now. That’s how you know. You know now!” She lifted that knife. “This is for my father and my sister, you bastard!” Margo yelled out and tried to stab Brax through the heart.

But Brax grabbed her wrist and kept the knife away from him. He had little strength, but he used what he had as they struggled for control of that knife.

“Roni,” he called out, but his voice was too weak. He was in no condition to fight anybody, but he had no choice. He flung himself out of bed, causing Margo to fall with him, in hopes of getting leverage.

But it was still a struggle. He ended up on his back and she ended up on top of him. And still holding that knife. She was determined to stab it all the way through his heart to the other side.

That knife was within inches of his heart as her hatred gave her herculean strength while he was trying with all he had to garner the little strength he had. And he was managing to keep that knife just away from his throat, where it now was pointed, but not enough to knock it out of her hand or knock her off of him.

But by the way he was grimacing and sweating, Margo knew he was in agony. That was why she repositioned herself and then pressed her knee into his wound, causing it to immediately began weeping. Then she slammed her knee into his wound, causing him to yell out in pain.

That yell was just enough for her to retake control of her knife. She lifted up that knife to get the hardest jab through she could. And she was about to jab it straight through when Roni ran into that bedroom, with her gun already drawn, and fired with

no hesitation. Because she had no time to hesitate. Within a second she was going to stab him to death. She had no time to worry if that bullet would graze Brax the way Jessica's bullet killed Gus. She just fired.

It was enough too. Margo slumped down, the knife slid from her hand, and she kilt over, right on top of Brax. He was in so much pain as the bleeding was intensifying that he didn't have the strength to push her dead weight off of him.

Roni ran to him, and slung her away from him herself.

Gate security, who ran in the house as soon as they heard that gunshot, ran into the bedroom.

"Call 911," Roni was saying breathlessly as she tried to staunch Brax's blood flow. "Call 911."

"We already have," the guard said, as he made sure Margo was indeed gone.

Roni removed her blazer and her blouse to staunch the blood flow even more. He looked to be losing consciousness.

But when he looked up and saw Roni's terrified eyes, he forced himself to hang in there. "Really I'm fine, Roni. Just need a little doctoring. Stop worrying so much. I'm okay."

But Roni wasn't. She could feel his pain. When they came for him it was just like they were coming for her. They came for them. And she wasn't going to rest until he was healed, back on his feet again, and ready to get on her last damn nerve once more. Then she'd be okay.

He looked at her as she straddled him holding that makeshift tourniquet over his belly. And he managed to smile. "Some pair we are," he said. "You're half-naked,

and I'm half-dead.”

Roni quickly looked at him, afraid that he was worse off than he was saying, but when she saw his smile she smiled too. And shook her head. “Maybe we aren’t happily ever after material just yet. But at least happy for now?”

Brax nodded his head. “Happy for now. Yes. That’s more like us. Happy for now,” he said. And they both found a way to actually feel that happiness.

And when the ambulance came and Brax, with Roni in tow, was taken to the hospital, Roni watched the doctors redress his wound and send him on his way.

They held hands in the limo as Harry drove them back to his place.

She still had his heart, and he still was the only man on earth who knew how to handle her - and let her be herself.

She still was the love of his life.

He still was her person.

They still were friends with benefits plus.

And that was cool with them.

“ When you get caught between the moon,

and New York City:

I know it’s crazy, but it’s true.

If you get caught between the moon,

and New York City:

The best that you can do,

The best that you can do,

is fall in love. ”