



You Deserve Good Things

Author: *Meka Evette*

Category: Romance

Description: At sixteen, Shaniya Stiles endures a tragedy that changes everything. In an instant, the sweet, vibrant girl from New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward becomes silent—her voice stolen by trauma and fear. Her best friend Jacory James, the boy she's secretly loved for years, tries desperately to reach her, but Shaniya can't let herself get close—not when loss feels like a guarantee.

When her parents uproot the family to Houston in search of a fresh start, Shaniya and Jacory are torn apart, their bond severed by distance and time.

Four years later, their paths cross again—older, different, but still tethered by something unspoken. Jacory is no longer a boy; he's a man determined not to let her slip away again. And Shaniya, still carrying the weight of her past, must find the courage to face what broke her... and decide if she's ready to embrace love again.

Told through the eyes of Shaniya, Jacory, her family, and the friends who walk beside them, *You Deserve Good Things* is a heartfelt love story about trauma, rediscovery, and learning that even in silence, you are worthy of something beautiful.

Total Pages (Source): 30

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The Calm Before the Storm

Kids were still outside barefoot, playing tag with the mosquitoes.

Somebody's mama was yelling from the window—"Y'all betta bring y'all fast lil' behinds in this house now !

"—like she hadn't already said it three times, and her voice would magically make them appear.

The old heads were out on their porches slapping dominoes and talking greasy about "the good old days." All the while the aunties were next door, curlers in and all, runnin' their mouths about everybody's business but their own.

The air smelled like somebody's boil pot was bubbling over with crawfish, corn, andouille sausage, turkey necks, and crab legs.

Somebody's speakers were knocking old-school Wayne, and every time the bass hit, it shook the porch under my feet.

The streetlights flickered like they were trying to warn us about something.

I didn't know it then, but I definitely should've listened.

I was sitting on the porch, with a notebook in my lap and pen in my hand—but I wasn't writing nothing. I couldn't. I couldn't focus for anything when Jacory James was posted across from me, leaning against my brother Silas's Cutlass like he was

made to be there.

He was tall now. His dark brown skin glistening from the sunlight, and his sharp jaw, along with that lazy-ass smirk like he stayed two seconds from trouble. His durag was tied clean, and his waves were peeking out at the edges. And the way the streetlight hit his face? Whew.

I'd been in love with him since I was nine. He just didn't know it yet.

"You good, baby?" Jacory asked, eyes on me, voice low and warm.

I blinked. "Yeah. Why?"

He grinned. "'Cause you been staring at me like I'm homework due at midnight."

Before I could even check him, Silas turned his head slowly. He was leaning against the hood, arms folded, eyes squinting.

"You got somethin' you tryna say to my sister, Jacory?"

Jacory didn't flinch. He chuckled, scratched his jaw. "Damn, big bro. I can't ask if she's good?"

Silas didn't laugh. "Not when you askin' like that."

See, Silas and Jacory were cool, but they weren't boys.

Jacory was my best friend. Silas always respected him—for the most part—but he always watched him around me like a hawk with trust issues.

It was almost as if he could tell we had a secret between us that we hadn't quite let

him or ourselves in on yet.

Chase, Silas's right-hand clown, was sittin' on the hood next to him, already grinnin' like a devil.

"Ooooooh, Jacory steppin' over friendship lines," he sang. "Silas, don't act like you ain't been seein' it, real shit."

"Shut yo' messy ass up," I mumbled, but my cheeks were burning.

Jacory held up both hands. "Look, man. I got too much respect for Yaya. Always have. I ain't never played with her, and I never will."

Silas let the silence hang for a second then nodded slowly. "Good. Keep it that way."

Jacory smirked and looked over at me, but that look? That look said he wasn't tryna keep it that way much longer.

Then it happened?—

"Ayo, shorty! Lemme holla at you real quick!"

The block got quiet in the kind of way that lets you know things were about to go left.

I turned and saw three dudes across the street near the corner store. They looked outta place—like they didn't belong on our side of the 9th. One had a scar down his cheek. Another had on slides with no socks and a tank top like he just walked out of the county jail.

Jacory straightened up at the same time Silas pushed off the car.

Chase tossed his drink in the bush. “Aight. I guess it’s go time.”

I stayed seated. “No, thank you; I’m good,” I called across the street.

One of them laughed. “She say she good like that mean anything. Bring yo’ fine lil’ ass over here, baby.”

Jacory moved fast.

“The fuck you just say to her?” he growled, already stepping off the porch.

Silas followed right behind him. His face? Cold. Focused. His hand hovered near his waistband.

Chase cracked his neck. “Please let ’em say something dumb. Please.”

“Yo, chill—” I stood up, tryna calm ’em down.

“Nah,” Jacory snapped. “They got me fucked up talkin’ to you like that.”

One of the dudes stepped forward. “Man, y’all pressed over a bitch?”

Everything stopped.

Jacory’s fists clenched. Silas blinked once. Just once.

“You call my sister a what?” Silas asked, voice deadly quiet.

“I said?—”

Crack.

Jacory hit him so hard it echoed down the block. The dude dropped like his knees gave out. Silas caught the next one in the stomach—folded him clean. Chase swung on the last dude, laughing like he was the Joker.

“You thought you could disrespect Yaya? Oh no, nigga.”

The rude dude tried to crawl away. Jacory grabbed his shirt, yanked him up close.

“You don’t talk to her. You don’t look at her. You don’t even breathe in her direction, you understand me?”

Dude nodded, bloody and shook.

Silas stood over him. “We done here?”

They limped off, broken and bruised.

Jacory stood there, still breathing hard, eyes locked on me.

I walked up slowly, touched his arm. “Cory . . . I’m okay.”

He looked down at me, voice rough. “Nah, baby. You safe . There’s a difference.”

Silas clapped Jacory’s back. “Good lookin’ out.”

Jacory nodded, but his eyes stayed on me.

“I ain’t never lettin’ nobody disrespect you, Yaya. Not while I’m alive to stop it.”

And in that moment?

I knew it.

This wasn't just a summer night.

This wasn't just a fight.

This was the night everything shifted.

And the storm was already in motion.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

It Has Always Been Her

I've been loving my best friend for as long as I can remember—before I even knew how to put a name to it.

This wasn't no lil' playground crush or schoolyard infatuation.

Nah, this was deep-rooted, soul-deep. Like my heart made a home in hers before I even knew how to build one. It's always been her. Shaniya. Always.

And Silas? He been clocking me about her since day one.

He never had to say it straight out, but he stayed checking me with them looks—real protective, big brother energy.

Like, "I see what you on, Jacory. Don't mess this up.

" And I respected that. I respected him .

Because more than anything, I respected her .

Shaniya wasn't some girl to flirt with or pass time with.

She was the kind you moved careful around, like your hands were holding crystal.

Silas was the blueprint. That man was solid—stoic even.

He didn't have to say much for the whole room to feel him.

And for a dude like me, who lost my pops too early to nonsense, Silas showed me what it meant to be present, to stand ten toes down.

He loved his sister loud and proud. And I made myself a vow off that love—I'd always honor her. Protect her. Cherish her.

Shaniya had that glow that came from the inside out.

It wasn't no regular pretty—it was the kind of beautiful you feel when the sun first hits your face on a cold morning.

Her heart was wide open, always. Even when life tried to shut her down, she smiled through the storm.

When leukemia hit her in third grade and took her hair, her weight, her energy—she still found ways to check on me .

Weak in body, but never in spirit. I treated her like fine glass—not 'cause she was breakable, but 'cause she was rare.

We used to sit on her porch after her treatments, me bringing over popsicles or sour belts, her scarf sliding off just a little while the summer air wrapped around us.

I'd crack the corniest jokes, and her laugh—soft but steady—made the world feel bearable again.

That laugh was healing. A sound I chased like breath.

But to understand how I got here, how I fell this hard, you gotta take it back.

Kindergarten.

The day we moved to the Lower 9th from Baton Rouge, I was pissed.

My daddy had left me and my mama, Justine, for some woman who ain't care nothing about him.

Just dipped. Said he was tired of the struggle.

Like we wasn't worth it. Mama packed up our lives with her lips tight and her heart bruised.

"We can't keep choking on memories like they air," she told me, and I ain't fully understand it then, but I do now.

Then came the worst part—Daddy got killed by that woman's boyfriend not long after. Shot in the chest. Gone just like that. I ain't cry. Couldn't. I just remember looking out the window while Mama drove us to New Orleans, and all I could think was: I'll never leave nobody like he left us.

That first day at school was a mess. Humidity had me sweating before we even hit the gate. Me and Mama were walking, and I tried to leap a puddle and missed completely—mud flew up and splashed all over my white-on-whites. I was sick.

Walked onto that blacktop and got clowned immediately. "Boy, what happened to your shoes? You moonwalked through a sewer?"

And then . . . she stepped in.

Shaniya.

I remember her like a dream you don't wanna wake up from.

Brown skin gleaming under the sun, hair in two puffballs with them sparkly butterfly clips that caught every glint of light.

She had on a glittery yellow shirt that read "Shine Bright," a denim skirt with a heart stitched on the pocket, and some pink light-up shoes that blinked like they had something to say. I'd never seen anyone so pretty. Ever.

She didn't flinch. Didn't hesitate.

"I like his shoes," she said, loud and proud. "They look like art. Like a muddy masterpiece. Ain't nothing wrong with being different."

The kid trying to roast me froze. "Man, whatever."

She stepped closer, arms crossed. "Say something else and I'm telling my brother Silas. He'll fold you like a church program."

The dude backed down instantly. "My bad." Then, trying to save face, he asked her if he could sit by her in art class.

"Nah," she said, cutting her eyes. "I don't sit with people who tear others down. Maybe try being decent first."

Then she turned to me with that warm smile. The kind that made your chest feel too small for your heart.

"I'm Shaniya."

"Jacory."

“Well, Jacory,” she said, “you sitting with me at lunch. And your shoes? They tell a story. Most people too simple to read it.”

I was done. Completely.

We clicked instantly. Ended up in the same class, same reading group, same lunch table. She shared her Fruit Roll-Ups, I traded my chips. She drew hearts on my folders, I sharpened her pencils. We protected each other—me from bullies, her from sadness.

Later on, Chase came into the picture—fiery and loyal.

Then Silas, tall and silent but deadly when he had to be.

We was a team. Ride or die. Papa Samuel, her daddy, pulled me aside one day after church and said, “You got a good head on your shoulders, son. Don’t let nobody twist it.” I held on to that.

When cats tried to step foul to Shaniya? Silas was the storm, Chase was the flame, I was the finisher. We had her back, always. But real talk? Shaniya ain’t always need us. That girl had bark. Told off more dudes than I could count. “Don’t let the dimples fool you,” she’d say.

And me? I watched her love everybody around her. From her teachers to the lunch lady. I saw her carry trays for girls with crutches, offer tissues to boys trying to hide tears. I fell in love with her heart way before I knew what love really meant.

One night, I asked Mama how you tell a girl you like her without messing up the friendship.

She laughed and said, “Baby, if the friendship’s real, love don’t break it. It just

deepens it.”

So, I’ve been waiting. Biding my time.

Silas? I think he knows. That’s why he be checking me extra hard. But I never gave him a reason not to trust me. I’m gon’ come correct when I come. And when I do? Shaniya gon’ know she been loved since kindergarten.

Loved through every laugh. Loved through every tear. Loved by a boy who turned into a man who kept his word.

Always.

For her.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

Witness to a Nightmare

It was supposed to be a regular night. Just Silas and me, riding through the city like we always did. Him behind the wheel, music playin' low—some old Boosie beat knocking slow out the speakers—windows cracked just enough to let that sticky New Orleans air roll in and coat our skin like syrup.

But something felt . . . wrong.

Silas was quiet. Too quiet. Usually, he'd be talking slick, cracking jokes, telling me about some fool he had to check earlier or asking me why I didn't give Jacory a chance yet.

He always kept the air light. But tonight?

He was all tight shoulders and quick glances, constantly checking his mirrors like he felt eyes on us.

I should've known.

I should've said somethin'.

I should've begged him to turn around.

But I didn't.

“Where are we goin'?” I asked, chin in my palm as I stared out the window at the

streetlights zipping by.

He licked his lips, gripping the wheel like it owed him an answer. “Just gotta make a move really quick, lil’ bit.”

I rolled my eyes. “You still dealing with them lame ass dudes, Si? For what? We straight. Aren’t all my medical bills paid off?”

He let out a tight breath that was supposed to be a laugh, but it didn’t feel like one. “You straight. I gotta make sure it stays that way. When you got sick, I made Keem a promise, and I’m gonna hold up my end. This will be my last time for sure and I’m square.”

And there it was—that heavy-ass guilt he carried like a cross. Silas always thought he had to bleed to keep the rest of us breathing. I hated that part of him. The part that didn’t know how to let go.

He pulled into the parking lot of a raggedy corner store off Claiborne.

The lights overhead flickered like they didn’t even wanna be on.

One busted car sat in the back of the lot, fogged windows and empty cups on the dash.

Everything about it felt . . . off. Like the block itself was holding its breath.

“Stay in the car,” Silas said, shifting the gear into park.

I stared at him. “Si—come on. Let’s just go home.”

He looked at me for a long second. His jaw clenched like he wanted to say yes. Like

maybe he was rethinking it.

But before he could answer, a black Charger pulled up, real slow, tires crunching over gravel like thunder.

Silas straightened.

Three dudes stepped out. One tall and skinny with a scar dragging down his cheek, another built like a linebacker with golds in his mouth, and the last one leaning on the hood, eyes bouncing between all of us like he was doing recon.

I didn't listen. I climbed out the car and stood near Silas before I could even think. That tension in the air had me on edge.

That was when Scarface, looked at me—up and down, bold as hell.

“Damn,” he said, smirking. “You fine as fuck, lil’ mama. Silas, you always had good taste.”

Silas’s whole face changed.

His nostrils flared. His fists clenched. And his voice came out ice cold.

“Keem, this is my baby sister. She is only sixteen, bruh. Watch your fuckin’ mouth and show some damn respect.”

Keem blinked then laughed like it ain’t even matter. “Relax, man. Just sayin’.”

“You sayin’ too much,” Silas snapped, shifting his body so he was fully between me and them.

Keem raised his hands, still grinning. “Aight, aight. Damn. Sensitive.”

But before anyone else could speak, another car pulled up.

This one was slick, darker than the first, windows blacked out. It didn’t roll in slow—it crept. Silent. No headlights. Just gliding up like death itself.

Keem’s smile dropped.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Them niggas found me.”

He backed up quick, lookin’ over his shoulder. “Y’all need to get the fuck outta here. Now. ”

Silas turned toward the car, eyes locking in. “Shaniya, get down?—”

The window rolled down.

And that was it.

Pop. Pop. Pop-Pop-Pop.

The night exploded with gunfire. Muzzled flashes lit up the lot like a camera flash from hell.

I screamed, paralyzed for half a second—until Silas grabbed me and tackled me to the pavement. His body wrapped around mine like a shield, arms covering my head, chest pressed tight against my back.

I felt him jerk.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Too many.

“Silas!” I screamed, clawing out from under him once the shots stopped.

He was heavy. His breath was ragged—then gone. Blood was everywhere. My hands were slippery with it as I grabbed his hoodie, screaming his name like it would make his heart beat again.

“Silas? Silas—no! Don’t do this, please—don’t do this to me!”

His eyes fluttered open just barely. He looked at me, his lips parting.

“I love you, Yaya,” he whispered.

And then . . . nothing.

He went still.

The car peeled off, tires screeching, the smell of rubber and iron in the air. The silence that followed was too loud. My screams got caught in my throat. My whole body shook. It felt like my heart had been ripped out, stomped on, and buried on that pavement next to my big brother.

I didn’t know how long I was kneeling there, sobbing like the world ended.

But then I heard it—Jacory’s voice, frantic and raw.

“Shaniya! Baby! Where she at!”

He ran up so fast, his knees almost buckled when he saw me covered in blood, hovering over Silas’s body.

“Baby—no, no—look at me. Shaniya, please—look at me!”

His arms wrapped around me, but I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. I just stared. My eyes wide. Empty. Gone.

Chase walked from across the street, eyes in shock, right behind him, shouting “What went wrong! I . . . he left me! Why the fuck wouldn’t he wait for me?”

Jacory was crying. Jacory. That boy never cried. But he was holding me like he was scared I was gonna disappear too.

“Silas protected her,” he said to Chase, voice cracking. “He-he took all of it.”

Chase was stomping around, fists balled, teeth grindin’. “I swear to God, I’m killing them. I’m killing every last one of them!”

But me?

I was done.

I looked at Silas—his body still protecting mine, his hoodie soaked, his chain twisted in his fingers like it never wanted to leave him.

That was the moment I stopped speaking.

No more words.

No more sound.

Just silence.

Because the moment Silas died . . . so did the loudest part of me.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The Helpless Protector

I wasn't there when it happened.

And that shit? That shit ate me alive every damn day.

I wasn't talking about guilt that faded after a while. I was talking about the kind that woke you up in cold sweats. The kind that made you look at your phone three times an hour hoping maybe that call never came.

But it did.

I got the call from Chase.

His voice was shaking, and if you knew Chase, then you'd know—that boy didn't shake . Not even when shit got ugly. But that night?

“J . . . Silas gone.”

My whole body went cold like the blood in my veins hit a brick wall.

“What?” I whispered, already standing up, heart pounding.

“He got shot, bro.” Chase breathed. “Shaniya was with him.”

That was all it took.

I didn't ask no questions. I didn't let another word fall out his mouth.

I just hung up and ran— literally —out the damn door like my feet had a mind of their own.

I didn't remember grabbing my keys. I didn't remember the drive.

I just remembered the way my chest felt like it was being pulled apart, piece by piece, with every turn I made.

And then I saw her.

Shaniya.

My baby. My best friend. The girl I'd loved since we were damn near in diapers.

She was on her knees in the middle of it all, her hands drenched in blood—Silas's blood.

I froze. My feet hit the pavement like they forgot how to move. Everything in me locked up.

Then I ran.

"Shaniya!" I dropped beside her, knees crashing hard against the asphalt.

She didn't even look at me. Her eyes were stuck on Silas's body like her soul was still begging him to get up. Her hands shook, her breathing was shallow, lips were trembling, but no sound came out.

"Baby, please," I whispered, taking her face in my hands. "Look at me."

Nothing. Not even a blink.

It was like the light in her went out.

I pulled her into me, cradling her like she was made of glass, and I was already holding her broken pieces. Blood soaked into my hoodie, but I didn't care. I would've taken all of it if it meant she'd come back to me.

Chase was somewhere behind me, screaming, cussing, ready to crash out.

I could hear the thuds of his boots stomping the pavement, hear him cussing out the cops for being late, for not caring.

And I didn't blame him one bit. I could see the flashing lights—red and blue spinning across the block like a siren was mourning with us.

The smell in the air was heavy. Thick. Gunpowder and blood. Death.

But me?

I didn't want revenge.

I didn't want justice.

I just wanted her to be okay.

I kept wiping the blood off her hands, over and over, like I could erase what happened. But it was still there. Everywhere.

The police tried talking to her. Asked me if she could give a statement. Statement? She didn't even look like she remembered how to breathe. I snapped. Told them if

they didn't back the hell up off her, we were gonna have a bigger problem than bullets.

I picked her up—literally—put her in my car, and drove. I didn't ask nobody permission. I didn't care what the rules were.

She sat in the passenger seat like a doll, seat belt on, hands folded in her lap. Her eyes stuck straight ahead, unmoving.

“Baby, say something,” I murmured. “Anything.”

Nothing.

I reached over, slid my fingers through hers. Her hand was cold. Limp. Like she wasn't even in her own body anymore.

And me?

I was begging God to take me back five minutes.

Five minutes before Silas pulled into that lot.

Five minutes before those bullets found him.

Five minutes before everything changed.

I had never felt more useless in my life. Not when my pops walked out and left me and Mama to figure it out. Not when we had to boil water to bathe 'cause the gas was off. Not even when I caught my first L in the streets and had to learn what real pain felt like.

No, this was different.

This was watchin' the one person I'd do anything for slip away from me and not being able to pull her back.

She didn't speak for two days.

Two whole days.

No words. No eye contact. No food unless we damn near forced it.

Mama Shari was breaking apart in real time—running her fingers through Shaniya's locs, tryin' to coax words outta her with soft songs and childhood stories. Samuel, her daddy, just sat in the kitchen sometimes, head in his hands, grief wrapped around him like a straitjacket.

I spent every second I could at her side. Slept on the couch. Ate whatever leftovers they offered. Didn't go home. Didn't wanna go home. Home didn't mean nothing if she wasn't okay.

"Shaniya, please," I whispered one night, sitting next to her on the couch. Her hand was in mine, but it felt like I was holding air.

She stared forward like I wasn't even there.

And I swear on everything, it broke me in ways I didn't even have words for.

Then came the bomb I ain't see coming—they were leaving.

Mama Shari pulled me aside, her voice soft and cracked. "We're moving to Houston, Jacory."

My knees buckled. I damn near dropped.

“What?”

“She needs a fresh start,” she said, her eyes red and swollen. “We all do.”

A fresh start?

So, what—we just leave Silas in the ground and act like that was enough? Just leave me behind?

I fought back tears. “She needs me.”

“I know, baby. But she needs space more.”

I couldn’t even speak. I just walked out the kitchen and sat on the porch, fists clenched, trying not to punch a hole in my chest.

The day before they left, I asked—no, demanded—to see her.

Shari nodded and led me inside. The house was packed up. Photos off the walls. Boxes stacked by the door.

But Shaniya was still on the couch. Same hoodie. Same blank stare.

I sat down next to her.

Close, but not too close.

“Yaya, Ma said y’all leaving tomorrow,” I said softly, my voice catching in my throat. She didn’t move.

Nothing. I looked at her, eyes filling.

“You really gon’ leave me like this, baby? Without sayin’ nothin’?”

Still silence. Still heartbreak.

I touched her fingers. She didn’t pull away, but she didn’t squeeze back either.

“You ain’t even gon’ say goodbye?”

Her jaw flexed. That was the first time I’d seen any emotion from her in days.

“I love you,” I said, tears spilling. “And I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do without you.”

She finally looked at me. And what I saw in her eyes?

Wasn’t anger.

Wasn’t sadness.

It was emptiness.

I begged. Pled. “Say something, Yaya. Please. Anything.”

She shook her head. Tears slid down her cheeks, and her lips trembled, but no sound came.

And that was when I knew.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to speak.

She couldn't.

I pulled her close, holding on like she was all I had left.

"I got you, baby. You hear me? Always. I don't care where you go, I'm yours. You're mine. My Yaya."

She nodded, barely. But I needed more.

"Say it," I whispered. "Say you mine."

She opened her mouth. Tried. But no sound came.

She just looked at me, gripped my hand, and let a single tear fall.

And that was it.

The next day, they were gone.

And I stood on that porch alone, watching the car drive away, knowing I'd just lost the only girl I ever truly loved.

But I also knew something else.

This wasn't the end.

Not even close.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The Decision to Leave

Wasn't no sound louder on this Earth than a mama's cry when she lost her child. Not sirens. Not screams. Not even the sound of gunfire.

It was the kind of cry that came from the soul—raw and ragged. One that didn't stop when the tears did. The kind that left your throat burning, your chest hollow, and your heart feeling like it got carved out your body with a rusty blade.

I never knew this kind of pain. Not until Silas. My baby. My firstborn. My protector. My whole damn heart.

The house still smelled like him. Like that mix of Polo Red and sweat, a scent that clung to his clothes and his room like it was tryin' to hold on for both of us.

His shoes still sat by the door, half-laced, toes scuffed from dragging 'em when he walked.

His hoodie—the one he wore damn near every day—was draped over the kitchen chair like he was gon' come back for it.

I hadn't moved none of it. I couldn't. 'Cause if I did, that'd make it real. And I wasn't ready for real. Not when his baby sister hadn't said a single word since she watched him bleed out on that pavement.

I glanced over at Shaniya, curled up on the end of the couch like a leaf pressed into a corner, her arms wrapped around her, hoodie drowning her body. Her face was blank.

Not a tear. Not a blink. Just . . . hollow.

She hadn't eaten. She barely slept. She wouldn't talk. Wouldn't hum. Wouldn't even flinch when I touched her.

I didn't know what else to do. I tried everything—songs, prayers, food, soft rubs on her back. Nothing I did worked. In such a way, Silas took her voice with him when he left.

Samuel sat next to me, his weight making the couch groan. He looked like a ghost of the man I married. He'd always been the rock—tall, strong, quiet, one of them Black men that didn't say much, but when he spoke? Everybody listened.

But lately, it looked as if the world broke him too. His elbows rested on his knees, hands clasped tight tryna hold on to the last bit of sanity he had left.

“Baby,” I whispered, reaching out to touch his knee. My voice came out raspy. Weak. He didn't look at me right away. He just inhaled deep, as though somethin' as simple as breathing hurt.

When his eyes met mine, they were red, tired, damn near lifeless.

“I shoulda protected him, Shari,” he murmured. “I shoulda been there, baby.”

My heart cracked again. “Don't do that, Samuel.”

“I shoulda told him no when he wanted to contribute financially to help,” he whispered, rubbing his palms like he could wipe away the guilt. “Shoulda stopped him. Made him listen. I knew something was wrong that night. I felt it in my bones.”

“And you think I didn't?” I said, my voice snapping louder than I meant. “You think I

ain't been asking myself what I coulda done better? If I shoulda called him back to grab his wallet or asked him to stay in and eat dinner with us?"

I choked on the tears pressing at my throat, but I kept going.

"We can't bring him back, Sam. We can't fix this. But we still got our daughter. And I refuse to lose her too."

I nodded toward Shaniya, her small frame still pressed into the corner, seeming to want to disappear. Her knees were pulled to her chest, face buried in her arms, hoodie strings dangling like they were tryna strangle her silence.

Samuel followed my gaze. His whole body deflated.

"She's all we got left," I whispered.

He nodded once. Slow.

In that instant, we both knew—we had to get her outta here. We couldn't keep breathing this air that reeked of death and memories. We couldn't keep passing the corner store where our son's blood still stained the pavement. We had to leave.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

Left Behind

I had never been the type to sit still.

Even as a kid, I was always moving, whether it was climbing fences, riding bikes too fast, or tryna flip off porch railings like I was invincible.

I was always on go. My mama used to say I had a motor in my bones and a storm in my mouth.

She said if I didn't learn to slow down, life was gon' catch me slipping.

But on this day? I couldn't move at all.

I just stood there, my jaw clenched and hands buried deep in my hoodie pockets like they were holdin' the weight of the world, and my eyes locked on that car.

The car that was takin' Shaniya away.

It was taking her away from this block. Away from Jacory. Away from me. And most of all, away from Silas.

The engine was low and quiet, but the wheels that were rolling over that cracked pavement sounded loud as hell in my ears. They were louder than the shots that dropped Silas. Louder than the screams that followed. Louder than the sound of my own heartbeat that hadn't been steady since that night.

Silas had called me, and I missed it. I went outside to take the trash out for my mama, and I missed his damn call. Had he not gone by himself, I could've looked out for him. When my mama told me he called, I left and headed that way. By the time I walked on the scene, I was too late.

I didn't blink. I didn't breathe. It felt like my chest was about to cave in.

Beside me, Jacory stood stiff, arms crossed so tight across his chest he looked like he was holdin' himself together with force. It was as if he let go, he would fall apart right there on the sidewalk.

He hadn't said a word in damn near fifteen minutes. My bro just stood there, brows low, jaw grinding, watching the back of that car like he could will it to stop.

But it didn't.

It turned the corner slow and disappeared, taking what little peace we had left right along with it.

And just like that . . . she was gone.

She was gone with her silence. Gone with the hole her brother left behind. Gone with every piece of our childhood we were still clinging to.

Jacory didn't move for a second, then suddenly, bam!

He turned and punched the streetlight pole so hard it echoed. The metal rattled, as his skin split, and blood smeared across his knuckles almost instantly, but he didn't flinch.

"Damn!" His voice cracked.

That was the first time I ever heard Jacory James sound broken. Not mad. Not frustrated. Just . . . broken. And that shit made my stomach twist.

I let out a breath, low and shaky. “Man . . .”

I didn’t know what else to say.

Because what the hell do you say to somebody who just lost the one person they would have given everything for?

What do you say when you carry the same guilt he does . . . but you were the one right there when it happened and didn’t do a damn thing to stop it?

My mind kept goin’ back to that night. All I could see was Silas bleeding out in the street. The vision of Shaniya, covered in his blood, screaming without sound. Me, stuck. Frozen. It replayed over and over in my mind like Groundhog’s Day.

I saw the car roll up. I saw the window come down. I saw the glint of the muzzle flash before I even processed what was happening.

And I didn’t do shit.

I didn’t jump in front of him.

Didn’t pull him back.

Didn’t block the shots.

I just stood there.

I fucking froze when it mattered.

It happened so fast.

I regret missing his phone call.

I didn't have his back.

So now I carry that. Every. Single. Day.

Jacory turned to me suddenly, eyes red, but sharp like broken glass.

"I shoulda went after her," he muttered, voice low and tight.

I ran a hand down my face, feelin' the sweat and regret coat my skin. "Man, what the hell you was gon' do? Snatch her out of the car? You know damn well Shari and Sam wasn't gon' let you do that."

He didn't respond. He just stared down at the sidewalk like he was tryna erase it with his eyes.

"You know she needs this, bruh," I said softly. "She ain't been the same."

Silence.

I hesitated, then added, "Since Silas."

That was when his head snapped up, and his eyes were blazing.

"Since what, Chase? Huh? Say it."

My throat locked up.

“Nah,” he said again, stepping toward me. “Say it. Say what you thinkin’. Since we let him die ?”

I clenched my jaw, heart poundin’. “Man, c’mon?—”

“Say it!”

My fists balled. “You think I ain’t thought about that every fuckin’ night since it happened? You think I don’t hear them fuckin’ shots in my head every time I close my eyes?”

His mouth opened, but I cut him off.

“You ain’t the only one hurt, bruh. I was there. I saw him hit the ground. I saw her face. And I ain’t do shit. So yeah, I’m carrying that! Just like you.”

Silence hit us like a punch.

His chest rose and fell fast, his knuckles still bloody, his jaw grinding.

Finally, he looked away, rubbing his hands down his face. “Man . . . I just needed more time, bruh.”

His voice cracked. Real low. Real raw.

“I just needed her to stay . . . just a little longer.”

And I felt that.

I felt every piece of that, ’cause I did too.

We were her village. Me and Jacory. We were her protectors when Silas couldn't be there. We were supposed to be her safety net. And now? She was gone. How would we know if she was good? How could we look out for her now?

We stood there for what felt like forever, just watching the block. Same block that raised us. Same block that buried Silas. Same block that never felt like home again after that night.

Then finally, Jacory turned to me, voice low. "You staying at my spot tonight?"

It wasn't a question. Not really.

It was a statement. A plea without begging. He didn't wanna be alone. And truth be told, neither did I.

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "I'm staying, bruh."

He pounded his fist against mine, then turned, walking toward the house.

I followed, quiet. Heavy. Hurting. And we ain't say another word, 'cause we didn't need to. We were all we had left.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

Houston, Texas

Houston wasn't home. It didn't smell like home. Didn't sound like home. Didn't feel like home.

New Orleans had a rhythm—like her heartbeat was sync'd to a second line, like her streets hummed even when the city slept. The cicadas in the trees, the bounce of a hot summer bassline coming from somebody's porch party, the smell of boiled crawfish, gasoline, and old rain? That was home.

Houston? Houston felt like the dial tone after a dropped call. Flat. Cold. Wrong. But maybe that was just me. I still hadn't said a word since the night Silas died.

Not. One. Word. Not to Mama. Not to Daddy. Not to Jacory—especially not Jacory. Not even to myself.

Every time I tried, every time I opened my mouth like a sound was about to come out, it felt like my lungs locked up.

It was as if my voice got buried right next to my brother, like it went six feet under, never to be heard from again.

My soul, it was left on that corner, right there next to the chalk outline and the blood that stained the curb.

Sure, I was walking. I was eating. I was breathing; I guess.

But I wasn't living . I wasn't here. I was floating above everything, watching life move around me while I just .

. . existed. It felt like my life stopped that day, and I was stuck on a loop watching everything else steady orbiting around me.

Poor Mama! She tried to hide the way she hovered, but I saw it.

I noticed the way her eyes followed me in the hallway.

I saw the way she paused at my bedroom door, her hand on the frame like she wanted to come in but didn't know how.

She'd try to act normal—fixing my plate, asking if I wanted to watch TV, suggesting little things like getting my hair done or going shopping—but the worry sat heavy in her throat.

Like she was waiting for me to break. Like if she stared long enough, I'd finally crack open and cry or scream or collapse.

But I didn't.

Daddy was much quieter. He was way quieter than he'd ever been.

He used to hum while he worked, used to leave the door cracked when he was sketching plans for a house he dreamed of building one day.

But now, he just sat at the kitchen table in silence every night, palms together, eyes down.

He looked like he was praying. Like he was talking to God but forgot the words.

Guilt looked different on him. It seemed to have aged him overnight.

Of course, he didn't say it, but I could feel it in him.

It was in the way he walked slower; it was in the way he barely spoke when Mama asked him anything now.

Silas's death hollowed him out too. And that was what this house had become—a hollow shell, with three broken people pretendin' to be whole.

People said grief looked like crying, like wailing, like tearing your clothes, like throwing yourself at the casket.

But grief wasn't always loud. Sometimes grief was quiet as a grave .

It crept in and settled like dust. Coated your skin, sat on your chest, and made everything taste like ash.

Grief was waking up and feeling like you'd been buried too, just without the dirt.

And me? I was buried in silence.

Every day was a copy-paste of the last. Wake up. Go to school. Pretend to care. Come home. Lay in bed. Stare at the ceiling until my eyes burned. Fall asleep. Repeat.

Then one day, she happened. Daniale. Loud as hell. Colorful. Unapologetic. The complete opposite of everything I was.

I didn't meet her—she inserted herself into my life like she'd been assigned the job.

I was sittin' alone at lunch, like usual, picking at my tray. I hadn't planned to eat. I

never did. I was just waitin' for the clock to hit that magic number so I could disappear again.

Then, clack. Her tray hit the table like a warning shot. She plopped into the seat across from me, her aura big as a marching band.

“Whew! These chicken tenders look like they’ve been through the struggle, but I’m too damn hungry to care.”

She didn’t ask to sit down—didn’t pause, didn’t hesitate, just entered like she belonged in my space.

Her nails were bright red, coffin-shaped, and loud. Her hair was in two space buns with edges laid like magic. Her earrings were hoops big enough to jump through, and she smelled like vanilla, cocoa butter, and a whole lotta confidence.

She squinted at me like I was a riddle.

“Aight. So, what’s your story, girl?”

I blinked.

She waited, leaning in, one perfectly arched brow raised.

Then she sighed. “Oh, okay. So, you are one of those mysterious bitches. Bet.”

I stayed quiet, but inside? I was halfway offended. Halfway amused.

She popped open her juice, sipped it like this was a casual meet-cute. “I don’t do quiet people. Makes me nervous. But you? You too pretty to be weird, so I’m gonna give you a pass.”

I nearly laughed. Almost. But it stayed stuck in my throat.

“You might as well get used to me now,” she said, smirking. “I talk a lot. Like, a lot . I’m loud. I’m nosy. I’m petty. But I got a good heart, and I give bomb-ass advice. So, you are in good hands.”

I didn’t say a word. Didn’t have to. She was already locked in.

She found me every single day after that.

Walkin’ with me to class. Sittin’ with me at lunch.

Talkin’ at me about everything from her mama’s crazy wigs to her obsession with cinnamon rolls and how she was gon’ fight her chemistry teacher if he gave her another “hating-ass quiz.”

And slowly . . . quietly . . . it started to help.

One day, she walked with me after school, shoulder to shoulder. She was talkin’ about some boy who tried to flirt with her even though he smelled like “sweaty ambition and two missed showers.”

I wasn’t really listening. Not until she stopped.

“Ayo,” she said, and I turned to look at her. “Real talk . . . I know you’ve been through some shit.”

I froze. My breath caught in my throat. She kept walkin’, like she hadn’t just dropped a whole emotional grenade on me.

“But I also know you have a voice,” she added. “Even if you ain’t used it in a while.”

I swallowed hard. She stopped again, looked at me, arms folded. “So, here’s the deal, sis. You got two choices: You gon’ keep runnin’ from the pain, or you gon’ start learning how to live through it.”

My lips parted. I wanted to speak. Needed to speak.

Tried to speak. But the words didn’t come.

Just that same emptiness in my throat. Like every sound I’d ever known was buried in Silas’s grave.

She didn’t get mad, didn’t press me. She just shook her head and grinned like I was a challenge she already planned on winning.

“Aight. I’ll wait.”

Then she linked her arm through mine like we’d been besties since diapers.

“Until then? I’m gon’ talk enough for both of us.”

And that was exactly what she did. Every hallway. Every lunch. Every walk home. Daniale became my noise. My color. My light . I still didn’t know who I was without Silas. Still didn’t know how to live in a world where he wasn’t at the door yelling about how late I was.

But Daniale? She made sure I didn’t disappear. She made sure I didn’t fade. She made sure I was still seen . And maybe—I was finally ready to be seen again. Even if I still wasn’t ready to speak.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The One That Got Away

Houston, Texas (Four Years Later)

It was like somebody carved a hole outta my chest and left the wind blowing through it ever since.

I couldn't forget the way she looked at me that day—like she wanted to stay, like she wanted me to stop her but couldn't bring herself to say the words.

I didn't even get a goodbye. No last hug.

No “take care, Jacory.” Just silence. And that silence?

That shit still haunted me. That silence still sat in my chest like a brick I couldn't cough up.

The block didn't feel the same no more. Not since Silas died. Not since Shaniya left. New Orleans still moved the same—music still bumping outta somebody's speakers, old heads still posted up playing dominoes, the smell of gumbo and crawfish still drifting through the air.

But it felt different now. It felt like the city had a hole in it. Like I had a hole in me .

The city moved on without her.

But I never did.

I tried. Lord knows I tried. I tried like hell to forget her—her eyes, that voice, that energy that felt like home and heaven all in one. Tried to patch the hole in my spirit with late-night distractions and women who looked good enough to make me forget—but none of them stuck.

I went through what I like to call The Shaniya Rebound Tour—messing with girls who had nothin’ to offer but a body and a lil’ conversation.

There was Kendall, with the big curls and even bigger ego, who thought sex and sushi dates made up for the fact she was allergic to emotional maturity.

There was Leah, who kept calling me “Jarell” no matter how many times I corrected her.

Then there was Tasha, who showed up to my mama’s house uninvited, tryna charm her with potato salad that tasted like wet air and disrespect.

And I’d be lying if I didn’t admit I stayed. I stayed for the noise, for the moment, for the numbness. But none of them could measure up. They didn’t have that storm-in-a-glass energy Shaniya had. They didn’t have that mouth that cut like a knife but that spirit that soothed like lotion on a burn.

They weren’t her.

So yeah, I dipped. I ghosted. I walked away from every single one. Not ’cause I didn’t wanna love somebody else, but ’cause my heart was still in New Orleans, sitting on that porch, waitin’ on a girl who never looked back.

Now? I had a plan. Four years. That was how long I gave myself to get my shit together.

And I did that. No handouts. No shortcuts.

Straight hustle. I wasn't the same broke-ass boy she left behind.

I had my own business now. James Financial Group.

I was a financial consultant. I was tryna build something real, something solid, something that made sure I never lost anything else important to me.

I was cleaning up other folks' money mess while makin' sure I'd never again be the one begging life to give me something.

Now, my pockets were right. My business was up and running.

I had a name in these streets—but not the kind that put a target on my back.

The kind that made people respect me. I was able to keep my street credibility clean, just enough hood to still be respected, just enough polish to make people cut me a check.

And that? That was all part of the plan.

I told myself I didn't wanna find her till I was ready.

Till I was the type of man that deserved her.

I wasn't gon' show up on some broke nigga, empty-handed, begging-for-her-time type shit.

Nah. When I saw her again? I was gon' be a man she could trust. A man she could feel safe with.

A man who could give her the world and back up every word I ever said to her.

Only problem? I had no idea where the hell she was.

At first, I tried to find her. I kept tabs on her parents, asked around about her.

But Shaniya? She was a damn ghost. She had no social media, no pictures, no posts about her living her best life in Houston.

It was like she'd just . . . vanished. And that shit drove me crazy.

Because I needed to know, did she miss me the way I missed her? Did she ever think about me late at night, wondering if I was okay? Did she ever regret leaving? Or worse—did she forget about me completely?

Chase was still my right-hand. His ass was still wild as hell. He was still talking reckless as fuck, and still the only person who knew just how bad Shaniya's absence was fucking me up.

I leaned back in my chair, staring at my laptop screen, tryna focus, but my mind was gone.

“Bruh, what the hell are you over there thinking so hard about?”

Chase sat across from me, brows raised, popping fries in his mouth like he wasn't the nosiest damn dude alive.

I exhaled through my nose, rubbing my hands together. “Nothing.”

He snorted. “Yeah, aight. Nothing looks a whole lot like Shaniya's name floating through your big ass head.”

I shot him a look. “Man, shut the fuck up.”

Chase grinned, shaking his head. “See, that’s your problem. You still acting like she ain’t got you wrapped up. Four years later, and you still over there stressing.”

I didn’t even bother lying. What was the point?

I just sighed, deep, shaking my head. “She ain’t just some girl, bro.”

Chase chewed slowly, watchin’ me. “I know, bro.”

Silence sat between us for a second before he leaned forward. “So, what you gon’ do? Sit here another four years hoping she magically shows up? Or you gon’ move differently?”

I clenched my jaw, feeling that familiar burn in my chest.

Chase wiped his hands on a napkin, leaning back in his chair. “Look, bro, all jokes aside, I get it. She was the one. There ain’t no replacing that.”

I nodded, jaw still tight.

“But it’s been four years. If you really wanna find her, you gon’ have to actually fucking look, nigga.”

I frowned. “You think I ain’t thought about that? I’ve been looking. It ain’t like she’s on social media like that. And I ain’t tryna be one of those stalker-ass niggas, hitting up her mama, asking where she at.”

Chase smirked. “Well, good news. You ain’t gotta do all that.”

I gave him a side-eye. “Fuck you mean?”

He pulled out his phone, scrolled for a second, then flipped the screen toward me. The caption read:

Texas Southern University.

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology – Shaniya Stiles.

My heart damn near stopped.

I stared at the screen, my whole body tight as hell.

“You deadass?” I asked, my voice low.

Chase nodded. “She was tagged in a picture by some fine ass girl named Daniale. You know I am social media heavy. All I had to do was put two and two together.”

I was already grabbing my keys.

Chase laughed. “Damn, you ain’t even gon’ think about it first?”

“Nah.” I stood up, sliding my cap on. “I done did all the thinking I needed to. It’s time to move.”

The Houston heat slapped me the minute I stepped out the house to get in my car, but it didn’t matter. I drove through Houston with one thought on my mind: I wasn’t losing her again.

I didn’t care if she was in class. I didn’t care if she cursed me out or gave me the same silence she left with.

I didn't give a fuck if she was mad. I was pulling up on her outta nowhere.

I just needed to see her. Face to face. No more guessing.

No more dreaming. No more trying to replace her with women who didn't even own a fraction of her essence.

It was time. I wasn't letting her go again.

Not now. Not ever. Let her scream. Let her cry.

Let her throw every wall up she could think of.

I'd climb every single one. Because even after four years?

Shaniya Stiles was still mine. She just didn't know it yet.

I needed her to know that no matter how much time passed, no matter how far she ran—I was always gon' come for her.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

Finding Her Strength

Four years. Four long-ass, soul-stretching, bone-deep years of learning how to breathe again.

Four years of unlearning survival just to make room for healing.

Four years of trying to figure out who the hell I was without Silas's laugh echoing through the house, without the humid, soulful buzz of New Orleans wrapping me up like a second skin, and without the pieces of the girl I used to be.

And I wasn't gon' lie—it damn near broke me.

The silence after losing him wasn't quiet. It was loud. Screaming. Haunting. It crawled under my skin and made a home there, sitting on my chest so heavy some nights I swore I was being buried alive.

But I survived. Somehow, with cracked ribs and shattered dreams, I found myself again.

At first, I hated Houston. The way the air felt different—too clean, too unfamiliar.

The way the roads were wide and rude and didn't smell like seafood boils or corner store incense.

People here smiled too damn easy. What the hell were they so damn happy about out here?

They talked too slow. Nobody yelled from the porch or blasted bounce music at random hours of the day.

I felt like I was dropped into somebody else's story and told to make it mine.

But grief had hands. And it would either choke the life outta you or teach you how to bob and weave.

Eventually, I learned how to fight back. I learned how to tread the water I was drowning in.

I fought therapy hard in the beginning. Like, Mayweather and Mike Tyson tag team kind of fight. I wasn't about to sit in a stiff-ass chair across from some Bette Midler knockoff scribbling notes and blinking all soft at me like I was a wounded puppy. No ma'am.

But then came Mrs. Scott.

A beautiful, no-nonsense Black woman with thick locs, gold bangles, and a voice that could calm a riot.

She had this look—one that sliced right through your bullshit and made you sit up straight without saying a word.

That woman didn't need a clipboard to read me.

She had divine discernment . I swear she was sent straight from the Lord and the ancestors with a mission to snatch me outta my darkness.

“You gon’ let this pain define you, baby?” she asked one session, her tone calm but firm. “Or you gon’ take it, break it, and turn it into power?”

At the time, I didn't have the words. Selective mutism is what the doctors stated I had developed from such a traumatic experience. But her question lived in my head rent-free. And eventually, I answered it.

I graduated high school with my high school diploma and associate's degree in sociology since I was in the dual credit program.

I drowned myself in my studies. Once I got to college I changed my major to psychology and graduated early.

I was interested in becoming a licensed professional counselor.

Not because I was trying to be anybody's savior, but because I knew what it felt like to be voiceless.

I understood firsthand how it felt to sit in silence so long you started to forget your own name.

How grief or trauma so deep could make you question your own existence and if you wanted to live or die yourself.

If I could be the person to pull someone out of that place, to show them they still mattered, then maybe—just maybe—my pain served a purpose.

But listen, if we were being honest? If it wasn't for Daniale, I wouldn't have made it past semester one.

That girl? She was a whole damn experience. She walked into my life loud, unbothered, and covered in confidence. Her nails are always sharp, and edges always laid. Her mouth was reckless as hell, and she loved me like she'd known me since the womb.

“Girl, you really tryna be Mother Teresa out here?” she teased one night, sprawled on my couch with her bonnet halfway off, eating my fries with her crusty lil’ toes tucked in my throw blanket like she paid bills.

I rolled my eyes. “It ain’t like that, Dani.”

She scoffed. “It’s exactly like that. You out here fixing everybody’s childhood trauma but still jump every time you see a man with waves and tattoos.”

“I’m working on myself.”

She crossed her arms and stared at me like a disappointed auntie. “Sis . . . the last time you had a man touch you, we still had to wear masks and wipe down our groceries. I know your coochie got abandonment issues.”

“Dani!” I screamed, choking on my water.

She fell out laughing, her cackles shaking the couch. “I’m just sayin’! That cat needs some TLC, and you out here actin’ like celibacy was part of your scholarship.”

I threw a pillow at her head, but she caught it like a wide receiver and kept talking.

“I’m just concerned. You got degrees, glowing skin, good credit, and hair that moves when the wind blows. But you still scared of love.”

I paused. That part hit.

Daniale must’ve seen it too, because her tone shifted. She sat up, face serious now. “Do you ever think about him?”

My throat tightened. “Who?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t do that. You know who. Jacory.”

I looked down at my hands, fingers curling into my lap. “I moved on.”

“Lies. You still be listening to Keyshia Cole like it’s 2006.”

I cracked a small smile. “You ain’t got no damn sense.”

She leaned closer. “You still love him.”

“I don’t know,” I whispered.

“You do.”

I shrugged. “It’s been four years.”

“And that boy is still in your bones.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I’m scared.”

“Of what?” she asked.

I finally looked at her. “What if I find him and he’s moved on? Got a wife, kids . . . a goldendoodle named Loyalty ?”

Daniale blinked. “Girl . . . what in the Tyler Perry plotline?”

I laughed through my tears, and she grinned, pulling me into a side hug.

“Look, Yaya . . . all I’m sayin’ is, you deserve love. Real love. That Jacory kinda love. The ‘I will crash out behind you’ love.” Her voice softened. “You already

healed yourself. Now it's time to let somebody else pour into you too.”

I stayed quiet, staring at the ceiling. I didn't say it out loud, but the truth was . . . she was right. Jacory was still in me. Still woven into my spirit like scripture. Still humming under my skin like a song I never finished.

And maybe . . . just maybe . . . I was finally ready to sing the rest.

The Push

One thing about me? I didn't do pity parties.

I didn't bring chips to them, I didn't RSVP, and I damn sure didn't bringing a bottle.

If you were my people, you didn't get to sit in your sadness like it was a studio apartment and pay rent with regret.

Nah. I was the type of friend that kicked the damn door in, flipped the lights on, and said get up, bitch, we got healing to do .

Shaniya had been playin' hide-and-seek with her heart for years now—sittin' in her silence like it was a safety net, when really, it was a straitjacket.

I let her grieve. I let her hide. But now?

Time was up. My best friend was drowning in unspoken trauma and unfinished love, and I was tired of watchin' her act like she didn't have the strength to swim when I knew she was a whole damn wave.

When I first got her to talk about her life in New Orleans, prior to coming to Texas, all she did was gush about her boy trio: Silas, Chase, and her secret love Jacory. I felt like I knew him. He was good for her.

So, I pulled up to her apartment like the repo man, banging on the door like I had a warrant and bad news.

“Ayo, open this door before I tell the landlord you are renting this joint out to spirits, 'cause you ghosting life right now, sis!”

A few seconds later, she cracked the door open—barefoot, bonnet crooked, big-ass T-shirt hangin’ off her like it was tryna slide into depression right along with her.

I looked her up and down and sighed dramatically, hand on my hip like I was Auntie Patti at the family reunion.

I raised a brow. “You look like heartbreak put you in a chokehold and Nightmares from the Bottom is playin’ in the background like your life got a sad-ass soundtrack.”

She rolled her eyes and shuffled back inside like an old lady who was mad that the club was too loud. “Good morning to you too, Dani.”

I walked in behind her, sniffing dramatically. “It smells like depression and unseasoned microwave meals in here.”

She flopped on the couch and pulled a throw blanket over her legs. I snatched it off with zero hesitation.

She yelled, “Ain’t nobody asked you to show up with all this energy.”

“Nah. You don’t get to hide under polyester sadness today. I came to drag you into the light, and I brought snacks.”

She groaned. “Daniale?—”

“Don’t you Daniale me like I ain’t been watchin’ you mourn like you got a part-time job in misery,” I snapped, sittin’ crisscross in the chair like I was hosting a hood TED Talk.

I hit her with the truth before she could build any mental barricades.

“We gon’ talk about Jacory today.”

Instant lockup. Her whole soul hit freeze frame like a scene out of a BET drama. The silence in the room got thick enough to chew.

She shook her head, eyes hard. “No, we are not.”

“Yes, the hell we are.”

“No, Dani?—”

“Yes, Yaya .”

She exhaled hard, trying to gather her attitude. But I had been trained in petty warfare and psychological precision.

“You are still in love with that man,” I said matter-of-factly, watching her mouth twitch.

“You still sleep on the left side of the bed like he gon’ slide in behind you.

You still cook red beans and rice on Mondays like you are back in New Orleans, waitin’ on him to pull up.

You are still replaying every Lil Wayne verse like it was your personal diary.

Talking ’bout ‘sleeping at the top, nightmares of the bottom’ like that man ain’t your top and your bottom, your north, south, east and center. ”

That was when I saw it. Her defenses faltered. Her lips parted. Her eyes softened just enough to show the storm behind them.

“I left him,” she whispered. “I walked away like a damn coward. I didn’t even say goodbye to him.”

Her voice cracked, and I sat forward, softer this time. “You ain’t a coward, Shaniya. You were broken. And broken people don’t always know how to love when they are drowning, hun.”

She looked away, eyes glossing over like she was tryna hold back the flood.

“I feel like I don’t deserve him, happiness, or anything good . . . If I reach for that kind of love again, the universe gon’ snatch it right back,” she whispered, “like it always does.”

And there it was—the real reason.

“You think Silas died because of you. You think Jacory is hurt because of you. So now you are punishing yourself like pain is gon’ bring balance to the universe.”

She bit her lip, shaking her head. I watched her eyes gloss over, her mouth part like she was gon’ say something, but then it just trembled, and she dropped her head into her hands.

“If I find Jacory, . . . and he still loves me? That might break me more than losing him ever did.”

I sat up straight, crossing my arms like I was on Judge Mathis.

“Let me tell you what I know. Niggas like Jacory? The real ones? They don’t fold.

They don't ghost you and move on. They wait . They build . They love you from a distance, and if he's anything like the man I peeped in your throwback stories—you have been sittin' on a forever kind of love."

She blinked slowly, trying to process.

"And bitch," I said, waving my phone like a damn wand, "I already found him."

She snapped to attention so fast I thought her neck cracked.

"You what !"

I turned the screen toward her.

Jacory. Present day. Beard full. Locs flowing down his back. Skin glowed up. Smile strong. He looked like Black royalty dipped in ambition and dripped in grown-man peace.

Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh my God . . ."

"I know, sis," I said proudly. " No Ceilings Jacory. Ice Cream Paint Job Jacory. Pull up like, I got her, you don't Jacory. He still looks like he'd knock over a table if somebody called you out your name in a Target."

She was shaking now. Not scared—overwhelmed.

I stepped over, kneeled in front of her, and took her hands.

"Stop hiding from love because you think you ain't worthy.

You've been through hell, yeah. But you came out like a 'I wipe my tears with dollar

bills, now I smell like Chanel' type bad bitch.

You built yourself back up from ashes. You walk like strength and cry like softness, and that balance? That's beauty."

She sniffled, and I wiped the tears off her cheeks like a mama.

"Shaniya Stiles, you are not just worthy of love—you deserve it. All of it. Messy, deep, real, loud, protective, shout-it-from-the-rooftop love."

She looked at me with all the heartbreak she'd been carrying.

And then, she nodded. It wasn't big. It wasn't loud. But it was the beginning of her saying, "I'm ready."

I stood up, winked, and threw her a hoodie.

"Put this on. Let's go get your man."

Because "6 Foot 7 Foot" said it best?—

"I speak the truth, but I guess that's a foreign language to y'all."

And love? Love is always gon' sound like home when it's spoken in your name.

Because some people? Some people were the kind of homes that weren't made of bricks—they were made of love. And Jacory? He was her address, her roots, her redemption. I was just the GPS tryna get her there.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

Houston, TX

Some people said time healed everything. They fucking lied.

Four long-ass years since I last saw her.

Four damn years since she left without a damn word.

Since I had to stand there like a damn fool watching my whole world drive away.

And still? She was in my bones. Deep. Like marrow-deep.

Her name was carved in every breath I took, and her memory lived in the pauses between my heartbeats.

I tried to move on. God knew I did. I tried to drown her out with work, ambition, and distractions.

I let the streets pull me into motion so I wouldn't feel the stillness she left behind.

I tried different faces, different names, different bodies.

But none of them tasted like her laugh. None of them smelled like the vanilla and brown sugar she wore on her collarbone.

None of them had that energy, that soft thunder that only Shaniya could carry.

She was the dream I couldn't wake up from and the nightmare I couldn't sleep through.

I left Chase so fast to head to the area where the university Shaniya attended was located without any real plan.

I just hoped I would see her or catch her in passing, so when I received a DM from the same Daniale chick that Chase showed me in the picture with my baby, I never responded to something so fast in my life.

She gave me the third-degree on not playing with her "sis" first, but eventually let me know that Shaniya frequents the bookstore on campus.

She also told me to let her know if I needed her assistance because my baby was a track star.

I appreciated her for real and was happy Yaya found somebody to look out for her like I used to.

And now, outta nowhere, she was just there.

Standing right in front of me. Like she hadn't ripped my heart out and took it with her to Texas when she left.

Parading around like she wasn't the reason every damn love song made me mad.

Simply existing as if she hadn't haunted my damn prayers every night since.

She didn't see me at first. She was walking through the bookstore, fingers gliding across covers like they were silk.

The way she moved—calm, graceful, like poetry before it's read aloud in a dimly lit lounge.

I didn't even know why I walked in there—I had just been killing time.

However, life had a funny-ass way of showing you mercy when you had given up on it. And there she was.

Same caramel skin—glowing like the sun kissed her just 'cause it missed her.

Same long lashes that curled up like they were praying for something.

Same mouth. Soft. Full. The kind of lips you write poems about and then pretend you weren't soft enough to write no damn poems.

She was wearing this little sundress. Cream and butter yellow. Simple. Modest. But on her? Baby . . . she might as well had been the goddess of warmth. She didn't need no makeup, no jewelry, no extra shit. Just existing was enough to knock the breath outta me.

And just like that, my legs moved. My heart moved. My soul damn near leapt out my chest. I was across that store in seconds, walking toward her like she was a magnetic field and I'd been made of steel this whole time.

When she turned toward me, our eyes instantly locked.

Time? That shit stopped like God hit pause on the whole world just so I could see her clearly.

She froze. Her fingers tightened around the book she was holding, and I saw it, the flicker of recognition. There was a storm brewing behind her eyes. The way her chest

rose up and down methodically as if she forgot how to breathe.

Her lips parted, just barely. I waited for the sound. For my name to come out her mouth. But she snapped it shut and turned.

Like she could just walk away again.

Nah.

I moved before she took a second step. Reached out and wrapped my fingers around her wrist—gently, like I remembered how she didn't like to be startled. Like I still knew her body better than she did.

“Don't you dare,” I said, low, just above a whisper.

Her breath caught. She didn't pull away. Didn't turn, either. But that pause in her steps? That was enough for me to slide in. I stepped closer. Her back was still to me, the heat of her skin radiating into my chest like a flame I'd never stopped craving.

“You really gon' act like you don't see me, Yaya?”

That name hit her. I saw the shudder roll down her spine.

She turned.

And when our eyes met? My whole damn world stitched itself back together like I'd been cracked down the middle and only she had the thread to sew me back up.

She looked different. Grown. Fuller. Like life had kissed her and cut her in equal measure. But she was still mine. Still her. Still the girl who used to hum under her breath when she was nervous. Still the girl who used to doodle hearts in her notebook

when she thought nobody was watching.

“Jacory . . .” she muttered breathlessly.

I closed my eyes.

That voice. That voice was the sound of safety and storms. If Heaven had an accent, it would sound like her whispering my name.

I opened my eyes, stepping in like I belonged in her space. 'Cause I did.

“It’s really you.”

She looked like she didn’t know what to say. Hell, she looked like she didn’t know how to be here with me again. And I got it. I really did. But I needed her to understand—this was no accident.

“You look . . .” she started then trailed off.

I caught her hand, slid my fingers through hers like I was reclaiming territory.

“You ain’t even gotta say it, baby. I already know.”

She blinked. “Know what?”

“That you missed me.”

She scoffed, tried to roll her eyes. “You’re still cocky as hell.”

“Yeah.” I smirked. “And you still in love with me, though.”

Her fingers tensed. Her lips parted again. And that silence? That was a confession.

She tried to pull back. “Jacory, we shouldn’t?—”

“Nah.” I shook my head. “You don’t get to do that. Not again.”

She looked like she wanted to bolt. Her heart was racing, and her fear was screaming, but I wasn’t allowing her to run.

“You left, Yaya. And I let you. I let you walk away because I thought maybe that’s what you needed to heal. But you know what I needed?” I leaned in, voice rough now. “You.”

Her lips trembled. “You don’t know what I’ve been through . . .”

“I don’t care,” I said, my thumb brushing her cheek. “Whatever it is, we gon’ walk through it together.”

My voice broke.

“You mean more to me than air. Than blood. You in every beat of my chest. Every time I exhale, your name’s in it. You are the reason I kept goin’, baby. You are the reason I built myself up.”

I took her hand and placed it on my chest.

“You feel that? That heartbeat? That’s been yours since we were kids. Ain’t nobody else ever had it.”

Her eyes filled, spilling tears she didn’t even try to catch.

“This time,” I whispered, leaning in, pressing my forehead to hers. “This time, I’m not letting you go. I don’t care what happened. I don’t care what you think you don’t deserve. I’m gon’ spend the rest of my life showin’ you that you deserve every good thing this world got to give.”

She didn’t speak.

But she didn’t run.

And in that moment? That was enough.

For now.

But I was coming for all of her. Her heart. Her fears. Her forever. Because love like this? It wasn’t made to be temporary.

It was made to last lifetimes.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The Fear of Love

Jacory's words sat heavy in my chest, clinging to me like they had roots—roots with memories, promises, and prayers tangled up in 'em. Like they'd dug in deep, takin' up space where my pain had once lived.

“This time, baby, I'm not letting you go.”

I wanted to believe him. God, I did. But believing?

Believing meant letting go of the fear. And fear?

That bitch had moved in, redecorated my insides, threw up curtains of doubt, and laid carpet made of grief.

It didn't just settle—it nested. Like a crow on a wire, watchin', whisperin' lies: You don't get forever.

You barely got now. You ain't worthy of what you lost.

Especially Silas.

My grip on the steering wheel turned into a death hold.

The plastic groaned beneath my fingers—crick, crack, pop—like even it was begging me to let go.

My heart? It was acting a damn fool, slamming against my ribs like it was running from something Boom-boom.

Boom-boom . Each beat a scream, a memory, a regret.

I should've left. My foot hovered over the gas pedal, but I stayed planted like my car had turned into a confessional booth and I couldn't drive away until I came clean. But clean was never something I felt. Not since that night.

Behind me stood Jacory, not just a memory, not just a boy with a smile that could light up the darkest corner of my spirit. A man now. Solid. Steady. And still staring at me like I hung the damn moon.

His love had grown like wild ivy—wrapped around your ribs and bloomed even when you neglected it.

It had patience. Strength. And fire. But I didn't know if I was built to be loved like that.

I didn't know if I was still made of the right kind of steel, or if I was just shattered glass held together with invisible tape.

I didn't even know I was cryin' till I caught myself in the rearview mirror. My eyes were swollen, bottom lip quivering, cheeks streaked with tears like little roadmaps of pain.

Brrrrt-brrrt.

My phone vibrated so loud, I jumped. It was like it slapped me outta my spiral.

Of course, it was Daniale.

I picked up like I was ready for the sermon she had loaded in her throat.

“Bitch, you better not be sittin’ in that car lookin’ like a bootleg Lifetime movie extra!”

I sniffed. “Hi to you too.”

“Don’t ‘hi’ me, ho. You saw him, didn’t you? You saw Jacory?”

“Yeah . . .”

“And now you sittin’ in your car cryin’ like somebody canceled Girlfriends mid-season? Girl, get the hell outta here.”

I wiped my nose, shaking my head. “I walked out before I could say something stupid.”

“Oh, so you did somethin’ even stupider. Cool. Love that for you.”

“Dani—”

“Nah, I’m talkin’. You sittin’ there lookin’ like a Fantasia lyric come to life. That man would gargle hot sauce just to hear you say his name. He’d swallow glass and chase it with your tears. He would write odes to your elbows if you let him.”

I wheezed a laugh. “You are nasty and dramatic.”

“I’m honest, and you are lucky to have me. You over there stuck in a thought spiral while he sittin’ in that bookstore looking like a renaissance sculpture dipped in chocolate dreams, wondering why his soul just walked out the door.”

The silence on my end said it all.

“You love him, Shaniya. I know it. He knows it. Hell, strangers on the internet know it. But you convinced yourself love means losing. That if you let him in too close, he gon’ disappear like everybody else you’ve buried in your heart. But, girl . . . he’s not a ghost. He’s your anchor.”

I blinked fast, tears falling again. “You think I deserve him?”

“Bitch. Yes. You deserve a man who would fight off a swarm of wasps just to warm up your car. You deserve forehead kisses, real apologies, and deep-fried loyalty. And Jacory? He been ready. Since y’all was sharing Capri Suns and chubby crushes.”

I full-on laughed. Chest shook. Pain cracked open just enough to let air in.

“He don’t even see nobody else. He acts like you are the last Wi-Fi bar on a damn airplane and his soul got five tabs open.”

“Stop .”

“I will not. You left that man on read for four years and now you are scared to press ‘reply.’ Sis. Either go see him or start a YouTube channel about heartbreak and herbal tea.”

“Okay, damn.”

“Nope. Don’t ‘okay, damn’ me. I already texted him. Told him where you are gon’ be. If you got any parts of your ovaries intact, you better walk in that café like it’s a courtroom and you pleading your case for love.”

“Wait. You what?”

“Oh, don’t act brand new, baby girl. Pull up, or I will pull up for you.”

Click.

The café smelled like cinnamon wishes and caramel warmth. Soft jazz played like the room had a pulse, and my nerves? They were doing backflips in combat boots.

I tucked myself into the farthest booth, cappuccino untouched, staring at the door like it held my fate. Every time it creaked open, my breath hitched.

Then he walked in.

Jacory.

Tall like truth. Built like answers. Brown skin glowing like dusk loved him. His chain glinted like a promise, and his walk? A smooth glide that said, “I been looking for you.”

He spotted me. No hesitation. Just that slow, syrupy smirk.

He slid into the booth across from me like we had unfinished poetry to write.

“Hey, beautiful. You really thought I wasn’t gon’ come, my love?”

My heart thudded so loud I swore the windows heard it.

“I wasn’t sure you’d want to.”

He leaned forward, takin’ my hand like he was reminding me what safe felt like.

“Then you don’t know me like you used to, baby.”

“Why . . . why didn’t you hate me?”

He exhaled, stood up. My chest clenched—till he slid next to me, arms already wrapping around my waist like home.

“Because I love you. I never stopped. Not when you left. Not when I wondered why. I didn’t just love the girl—I love the woman. The one who still shows up even after life knocked her down. You have been stuck in my spirit like a Sunday hymn.”

Tears blurred my vision. He turned to me, his thumb catching each one.

“My love for you ain’t some teenage dream. It’s real. It’s loud. It’s got roots and wings. I ain’t scared of the dark ’cause I know the light got your name on it.”

He tilted his head, smilin’ soft.

“You my peace, Yaya. You my poem, my prayer, my forever. I didn’t wait all this time just to lose you again.”

I cried harder, but it felt good this time. Like I was releasin’ ghosts.

“You always say the right thing.”

He grinned. “That’s ’cause I mean every syllable.”

Brrt. Brrt.

My phone buzzed.

Daniale:

Did he cry yet or y'all still bein' dramatic?

I passed it to him.

He laughed. "Yo, she wild."

"She's you. Just with edges."

"Say less."

And for the first time in what felt like forever, I didn't feel broken. I felt like I was finally, finally home.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

A Man with a Plan

I had never been the type to chase no woman.

Never had to. My presence alone had always been enough—tall, chocolate, and dipped in divine timing.

But Shaniya? She was the one exception to every rule I ever lived by.

The one girl I never got over, the one woman I would spin the world backwards for, just to have another chance.

The love of my damn life, in brains and beauty, sitting across from me like she hadn't just resurrected every dead part of me by walking back into my orbit.

She had this soft ass glow about her, even when she looked like she was tryna fold herself into the corner of the café.

Her hands wrapped around her cup like it was keeping her from falling apart.

Her nails were fresh, lilac with little gold accents, the kind of detail only a woman who still gave a damn about herself would rock.

But her eyes? They told a whole different story.

Still those same rich mocha brown windows I used to lose sleep over, but now?

They were heavier. Like they had seen some shit.

Like they were carrying grief in the corners and guilt in the shadows.

I leaned back in my chair, just watching her.

Soaking her in like she was the last drop of water on a hot-ass Houston day.

The type of beauty that wasn't loud, but it demanded attention anyway.

Her hair was longer now, pulled back in a soft bun with some curls hanging out like they didn't follow no rules either.

That was her all day—sweet, stubborn, and still fine as hell without even trying.

“How long have you been in Houston, baby?” I asked, keeping my tone low and steady, like I didn't want to spook her.

She glanced up from her cup, biting the inside of her cheek before answering.

“Four years,” she said softly. “Since . . .”

She trailed off, but I already knew what she didn't say.

I nodded. “Since you left me.”

Her whole body stilled. Her grip on the cup tightened like it was the only thing keeping her grounded.

“Jacory,” she started, her voice barely a whisper.

“Nah.” I shook my head and leaned forward, my elbows pressing into the table. “We gon’ talk about it, Yaya. I told you, ain’t no more running, baby. Not from me.”

She exhaled, long and heavy, like the truth weighed more than her chest could hold.

“I ain’t mean to hurt you,” she whispered.

My jaw flexed hard. “You ain’t mean to, but you did. It’s not even that you left. You couldn’t control that shit at all. It’s the fact that you cut me out your entire life when you did. No contact. Straight silence.”

And it was like I could feel the memory of that pain crawl back up from my gut. That night. That silence. That goodbye I never got. It still haunted me like unfinished business.

She looked at me then, really looked at me, like she was tryna measure just how much damage she’d done. But she didn’t even know the half of it.

I ran a hand down my face, steadying my voice. “Four years, Yaya. Four years of wondering if you ever thought about me. If you missed me like I missed you. If you still had love for me buried underneath all that pain you’ve been carrying.”

She closed her eyes, her lashes trembling. “Every damn day.”

That confession hit me harder than a bullet to the chest. It knocked the wind outta me and kissed my soul at the same time.

I reached across the table, my hand sliding over hers. She flinched at first, like touch was foreign to her now, like love was a language she forgot how to speak. But after a moment, she let me hold her. And that was all the answer I needed.

“You think I came all this way to let you slip away again?” I asked, my voice dropping low, rough around the edges, filled with every ounce of the love I had left in me.

Her breath hitched.

“You don’t know me anymore, Jacory,” she whispered.

“Nah, baby,” I said, tilting my head as I studied her.

“I know you better than anybody. I know the way your voice gets real soft when you’re scared, how you tuck your hair behind your ear when you’re tryna stay strong, how you laugh with your whole body when you finally let yourself feel joy.

I know the way you shut down when you feel like you gotta protect everybody but yourself. ”

She looked down again.

“You’re still scared,” I said gently. “Still afraid to lose me like you lost Silas.”

Her body tensed. Her whole aura dimmed like I’d reached too deep, pulled at a wound that never healed right.

But I didn’t flinch. I squeezed her hand tighter. “I get it. But, baby, you don’t have to carry that fear alone. I ain’t him. I’m still here. I’m still breathing. And I’m not going anywhere.”

She shook her head slowly. “You can’t promise that.”

“I can,” I said firmly, locking my eyes with hers. “I can promise I will fight every

damn day to stay. I will love you through every breakdown, every tear, every wall you try to build up between us. I will climb that shit barefoot if I have to.”

She blinked fast, tears threatening to fall. But she was stubborn as hell—wouldn’t let them fall in front of me.

“I waited too long for this,” I added. “I’m ready when you are. Been ready. But I need to know if you are ready to stop being scared and start being loved the way you deserve.”

Silence wrapped around us again, thick and heavy like summer heat.

She pulled her hand away gently, her fingers trembling. “I need time.”

I nodded, standing up slowly, not in anger but in understanding.

“Take all the time you need,” I said. “Just know . . . I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

I leaned down, close enough to smell the soft vanilla she always wore, and whispered in her ear, “You’ve always been mine, Yaya. That ain’t ever changed.”

She sucked in a breath, eyes wide, heart beating wild in her chest like it wanted to leap out and follow me.

And I let her sit there with that. Because for the first time in four years, she was gon’ have to come to me. On her own time. With her whole heart. And when she did? I’d be ready.

Because I wasn’t just a man in love; I was a man with a plan.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

Confronting the Past

I spent years avoiding it. Drowning it out with liquor, with late nights, with women I didn't even bother learning the names of.

I told myself what happened to Silas wasn't my fault.

Told myself that if I said it enough times, I might actually believe it.

But the truth? The truth had been haunting me since the night we put him in the ground.

And I had been running from it ever since.

We were supposed to go meet up with Keem's scarface-ass together.

I missed his phone call, got there late, and witnessed everything from the shadows.

I cringe every time I think about how I actually froze in fear, in shock. Everything happened so damn fast.

New Orleans had been the same since he died.

Same streets. Same people. Same ghosts. I still couldn't walk past the spot where it happened without hearing the gunshots in my head.

Without hearing Shaniya's screams. Without remembering how Jacory had to hold

me back from spinning the block and killing every nigga in sight.

I was ready to die that night. Ready to go out behind my brother. But Jacory stopped me. He told me it wasn't worth it. Told me we had to be smarter. And ever since then? I was stuck in this limbo between wanting revenge and knowing that revenge wouldn't bring him back.

I met Daniale when I came out to Houston to visit Jacory. First time I saw her? She was talking shit to some dude outside the bar, reading him for filth, while I noticed my sister Shaniya trying to drag her away.

I remember thinking damn, she is dangerous. And I liked that. We started seeing each other after that. But it wasn't what people thought. I wasn't tryna cuff her. And she damn sure wasn't tryna be cuffed. At least, that was what we told ourselves. But somehow, we kept ending up together.

Talkin' shit. Drinking. Doing other things we both pretended didn't mean nothing.

Until one night, she hit me with some shit I wasn't ready for.

"You still blaming yourself for Silas, huh?"

I froze mid-pour, the Henny in my glass damn near spilling over.

I looked up, my jaw tight. "The fuck you talking about?"

She leaned back on the couch, crossing her arms. "You heard me."

I clenched my teeth. "I ain't got nothing to say about that."

She scoffed. "That's 'cause you are too busy lying to yourself to actually face it."

I exhaled, rubbing a hand down my face.

I didn't wanna do this. Not tonight. Not with her.

"Look, Dani." I sighed. "I ain't tryna have this conversation, ma."

"Then what conversation you tryna have, Chase?" she shot back, brows raising.

"Cause I ain't gon' sit here and act like you don't carry that man's death like it was your bullets that killed him."

My stomach turned. I looked away. She leaned forward, her voice softer now.

"Have you ever actually talked about it?" she asked. "Or do you just let it sit in your chest and eat you alive?"

I let out a short laugh, but it was empty. "Talk about it? To who?"

She shrugged. "To me."

I shook my head. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"Cause you have been running from this shit for four years, Chase. Maybe it's time you stop."

I clenched my fists. I felt the anger boiling up, but I didn't let it spill over. Not at her. She didn't deserve that.

I ran a hand over my beard, trying to keep my shit together.

"You don't get it," I muttered. "Silas was my boy. My brother. He was supposed to be straight. We were supposed to have his back."

Daniale nodded. “But you ain’t pull the trigger, Chase.”

“Shit, I ain’t stop it either.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “And how exactly were you supposed to do that?”

I swallowed hard. “I shoulda been with him that night. I shoulda?—”

“Shoulda, coulda, woulda.” She cut me off. “But that ain’t reality, is it?”

I glared at her. “The fuck you want me to say, Dani? That I ain’t fail him?

That I don’t still wake up hearing his name?

That I ain’t still see the blood on the pavement every time I close my damn eyes?

We were meeting up with Keem to pay him back the money we’d gotten for Shaniya’s medical bills.

It was supposed to be a drop off and go type deal and I couldn’t even be on fucking time.

Then when I saw the car roll up I fucking froze... ”

She stared at me, her expression unreadable. Then she moved closer, sliding onto the coffee table in front of me, taking my hands in hers.

“You think he’d want you living like this?” she asked softly.

My throat locked up.

I shook my head. “I dunno.”

“Yes, you do.”

I let out a breath, long and slow.

“You were his boy, Chase,” she murmured. “You think he’d want you stuck in the same pain that took him from you?”

I exhaled, shaky as hell. And I didn’t have an answer.

Daniale didn’t push me. She didn’t force me to keep talking.

She just sat there, holding my hands, keeping me grounded.

And for the first time in four years, I felt . . . lighter. Like maybe I could breathe again. Like maybe, just maybe, I wasn’t meant to carry this alone.

I looked up at her, really looked at her. And for the first time, I let myself admit it.

That I felt something real for this woman.

Something dangerous. Something that could either fix me . . . or break me worse than I already was.

I smirked, tryna lighten the mood. “You really got me out here feeling emotions and shit.”

She grinned. “I got that effect on people.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “You a handful, you know that?”

She raised a brow. “You saying you can’t handle me?”

I leaned in, my voice dropping to a low murmur.

“Baby, I could handle you in ways you ain’t even ready for.”

Her eyes flashed. And I knew, this thing between us? It wasn’t going away. Not now. Not ever.

I exhaled, sitting back.

“I can’t change what happened,” I admitted. “But I can try to do better moving forward.”

Daniale smiled. “That’s all you ever needed to do.”

I nodded slowly, letting her words settle in my chest.

Then I smirked, pulling her closer.

“But just so you know, baby,” I murmured, “you keep pressing me like this, you might fuck around and end up falling for me.”

She snorted. “Who said I haven’t already?”

And just like that, I knew I was in big fucking trouble.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

First Date Jitters

I had never been the type to get nervous over no damn date.

I mean, come on—I survived trauma, moved to a whole new city, got my degree, started healing, and somehow didn't lose my mind in the process.

But this? This wasn't just dinner and drinks with some random nigga with a fade and a beard tryna sell dreams. This was Jacory.

This was him . The man who lived in the pages of my past and still somehow ended up between every line of my present.

So yeah. My nerves were tap dancing on my spine like they had Timberlands on.

The sky outside had dipped into a golden-pink gradient, the kind of sunset that made Houston look like it was tryna flirt with you.

Warm breezes danced across my shoulders through the window as I tried to pick the perfect outfit, which felt like trying to pick a weapon in battle—'cause this was war.

War between what I told myself I didn't need and the man I couldn't stop needing.

Daniale was sprawled across my bed like she owned the place, legs crossed, bonnet tilted slightly like it was tired of fighting gravity.

“Bitch, what is the issue!” she barked, launching a pillow at my head with sniper-like

precision. “You done tried on four damn dresses and still talking ’bout, ‘it don’t feel right.’ Baby, you tryna impress your man or the Met Gala?”

I adjusted my neckline in the mirror and shot her a glare. “I just wanna look . . . good.”

She sucked her teeth. “You always look good. Even when you ugly crying on FaceTime with crust in your eye talkin’ ’bout, ‘Dani, what if he don’t want me no mo’.’”

I gasped. “I hate you.”

“And yet, I’m still here like your emotional support bad bitch.”

I finally landed on a wine-red bodycon dress that hugged my hips like it had a crush on me. I grabbed my gloss and hit a final swipe across my lips, still not sure if I wanted to throw up or cry.

“I just . . . I need to breathe,” I mumbled.

“Nah.” Daniale stood up and snapped her fingers like a hood fairy godmother. “You need to stop playing. That man has been ready to risk it all for you since puberty. You were the dream before he had facial hair. Go claim what’s yours.”

And claim I did. Or, at least, I tried to—until life decided to give me a detour in the form of a crusty-ass Houston hoodrat who had the audacity to step in my path with some dollar store confidence and half a lineup.

“Damn, lil’ mama, where yo’ fine ass been hiding at?” he slurred, stepping into my space like he paid rent in my aura.

I gave him the courtesy of a glance and a hard “I’m not interested,” but he kept pressing like a cracked iPhone screen.

“You one of them bougie-ass bitches, huh?”

Cue record scratch.

I turned slowly, my heels clicking against the concrete like punctuation marks in a read session.

“I’m sorry— what did you just say to me?”

This grown man-child had the audacity to smirk, eyes crawling over me like I was an appetizer he couldn’t afford.

“You heard me. Stuck-up, tight-ass, self-righteous ho?—”

And that was when it happened.

Before I could finish rearing back to knock his front teeth into alignment, Jacory came outta nowhere like a damn shadow with purpose and fists. One clean, fluid motion and— CRACK —that man hit the pavement like a bag of wet laundry.

Gasps echoed like background music. Car horns paused. Street noise fell silent like the city held its breath.

Jacory stood over him, chest rising and falling, every muscle in his jaw clenched like he was biting back an entire monologue.

“You done?” he asked, his tone cold enough to frost the windows.

The dude tried to crawl backward, spitting blood onto the concrete like punctuation.

Jacory crouched low, calm and terrifying . “You disrespected a woman. Not just any woman. My woman. You understand the difference?”

My whole body went still. I should’ve been mad. I should’ve stopped him. But my ovaries were doing cartwheels, and my knees were on vacation.

When he finally stood up and turned to me, I was too stunned to speak. His voice was gravel and honey.

“You good, baby?”

I blinked then smirked. “Damn, Jacory. Are you really out here doing Mortal Kombat finishers on folks for me?”

He stepped in close, his cologne curling into my senses like a whispered memory. “Baby, I’d burn this whole city to the ground if it meant keeping you safe.”

My breath hitched. “You gotta stop saying shit like that.”

“Why?” he murmured, his hand grazing my waist. “Because you start thinking about me in ways that make your thighs talk?”

I shoved him playfully. “Shut up.”

He leaned in, smirking. “You shut up.”

We finally made it inside the restaurant. The place was dim, with candles flickering low and jazz humming softly through the air like a memory from a better time. The air was laced with the scent of garlic butter and wine.

“Baby, you still shaking,” Jacory said, leaning across the table. His voice was low, like velvet laced in danger. “You good?”

“I’m fine. You just had to go full Avenger out there.”

He chuckled, sipping his drink. “He had you messed up. That’s all it takes for me to crash out.”

I tried not to blush. I failed.

Then his eyes softened. “You spend so much time healing everybody else, baby. Who is helping you heal?”

I went quiet. The truth sat between us, heavy and hungry.

Jacory reached across the table, lacing his fingers with mine.

“I’ve been waitin’ on you. Not just for us to link up, but to love you the way you need. With patience. With passion. With peace.”

I bit my lip. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It is easy,” he said. “Loving you is easy. The world just convinced you it had to be hard.”

That was when I knew I was already his again.

Jacory leaned back, eyes dancing.

“You still tryna pretend like you ain’t all the way in love with me, huh?”

I smirked. “I plead the fifth.”

He grinned wide. “Cool. Just know you are about to be pleading for me later.”

My fork clattered.

“Boy!”

“Don’t ‘boy’ me now. I seen the way you clenched your legs when I laid homie out.”

I covered my face, laughing. “You ain’t got no damn sense.”

He grinned wider. “Nah, but I got you.”

And Lord, help me . . . I wanted to give him everything.

The Breakthrough

I wasn't letting her go again. Not now, or ever. She could run, she could hide behind all them fears, stack every damn emotional sandbag she had around her heart—but I was breakin' through all that shit tonight. I wasn't just fighting for her no more. I was reclaiming what had always been mine.

She sat across from me like a storm I'd been chasing all my life.

Her hands were folded tight in her lap, trembling slightly, like her soul was debating whether to stay or fly away again.

Her lips—soft, swollen, bitten raw from nerves—looked like they'd been wrestling secrets she wasn't ready to speak yet.

Her eyes? They held galaxies. Full of grief, love, confusion, and that same old fire I fell for way back when we were too young to know what forever really meant.

The room was dim, moody like us. Soft yellow light spilled from a low-hanging lamp, painting her caramel skin in this golden glow that made her look damn near celestial.

The scent of jasmine oil and soft vanilla floated from her like temptation wearing a sundress.

I leaned forward, my voice low, vibrating straight from my chest like a bassline made for slow dancing and confessions.

I slid two fingers under her chin, forcing her to look at me. “Tell me the truth, baby,” I murmured, my tone thick like honey and heavier than the silence between us.

She swallowed hard. “About what?”

I smirked, all confidence and quiet command. “You know what.”

She licked her lips, eyes darting like she was tryna find an escape route. But she knew there wasn’t one. Not from me.

Finally, she exhaled. Voice soft, barely there. “I don’t wanna lose you.”

That right there broke something open in me. I exhaled slowly, nodded like I’d been waitin’ on her to admit it.

Then I leaned in—closer, slow as sin, brushed my thumb across her bottom lip, claiming her in the most delicate, yet possessive way possible. “Baby,” I said, deep and certain, “the only way you losing me is if you put me in the ground.”

Her breath hitched. Her lashes fluttered. I could damn near hear her heart hiccup.

“Listen to me, Yaya,” I whispered, every word pouring outta me like a vow. “Ain’t nobody, and I mean nobody, ever gon’ take me from you. Not these streets, not no weak-ass nigga, not no jealous-ass bitch, not no situation, not even God Himself unless Big G take me with you.”

Her eyes filled with tears, those unshed, quiet ones that only came when a woman had been strong for too damn long.

And I wasn’t done.

“I will lay any nigga or bitch down behind you,” I said slowly, “and I’ll smile in my mugshot like it’s my graduation picture.”

Her whole body shuddered. And I meant every single syllable. I wasn’t just tryna impress her. I was tryna make her feel the safety in my soul.

I reached across the table, gently slid my hand over hers—firm but soft, like I was tryna anchor her to me. “You’re scared ’cause you think loving me means losing me. You’re scared ’cause everything good in your life has been ripped from you.”

Her bottom lip trembled. Her fingers gripped mine like she didn’t realize how tight she was holding on till she almost let go.

“But baby,” I whispered, my thumb tracing lazy circles on the back of her hand, “you ain’t gotta be scared of me. You stuck with me now.”

She blinked hard, her breath stuttering in and out like her lungs were learning how to breathe again.

“I’ll love you till I’m gone,” I said, my voice rasped and full of raw devotion. “But not before I spend every single day making you feel like you were never supposed to cry alone in the first place.”

Her whole body went still, quiet like the calm before a thunderstorm. I leaned back just a little, gave her space, just enough for her to feel the loss.

And just like that, she twitched. Her fingers reached for mine again on instinct. I chuckled low, slow, smug.

“Ain’t no point in fighting it, baby,” I said, leaning in again, lowering my voice to a hush just between us. “You mine. And I been yours. So stop acting like you don’t feel

it.”

She licked her lips, cheeks flushed, thighs pressing together under the table. I caught it. Oh, I saw it. Felt it. That tension. That need. That love.

“Jacory . . .” she started, barely breathing my name like it was the first prayer she ever said out loud.

“Yeah, my love?” I asked, my voice velvet-wrapped steel.

“ . . . I’m tired of running.”

That right there broke me open in a way I couldn’t put in words. It felt like hearing a favorite song that hadn’t played in years. Like your heart finding its rhythm after beating off-key for too damn long.

“Then stop, baby,” I whispered, standing and going ’round to her side.

I pulled her up gently, pressing my chest to hers, my arms locking behind her lower back like a fortress made outta flesh. My lips brushed her ear. “Let me catch you.”

Her whole body melted. Right there in my arms, she finally surrendered. I felt it in the way she sank into me, the way her fingers curled into my shirt like she needed to memorize my heartbeat.

“You sure?” she whispered, voice barely audible.

I pulled back just enough to look her in the eyes.

“I ain’t never been more sure of anything in my life,” I said, one hand sliding up to her cheek, thumb brushing that one little tear that had slipped free. “You are

everything I ever wanted. Everything I ever prayed for. And I ain't never letting you go again."

Then I kissed her—slow, deep, soulful, like a promise sealed in heat and honey.

And for the first time? She kissed me back like she believed I'd keep it.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

I wasn't asking no more. I wasn't waiting, wasn't hesitating, and sure as hell wasn't about to let her love tiptoe through fear.

Tonight, she was gon' feel me—fully, deeply, eternally.

She was gon' feel me in her pulse, in her breath, in every damn heartbeat like I was part of her anatomy.

There wasn't no more room for doubt, and definitely not no more runnin'.

This was our reckoning. A redemption wrapped in passion, soaked in sweat, and sealed with the kind of love only we could create.

The moonlight bled through the curtains in wide streaks, painting her caramel skin in strokes of silver and seduction.

She looked like a dream dipped in honey—warm, glowing, and far too divine to be real.

My fingers traced slow, reverent circles along her thighs like I was sketching a masterpiece on soft canvas, takin' my damn time, savoring every inch like it was gospel.

She lay beneath me, breath uneven, her chest rising like waves crashing against the shore. Her lips were swollen from all the biting, glistening with unspoken words and raw emotion. But I didn't want words—I wanted surrender. That deep, soul-deep surrender that didn't come from fear but from trust.

“You can have me, Yaya,” I murmured, my voice low and thick like warm syrup sliding over southern biscuits.

She shook her head, her hands gripping my arms like they were the only thing tethering her to this world. I moved slow, deliberate, my lips brushing her collarbone like soft silk and promising, electric with intention.

But I needed her to say it. I needed her to own it.

“Nah, baby. I wanna hear you say it.” My lips barely touched her ear, breath hot and reverent. “Say you want me. Say it with that sweet-ass voice God gave you.”

Her nails dug deeper into my back, a soft whimper escaping her lips, but the words still didn’t come. So, I dropped my hand lower, fingertips gliding between her thighs like a whisper, teasing just enough to make her squirm.

“Say it, beautiful,” I said again, voice rumbling like a thunderstorm rolling in from the bayou. “Tell me you want me.”

Her body bucked beneath me, that tension building in her like she was a rubber band on the verge of snapping. And when she finally whispered it—“I want you, baby”—it was soft and sticky sweet, like molasses dripping slow in July heat.

But it still wasn’t enough.

“Nah.” I growled low, like her need was fuel and I was starving. My fingers pressed deeper, sending a jolt through her whole frame. “Say it again.”

She gasped, her breath hitching like her soul was catching up to her flesh. “I want you so bad,” she moaned, desperate and delicious.

That was the key. That was when I unlocked her.

“That’s my girl,” I whispered, my mouth sliding back down her neck, laying kisses like little fires along her skin. “You have always been mine, Yaya. I was just waiting on you to come home.”

She tilted her head back, surrendering fully, and I took my time makin’ love to her like she was sacred ground. Kissin’ her, touching her, drowning in her. The way she trembled under me? That shit made me feel like a god.

“Goddamn, you sexy as hell.” I groaned, letting my hands memorize every dip, every curve, every stretch mark that told the story of a woman who survived.

“You feeling me, baby?”

She nodded, eyes glazed over like she was caught between prayer and sin.

“Say it,” I coaxed, voice hoarse and needy. “Talk to me.”

“I feel you, Jacory,” she breathed out. “I feel you everywhere.”

And that was it. That was church.

I worshipped her body like it was scripture, lips and tongue tracing verses she didn’t know she carried. When I kissed her thighs, she quivered. When I finally went lower, tasted her, her hands tangled in my locs like she was tryna keep from falling apart.

And when she came undone, moaning my name like it was her only prayer, I felt that shit in my chest. In my veins. In the part of me that had been waiting four years to be this close to her again.

But I wasn't done.

I slid up her body, slid into her slow, deep, like I was home.

"Baby," she whispered, shaking beneath me.

I kissed her mouth, slow and deep, lettin' her taste her own sweetness. "You think we done, baby?" I smirked. "We just getting started."

We moved together like a slow song in the summer. Sticky. Sweat-slick. Sensual. Every stroke was a promise. Every moan was a confession. I loved her with my body the way I'd always loved her with my soul—wildly, deeply, and without hesitation.

She wrapped her legs around me, locking me in like she was never lettin' me go again.

And I wasn't letting her.

When we finally crashed together one last time, bodies shaking, breath ragged, skin hot, I held her close like the world outside didn't exist.

She lay on my chest, her fingers drawing lazy circles on my stomach, our heartbeats thumping in rhythm like a slow jazz drumline on Frenchmen Street.

I brushed her curls off her face, kissed her forehead soft and slow.

"You locked in now, my love," I murmured.

She tilted her head up, eyes hazy, lips swollen from our confessions.

"I been locked in," she whispered.

That wrecked me in the best way. I held her face in both hands, kissing her slow, kissing her deep, like I was kissing every broken part of her back together.

“You never gotta worry about me leaving you, baby,” I whispered, my voice raw like scraped knuckles and bleeding truth.

“I love you past the moon and stars, Yaya,” I said. “I love you beyond forever.”

She relaxed into me, body limp, spirit safe.

“And ain’t no one,” I added, eyes locked on hers, “not no bitch, not no situation, not no storm or shadow—ever coming between us. You hear me?”

She nodded, soft tears clinging to her lashes, and then she said the one thing that made my whole soul exhale?—

“I love you too, baby.”

I smiled, heart feelin’ like it was damn near floating.

“Good,” I whispered, pullin’ her tight.

“‘Cause, I only got eyes for you, my love. Ain’t no woman alive could ever come close to my beautiful-ass queen.”

And right there, in the warmth of our bodies, tangled in sheets and forever, she didn’t look scared no more.

She looked loved. She looked found. She looked mine.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

Chase + Daniale

I was patient. Hell, I had always been patient, played it cool, let women do what they did—act like they didn’t want a nigga, toss the “I’m good” line like it wasn’t a damn lie.

I’d let ’em dance in denial, play that back-and-forth game.

But this shit with Daniale? This was different.

She was different. She might not wanna admit it yet, but she was already mine.

Her soul had already signed the damn lease—I was just waiting on her to recognize she’d been living in my heart rent-free since day one.

That was why tonight, I was setting the damn record straight.

We were sitting in this moody little hookah lounge off the corner of Montrose—low lights glowing amber like melted honey, thick smoke curling in the air like whispered secrets.

The music was low, heavy bass thumping like a slow heartbeat, people all around us vibing.

. . but I didn’t see none of that. All I saw was her .

Daniale.

Slick mouth. Smart-ass attitude. Nails long enough to scratch a man's soul and a face so fine it could cause traffic on foot.

Lips sitting plump and glossy like they were dipped in temptation.

She was sipping on her drink, legs crossed, her body moving to the beat just enough to drive a man insane, acting unbothered like she wasn't burning up under the surface.

But I saw it, the way her eyes flicked to me every few seconds like I was gravity, and she didn't know how to fight the pull.

The way she licked her lips like they were dry when they weren't.

She was tryin' to play cool . . . but baby girl was crumbling .

I leaned back, legs spread slightly, postured like the king I was, my arm slung across the back of the booth while I watched her with a smirk that said, you not gon' win this war, mama.

"You look good, Dani," I murmured, voice low and slow like syrup on a summer biscuit.

She side-eyed me over her glass. "I know."

I chuckled. "Cocky as hell."

She shrugged like she didn't just throw gasoline on my desire. "It ain't cocky if it's facts."

That made me grin, slow and wicked. "You something else, mama."

She leaned her chin on her palm, feigning innocence. “You love it, though.”

“Damn right I do.”

That made her breath hitch. She tried to hide it, but I caught the way her thighs shifted under the table. Mmhm. She felt me.

I picked up my drink and took a slow sip, letting the glass kiss my lips like I was trying to seduce her through every motion. When I set it down, I locked eyes with her.

“Look, baby,” I said, calm as a quiet storm about to tear shit up.

She raised a brow. “Oh, hell. You ’bout to say something deep, huh? Let me prepare.”

I smirked, but my eyes didn’t waver. “Nah. I’m just letting you know what it is.”

She leaned in slightly. “And what’s that?”

“I don’t do maybe, Dani,” I said, my voice rough and real. “You mine. Ain’t no more playing like you don’t feel this. I’m done letting you pretend like we ain’t already wrapped up in each other.”

Her smile froze. Her lips parted slightly, but she didn’t speak.

“Oh, so we making declarations now?” she finally said, trying to keep it light, but her voice had that telltale quiver to it.

I tilted my head, grin curling at the corner of my mouth. “Baby, I don’t declare nothin’. I just state facts.”

She let out a breathy laugh, shook her head, sipped her drink again like it could cool the heat rising in her chest. But her hands were trembling just enough for me to notice.

“You wild,” she whispered.

“Nah,” I murmured, voice dropping lower, my gaze heavy. “But I will get wild if any nigga ever think he gon’ step to you.”

She blinked, like she didn’t know whether to melt or swing on me. “Chase?—”

I cut her off, my voice low, steady, final.

I leaned in, fingers trailing slowly across her thigh under the table, my touch light, teasing.

“Any nigga ever approach you? Ever try you?” I tilted my head.

“You better be prepared to give his eulogy, ’cause I promise you, niggas will not play in my face about my wife. ”

Her breath caught like a hiccup in time.

“Wife?” she echoed, like the word shocked her out of her seat.

“Yeah. Wife,” I said, bold and blunt. “You think I’m out here tryna wife just anybody?”

She looked away, lips pressing tight. Yeah. She was feeling it, but she still wanted to act tough.

“You don’t even do relationships,” she whispered.

“Yeah. Until you .”

I let the silence hang, like thunder before a storm.

Then I dragged my hand a little higher. She tensed, but her legs didn’t move. She didn’t stop me.

“Start getting used to the idea,” I said, voice firm, but low and soft.

She finally looked up at me, eyes wild with heat and confusion and hope all tangled up like wires behind an old stereo.

“You really think you own me?”

I chuckled, leaning in close enough to kiss her but pulling back just to make her want it more.

“Baby . . . I already do .”

She sucked in a shaky breath and stood up, grabbing her purse like she was escaping the damn devil. I knew it was only a matter of time before she stopped fighting it. Before she let herself have me. When she did, she wasn’t ever gon’ be the same again.

I smirked, pulling my hand away, giving her a little space.

I wasn’t gon’ press her too hard. Not yet. She already knew what it was. When she was ready, she’d come to me.

She adjusted her purse, her face unreadable.

“Where you goin’, baby?” I asked, voice lazy, leaning back.

She turned her head, brows raised.

“Home,” she said. “I need to think.”

I grinned. “About me?”

She rolled her eyes, but her lips twitched, and I knew she was fucked up behind me. She didn’t answer. Just turned and walked off. I just sat there, letting her go for now.

But I knew the truth. She wasn’t going nowhere. Not from me. Not from this. She was already mine. She was gon’ stop fighting it and act like it eventually.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

I sat in my car, the engine humming low beneath me, hands wrapped tight around the wheel like they were gripping the moment itself.

My heart was knocking against my chest like a drumline at halftime, but it wasn't fear; it was purpose.

It was love on a mission. I wasn't nervous.

Nah, I was charged the hell up. Locked in. Ten toes down.

I had been waiting my whole life to love her out loud, without limits. To put some weight behind all the promises I whispered against her skin when the lights were low and my truth was loud. And now? I was ready to make her mine in front of the whole damn world.

But before the rooftop lights, the music, the ring, the yes—I had one stop to make. One conversation that mattered more than anything else. Her daddy.

Samuel Stiles. That man didn't speak unless the moment required his voice. He was the kind of OG that made silence sound like scripture. When he opened that front door, the porch light caught the silver threading his beard, and his eyes—calm, but knowing—met mine like they'd been waiting.

“Jacory,” he said with that steady nod, the kind that always made you fix your posture.

“Mr. Stiles,” I replied, clearing my throat like my heart didn't just skip a whole damn

beat.

He stepped aside. “Come on in, son.”

The air in the living room was still. Heavy like it knew what I came to say. We sat across from each other, no distractions. Just me and the man who raised the woman I was ready to build a kingdom with.

He leaned back in that big recliner of his, fingers interlocked, watching me the way real men do—quiet, steady, calculating. And I didn’t fold.

“I think I already know why you are here,” he said, calm as ever.

I nodded once, leaning forward. “Yes, sir. I’m here to ask for your permission to marry Shaniya.”

His eyes never flinched. “Go on.”

So, I did.

“I’ve been in love with your daughter since before I even understood what love was.

I ain’t just wanna kiss her. I wanted to protect her joy, hold her pain, dance with her shadow and still see the light.

She’s not just my heart, Mr. Stiles. She’s my heartbeat .

And I won’t spend another day on this Earth without making her my wife. ”

He listened. Eyes still. But I wasn’t done.

“If she wants the world, I’ll spin it on my damn finger. If she wants peace, I’ll fight whatever war to bring it to her doorstep. And if she just wanna be loved out loud, every single day for the rest of her life? Then I already got that covered. I wake up with her name in my mouth like a prayer.”

His jaw ticked. Still not speaking. But I could feel it. He was hearing me.

“I’m gon’ love her past her fears, past her silence, past the ghosts that still whisper in her ear at night. And if anybody ever think they can snatch that happiness away from her?” I tilted my head. “They gon’ have to fight God, the devil, and me. In that order.”

That man smirked. The tiniest twitch of his lips. But it said a lot.

Then he leaned forward, eyes sharper than glass.

“You know,” he said, voice low, “Silas told me something before he passed.”

I sat up straighter, my breath catching.

“He said, ‘Daddy, I ain’t gon’ be around forever.

But Jacory? He got her. He gon’ take care of my baby sister.

He gave you hell because he knew you were good enough for her.

His overprotectiveness of his baby sis had him aggressive as all get out, but he was always rooting for you nonetheless, son. ”

That shit hit me like a bullet made of love and grief. Silas had seen me when I didn’t even see myself yet. And that? That damn near broke me and built me at the same

time.

Samuel exhaled, eyes glinting.

“You always been good to her,” he said. “But now? You better be better. You get my blessing, son. Now go make her yours.”

I stood up, my heart a thunderstorm, my hand steady as I shook his. Respect was heavy in that grip. Legacy passed between our palms.

Now it was time for the magic.

“Boy, are you really tryna marry my baby for real?” Shari gasped, already dabbing at her eyes with a tissue like she was auditioning for a Tyler Perry scene.

“Duh, Mama Stiles.” Daniale grinned, braids swinging as she leaned across the table. “He tryna shut the game down, lock it up, throw away the key, and engrave his name on the lock.”

I laughed, the tension breaking a little. “I want it to be perfect.”

Shari sniffed. “You already got her heart, baby. Everything else is just glitter.”

“Glitter and a dramatic-ass entrance,” Daniale added. “Let me know how extra I can go. I’m tryna pull up with doves, a drone, and Beyoncé vocals if you let me.”

Chase walked in, leaned against the doorframe. “Y’all talking about locking in?”

I nodded. “You already know.”

He smirked, eyes flicking toward Dani for a second too long. “Took you long

enough.”

“You next,” I shot back.

He choked on his drink. “Nigga, mind your business.”

We all cracked up.

The rooftop was straight out a dream. The city lights flickered like stars had fallen and found a new home on the pavement.

Fairy lights were strung across the rafters, glimmering like her smile.

A string quartet played a melody that sounded like everything I ever felt but could never put into words.

The breeze was light, warm, whispering promises as it kissed the back of my neck.

And there she was.

Walking in like the whole night had been waiting for her. Her heels clicked against the floor like the beat of a song only we knew. Her dress hugged her in all the right places, flowing behind her like it had a damn attitude. Her skin glowed. Her curls bounced. Her eyes? Locked on me.

She froze when she saw the setup. The flowers. The lights. The sign that read:

“Marry Me, My Love.”

I was already on one knee, heart bare, love louder than the city beneath us.

“Baby,” I said, takin’ her hand in mine, voice trembling but firm, “you are my first, my last, my always. I don’t just want you. I need you. Forever.”

Her lips quivered.

“I done prayed for you. Fought for you. Waited for you. Let me spend the rest of my life loving you.”

I pulled the ring from my pocket, a custom 3.5 carat oval-cut diamond set in white gold, sittin’ like royalty in that box.

“Marry me, Shaniya Stiles. Be my queen. My wife. My forever.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she nodded, too choked up to speak.

“Yes, baby,” she whispered. “Yes.”

Behind us, family and friends erupted. Daniale fanned herself with fake drama. “I’m not crying—y’all are crying!”

Shari cried like she’d been holding it in for decades. Chase just nodded, smiling.

I stood, slid the ring on her finger, and pulled her into the softest, deepest kiss we ever shared.

We were curled up, limbs tangled like roots of the same tree. I kissed her shoulder, forehead pressed to hers.

“You happy, baby?” I whispered.

She looked at me, eyes glossy, lips smiling.

“I’m perfect, Jacory.”

And I kissed her slow, like time ain’t matter, . . . like love was forever, . . . like nothing existed outside this moment.

Because now? We had forever.

And I was gon’ spend every second showing her just how deep love could go.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

I swear, my heart ain't even caught up yet.

It was still doing backflips like a damn cheerleader with no chill, cartwheeling through every memory, every promise, every kiss that led up to last night.

I was still tryna wrap my head around the fact that this man—Jacory James, my first love, my forever flame, the one who had me twisted tighter than my bonnet in the middle of a hurricane—was now my fiancé.

Fiancé. That word sounded too light, too casual, too flimsy for what we had.

Because what we had, it was divine design.

It was bigger than butterflies. Stronger than storms. Slicker than fate.

We weren't just in love; we were tethered.

Spirit-to-spirit. Soul-to-soul. What we had was holy, hood, and hella real.

The night still played in my mind like a Spike Lee joint shot in slow motion.

The candles flickered like stars whispering yes.

The music floated through the air like it was made just for us.

The skyline lit up behind him, and when Jacory dropped to one knee?

Whew. My knees damn near buckled. Not 'cause I was surprised, but 'cause I knew. I knew this was my moment. Our moment.

And the way his voice wrapped around me, low, deep, sweet like strawberries dipped in white chocolate? I felt like I had been caught in a time loop, one where every version of me always chose him.

And listen, for once, I didn't hesitate. I said yes like my soul already had the answer long before my mouth did.

So yeah, . . . I was gone for this man. I always had been, and I always would be.

But if I thought I was gonna have a peaceful night to process that life-changing moment, I was dead wrong.

The moment we walked through my parents' front door, the house erupted like a firework factory in the Fourth Ward.

My mama, Mama Shari, was already in full Southern mama mode. She was crying, fanning herself with a paper towel, and rocking like she was catching the Holy Ghost.

"My baby gon' be a wife! Lord Jesus, I need a drink! And where is my good wig!"

My bestie and sister, Daniale—that heffa was grinning like she was the one who just got the ring, dancing in a circle like we were at a second line.

"Damn, Yaya! You really gon' be Mrs. James out here! Mrs. J to the A to the M—bitch, you got a whole husband! I'm so happy for you, sister!"

Chase was posted on the couch like he been waiting years to finally say, "This man has officially put my little sister on lock. 'Bout damn time. I love this for my day

ones, real shit.”

I laughed, high off love and pure chaos.

Jacory pulled me in by the waist, strong hands gripping like he was scared I might float away.

“Yeah, she is mine now. You niggas gon’ have to deal with it.”

I rolled my eyes, smirking. “I have been yours, Jacory. You’re just late to the party.”

He leaned in close, lips brushing my ear, voice syrup thick.

“I know, baby. But now the whole world gotta respect it.”

My whole body shivered like the A/C hit me wrong. Goddamn, this man was lethal.

Daniale flopped on the couch, crossing her legs like she ran the damn family. “So, we doing this wedding big, or are we keeping it intimate and low-key? How you feeling, sis? It’s yo’ world. I just want to make sure it happens the way you dreamed it would.”

Shari wiped her eyes again, sniffing.

“Big, baby. My child ain’t been through hell for nothing. This gon’ be the wedding of the century. I need fireworks, white doves, and somebody singing Tamia live.”

Chase snorted. “Nigga, I just wanna know how much I gotta pay for this tux before I get hit with a GoFundMe link.”

Jacory waved him off like a fly. “Don’t worry about the price. Just make sure you

don't look ugly in the pictures."

Chase sat up. "Nigga, I been finer than you since before puberty. Don't let this lil' engagement make you delusional out here."

Daniale sipped her wine like it was tea. "Y'all swear y'all some heartthrobs. Meanwhile, it's me and Shaniya carryin' this whole aesthetic."

I grinned. "I mean . . . my man is fine, so?—"

Jacory smirked, kissing my temple. "Damn right, baby. Tell these peasants the truth. Let 'em know your taste is immaculate."

Chase grabbed a pillow and launched it across the room. Jacory caught it one-handed, smooth as hell.

"You mad, lil' bro?"

"Nah," Chase said, smirking. "I just can't believe your commitment-phobic ass about to say vows."

Daniale jumped in, laughing. "Right! Jacory 'I'll Never Settle' James really out here picking color palettes and floral arrangements."

I laughed so hard I snorted.

But even through the jokes, the love was loud. The kind you could feel vibrating off the walls.

Later that night, after the giggles died down, after Mama called every cousin in the damn family tree, and after Daniale declared herself co-maid of honor whether I liked

it or not . . . it was just us. Me and Jacory. My fiancé. My forever.

I was sitting on the bed, still staring at the ring like it might dissolve if I blinked too hard.

That diamond sparkled like it knew it had just changed my whole life.

Jacory sat down beside me, his energy warm, grounded, solid.

He was always the calm after my chaos. His arm slid around my waist like it had always belonged there.

“Are you happy, baby?” he asked, his voice low, pounding loud like thunder vibrating in my bones.

I turned to him, studied him like he was the North Star, and I had just found my way home. I traced his jaw, slow, tender, grateful.

“I have been nothing but happy since the moment I saw you again,” I whispered.

His grip tightened, eyes softening with something deep, something rooted in realness.

“Then you gon’ be happy forever, my love,” he murmured, kissing my fingers, then my wrist, then my lips—each one slower than the last, like he was trying to memorize me with his mouth.

My breath caught.

I pulled back slightly, smirking. “You really about to be my husband, huh?”

He gave me that slow, deadly-ass grin, the one that always made my knees buckle

like a folding chair at a cookout.

“Damn right, baby.”

I bit my lip, heat rushing low in my belly. “I really like the sound of that.”

His hand slid down my spine, pullin’ me right into his lap, his voice dropping to a whisper so sinful it shoulda come with a parental advisory sticker.

“Then you gon’ really love the way it feels , Mrs. James.”

I shivered. This man was something else. I knew I wasn’t just his fiancée. I was his forever, and that was everything I ever needed.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The kitchen was bathed in the soft glow of afternoon sunlight, casting golden hues across the countertops.

Shaniya stood by the stove, her hands busy with a pot of simmering stew, while I leaned against the island with a glass of iced tea in my hand.

I was so happy for my best friend. She truly deserved this, and I was so glad that she was finally able to let this man love her like she deserved.

Shaniya was the most selfless person I'd ever met.

She gave her all, she always put everyone else's needs first, and she literally carried the entire world on her fuckin' shoulders.

She had been through hell and back, and she came back like she never was down for the count.

She deserved someone like Jacory to love her unconditionally, be her safe space, give her peace, and take the weight off her. I couldn't be happier for her.

"You know," I began, swirling the ice in my glass, "I never thought I'd see the day you'd be playing house like this."

Shaniya laughed, the sound as warm as the sun filtering through the window. "Neither did I. But here we are."

The aroma of herbs and spices filled the air, wrapping around us like a comforting

blanket.

“I’m so happy for you, sis,” I said, sincerity lacing my words. “You deserve this kind of love.”

She turned to face me, her eyes soft. “And so do you, Dani. Please don’t let your past define your future.”

My eyes clouded over as memories of my ex, Forrest, surfaced—his words, his fists, the way he broke me down piece by piece.

“It’s hard, Shaniya,” I admitted. “After everything Forrest put me through . . . the words, the beatings . . . it’s hard to believe someone could love me without hurting me.”

She stepped closer, placing a hand on my shoulder. “You are not your past. You are not the pain he inflicted. You are worthy of love, of healing, of happiness.”

Tears welled up in my eyes, threatening to spill over.

“Chase . . . he’s different,” I whispered. “But I’m scared. What if I let him in and he hurts me too?”

“Chase is a good man,” Shaniya said firmly. “He sees you, Dani. The real you. And he wants to love you, to heal with you. He would never put his hands on you or hurt you, sweetie.”

At that moment, Chase walked into the kitchen, his eyes locking onto my tear-streaked face.

“And when I catch up with that bitch-ass nigga that did,” he growled, “he’s gonna be

sleeping with the fucking fishes.

I'll be damned if I let any nigga have peace and he disrupted yours.

Any nigga that has ever brought harm to your sexy ass, baby, has got to die.

They don't deserve to breathe the same air as you.

I'm going to bring you all the love and peace in the world, Queen. You just have to let me."

My eyes widened, a mix of shock and relief washing over me.

He softened his tone, stepping closer. "I don't think you're beautiful. I think you're beyond it. You've had a lot of crooks try to steal your heart. Never really had luck, couldn't never figure out. But I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere."

He wrapped his arms around me, holding me as if I was the most precious thing in the world.

"You had a lot of moments that didn't last forever," he murmured. "Now you're in the corner tryna put it together. Let me help you. Let me love you, baby."

I buried my face in his chest, the dam breaking as sobs wracked my body.

Shaniya smiled through her own tears. "See? I told you, sis. You deserve this shit."

Just then, Jacory strolled into the kitchen, his arms wrapping around Shaniya from behind. "Did this nigga really just quote Tunechi?"

Shaniya giggled, leaning into his embrace. "It's funny they both love him so much.

She does the same shit when she's preachin' to me."

Jacory smiled, looking between Chase and me. "We all love Wayne, but these crazy fools were definitely made for each other."

Shaniya nodded enthusiastically. "For sheezy!"

Everyone burst into laughter, the room filled with warmth and joy.

The four of us stood there, wrapped in each other's presence, a circle of love and healing. At that moment, the past didn't matter. Only the present and the promise of a future filled with love, laughter, and the kind of peace that came from knowing you were finally home.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The backyard was cloaked in the soft hues of twilight, the air thick with the scent of burning sage and the earthy aroma of rolled herbs.

Jacory and I sat on worn-out lawn chairs, the kind that creaked with every shift, a testament to their age and the countless conversations they had witnessed.

The sky above was a canvas of purples and oranges, stars beginning to prick through the fading light.

I took a slow drag, letting the smoke curl around my thoughts before exhaling. “Man, it’s wild, ain’t it? All the shit we’ve been through, and here we are.”

Jacory chuckled, the sound deep and familiar. “Life’s a trip, bro. But it’s good to be on this side of it.”

I nodded, the weight of memories pressing against my chest. “Sometimes I feel guilty, you know? Like, why the fuck am I’m still here, breathing, living, while Silas . . . he’s not.”

Jacory’s eyes softened, the ember of his joint glowing in the dim light. “Silas wouldn’t want you carrying that weight. He’d want you to live, to thrive.”

I looked up at the stars, searching for solace. “Daniale . . . she’s different. She makes me want to be better, to do better. She’s like a lighthouse, guiding me through the fog.”

Jacory grinned, taking another puff. “Sounds like love, my nigga.”

I laughed, the sound tinged with disbelief. “Yeah, maybe it is. But it’s scary, bro. Being vulnerable, letting someone in, is not some shit I’m used to, but I want to for her.”

Jacory leaned back, his gaze fixed on the sky. “Being a Black man, we’re taught to be strong, to hide our emotions. But vulnerability? That’s strength too.”

I sighed, the truth of his words settling over me. “Daniale . . . she makes it safe to feel, to let go. I want to give her that same safety, that same peace.”

Jacory nodded, his expression serious. “Then do it. Don’t let fear keep you from your blessing.”

I looked at him, gratitude swelling in my chest. “I’m proud of you, man. For going after what you wanted, for building a life with Shaniya.”

He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “Thanks, bro. And I’m proud of you too. For opening up, for choosing love.”

We sat in comfortable silence, the night wrapping around us like a familiar blanket. Two men, navigating the complexities of life, love, and loss, finding solace in shared experiences and the unspoken bond of brotherhood.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

I swear on sweet tea and satin bonnets, I never felt stress like this in my damn life.

I had spent months planning this wedding like it was the damn Met Gala.

Every detail had been carefully mapped out with military precision—color palettes, floral arrangements, playlist order, who gon’ sit next to who so nobody ends up throwin’ hands at the reception.

I wanted a flawless fairytale, okay? Classy, candlelit, couture.

And instead? I was knee-deep in a shitstorm of pure chaos, sequins, and sacrilege.

I was at the bridal boutique, standing on that little white platform like a stressed-out mannequin, the tailor tugging at my dress while muttering under her breath like she was praying to the fashion gods for mercy.

My stomach felt like it was doing backflips, somersaults, and slow rolls all at once.

Meanwhile, Daniale was posted up on the couch like a hood princess with a grudge, scrolling her phone and looking like she was about to throw hands through the screen.

“You look stunning, Yaya.” Mama sniffled from the corner, her hand clutching her chest like the Spirit had touched her.

I gave her a tired smile. “Thanks, Mama. Just tryna keep it together before I turn into a damn soap opera meltdown.”

And that was when the devil himself rang my phone.

My wedding planner. Satan in stilettos.

“Hey, Shaniya, it’s about the venue . . .” she started, and I already knew. Her voice had that I-fucked-up-but-please-don’t-cuss-me-out tremble in it.

“What. About. The. Venue?” I said slowly, my voice calm like a storm that ain’t landed yet.

She exhaled. “They, um . . . double-booked you with a brunch-like baby shower for the same date.”

Double. Booked.

Daniale sat up like she had been summoned by Beyoncé herself. “Oh, hell no. You mean to tell me my best friend don’t have a damn venue anymore!”

I blinked. “You mean to tell me I planned this wedding for six months just to be evicted by a brunch and baby shower combo!”

“They’re offering to move it to a different location,” the planner said quickly, panicking. “It’s smaller but cozy! Intimate!”

“Intimate!” I screeched. “Girl, this ain’t a backyard barbecue! This is my wedding! This is silk gown, slow-dancing, ugly-cry vows type love! Not a ‘pass me a paper plate’ type situation, the fuck!”

Daniale yanked the phone out my hand. “Sweetie, I’m a say this with love. You’re fired. Fired like a microwave pizza. We’ll handle it from here.”

I just stood there, frozen in my dream dress, fighting tears like they owed me money.

And just when I thought it couldn't get worse?

Two hours later, I get a call from the florist. She sounded chipper as hell, like she just delivered sunshine.

“Hey! We just sent over the orange tulips!”

Tulips. Orange .

“I asked for red roses and white lilies!” I said, eyes twitching like I had just downed four espresso shots and a prayer.

“Well, we thought tulips were a fresh twist?—”

“You thought wrong! What part of elegant romance screams traffic cone chic !”

Mama rubbed my back like I had just been told the Lord was testing me. “Baby, it's gon' be fine.”

I turned slowly. “Fine? Mama, I'm two seconds from having a 'Bridezilla Snaps' documentary special. This wedding is about to be featured on a crime podcast.”

My daddy, sitting in the corner, let out a chuckle. A low, sneaky, back-of-the-throat laugh like he was tryin' not to get caught.

I whipped my head toward him. “You laughing?”

He shrugged. “You right, baby. It ain't funny . . .” He paused then grinned. “It's hilarious.”

I threw a throw pillow so hard at his chest he had to clutch it like it was a newborn baby.

And guess what? The chaos train still wasn't done. By the time I made it back to the boutique for my final fitting? My dress wasn't ready. The same dress I had dreams about. The same dress I picked with my heart in my hands.

"We're terribly sorry," the boutique owner said, looking like she was fighting for her job and her soul. "The alterations had a minor delay?—"

I slowly handed my earrings to Daniale.

"Hold these. I'm 'bout to catch a charge."

Daniale grinned. "Ain't no way God gon' let you go to jail before the wedding, sis. Maybe right after."

Just when I was about to launch into a full-blown, ugly cry meltdown, Jacory walked in.

The room stilled. I swear he walked in like a damn movie scene—slow-mo effect, beard perfectly lined, eyes laser-locked on me like I was the only woman in the world.

He took one look at my wild hair, wild eyes, wild heart, and said calmly, "How bad is it?"

Daniale threw a thumb over her shoulder. "She's about five minutes from setting this boutique on fire."

Jacory walked straight up to me and wrapped me in his arms.

His warmth hit my skin before his voice did.

“Baby. Breathe.”

I collapsed against him, fists in his shirt. “Jacory, this wedding is a disaster. The venue is gone, the flowers are wrong, the dress ain’t ready . . . How the hell am I supposed to—I’m ’bout to lose it.”

He stroked my back slowly, deliberately.

“Baby . . . look at me.”

I did.

He cupped my jaw, his voice a velvet vow. “None of that matters. You matter. You’re my bride, and all I need is you. I don’t give a damn if we say our vows in a parking lot. You’re the only thing I planned for.”

That man. That voice. That presence. Melted me.

That night he made love to me like I was the only thing keeping him breathing. He kissed away my panic. He whispered over my skin that I was his peace, his promise, his forever.

And the next morning, my whole tribe had activated and assembled like a squad of Black Avengers type shit.

Mama and Daddy hit the highway and drove for hours and found my dream flowers.

Chase pulled up on the venue like he was in an episode of *Power* , threatening lawsuits and snapping necks with professionalism.

Daniale walked into that boutique like she was the CEO of karma and justice and got my damn dress handled in record time .

And when I saw my people ride for me like that, I broke. I ugly cried in the middle of my kitchen. Snot hanging and everything.

Later, I caught Chase and Daniale low-key whispering.

He leaned into her like he had a secret just for her soul.

“So, you done playin’ with me?”

She blinked. “Boy, what?”

“You heard me. Go peep some rings, Dani.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You play too much.”

But she blushed so hard she looked sun kissed. And I knew. That man had her wrapped.

That night, I sat on the balcony in a silk robe, lookin’ up at the stars that watched me fall in love in every lifetime.

Jacory came behind me, arms wrapping around me like armor.

“You ready, my love?”

I turned, tears in my eyes, joy in my chest.

“For forever?”

He kissed my temple.

“Since I was twelve, baby. Since that day you stole my juice and my heart.”

And I laughed. Because even in the chaos, in the mayhem, in the wild whirlwind of wedding madness, I had peace.

Because I had him. And tomorrow, I'd be his wife. Forever and ever.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The air was thick, thick like sorrow, slow cooking in the atmosphere, thick like grief dressed in humidity, weighing down on my chest like a wet wool blanket in a thunderstorm.

It pressed against my skin, wrapping around my lungs, making it hard to breathe, making the night feel like it carried the burden of every tear I hadn't yet cried.

The street stretched out before me like a memory I couldn't unlive, cracked and uneven, just like the childhood we tried to survive.

The dim light from the old street lamp flickered overhead, casting gold shadows that danced and twitched like ghosts that were too tired to rest. The sky up above was that deep, inky kind of black—the kind that felt endless, like it could swallow you whole if you stood still too long.

And I knew this place. I remembered every chipped curb, every creaky porch swing. Every boarded-up window was burned into my bones like a second skin. I had lived majority of my childhood here. I had lost everything here.

I was back in my home of New Orleans. Yet, this wasn't a regular dream. This was something holy. Something heavy. Something realer than real.

And I wasn't alone.

Silas stood just a few feet away, leaning against the corner store like he never left. He had on that same, signature black hoodie. Same gold chain glinting against his chest, and that same cocky-ass smirk like he had the answers to questions I hadn't even

thought to ask.

I froze, breath stuck somewhere between disbelief and desperation.

“Si . . .” My voice cracked like dry branches underfoot, fragile and aching, my soul straining to reach him.

He pushed off the wall, walking toward me with that slow, easy strut that had always made him look like he ran the world—even when the world was tryna break him. His hands were in his pockets, but his eyes—they held galaxies. Deep, dark, and endless.

“You look good, lil’ bit,” he said, voice deep and rich, dipped in love and memory and something else—something softer.

Tears welled, burning behind my eyes like smoke. “I-I miss you, Si. So much, I don’t even know how I still breathe.”

He sighed, rubbing a hand over his head. “I know, baby girl. But I ain’t come for that.”

I blinked, heart thudding in my ears. “Then . . . why?”

He stepped up close, eyes searching mine. And the love there? It split me open. It made the ache in my chest throb in rhythm with the past.

“Because you still ain’t forgave yourself,” he said gently. “And it’s time.”

A sob clawed its way up my throat. “Silas, I ? —”

“Stop.” His tone was soft, but there was steel under it. The kind that made you pause. The kind that made you listen.

“This wasn’t on you, Shaniya. It never was. Never gon’ be.”

“But I was there,” I whispered, tears streaming. “I shoulda stopped you. I shoulda screamed louder. I shoulda ? —”

“Nah,” he said firmly. “You were a child, Yaya. A baby girl caught in a grown-ass fire. I brought you into that. I did that. Not you. That shit was on me.”

My knees buckled, and I dropped to the curb like my body couldn’t hold the weight of my regret anymore. Silas crouched next to me, placing a hand on my back.

“You were my peace,” he whispered. “My anchor. My reason to keep my head on straight when all I wanted to do was spin out. You saved me more times than you know, baby sis.”

I wept, loud and ugly, like my soul was finally letting go.

He pulled me into him, resting his chin on top of my head like he used to when we watched cartoons on Saturday mornings.

“You deserve good things, baby girl,” he murmured. “Please stop tryna punish yourself like you don’t.”

I looked up at him, face red and wet. “But I can’t stop thinking . . .”

He wiped my tears with his thumbs, soft like lullabies. “Let it go. Let me go. I’m tired, Yaya. You gotta let me rest, lil’ bit.”

I inhaled sharply, my lip trembling. “I don’t know how.”

He smiled. “You already doin’ it. You just ain’t realized it yet.”

Then he pulled back, squinting at me like he was switching subjects.

“Now . . . let’s talk about this nigga Jacory.”

I laughed through my tears. “What about him?”

He grinned. “I been peeped that man was down bad for you since middle school. Do you remember when he used to follow you around the playground like a lost puppy with a grill?”

I blushed. “Oh my God, Silas.”

He smirked. “He loves you for real, though. That nigga been ready to risk it all since y’all were sixteen. I seen it for myself. That’s why I ain’t ever trip.”

I swallowed. “He still loves me.”

Silas nodded. “He always will.”

His face turned serious again. “That man gon’ give you the kind of love I used to pray you’d get. The kind of love that don’t break you—it builds you.”

I wept again, soft this time. Grateful.

“You still got work to do,” he murmured. “You gon’ help a lot of people, Yaya. Heal ’em. Uplift ’em. Save lives. But you can’t do that if you don’t let me rest.”

I gripped his hoodie like it was my lifeline. “I don’t wanna let go.”

He kissed my forehead. “You got to, baby girl. But I’ll always be right here.” He pointed to my heart.

Then just like that, he was gone.

I woke up gasping like I had surfaced from underwater, chest heaving, body trembling.

Tears poured down my face in heavy, hot rivers.

Jacory shot up beside me, his voice hoarse with sleep. “Baby? You crying? What’s wrong?”

I buried my face in his chest, sobbing hard.

“I saw him,” I choked out. “I saw Silas.”

Jacory stiffened slightly but kept holding me close, one hand rubbing my back in slow, soothing circles.

“What did he say, baby?”

I sniffled. “He told me . . . it wasn’t my fault. That I deserve to be happy. That . . . that he always knew you were the one.”

Jacory exhaled, deep and ragged, his voice vibrating against my ear. “He was right.”

I looked up at him, eyes shining. “He said you’d give me the world.”

He smirked. “Shit, I plan on proving him right every damn day.”

His hand cupped my face, thumb brushing my tears like he was erasing years of guilt with a single touch.

“I’ma love you past this life, baby. Silas knew. I know. And now? You know too.”

I broke again, but this time? It was cleansing. Healing. Freeing.

He pulled me into his lap, holding me like I was something precious. Like I was something holy. And for the first time in forever, I believed it.

“You believe him now?” he whispered.

I nodded into his chest. “I do.”

He kissed my forehead, slow, soft, sacred.

“Good,” he whispered. “Then let’s give him the peace he earned. And give ourselves the love we deserve.”

I exhaled. Deep. Long. Final. I finally let go.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The air was heavy. Not the bad kind but the kind that wraps around your lungs, thick with magic and memories; the kind that makes your heartbeat sound like drums in a second line parade.

This wasn't just a wedding. This was a prophecy in motion.

A divine orchestration of everything Jacory and I had been through—every tear, every laugh, every moment that brought us back to each other, all wrapped in lace and sacred promises.

I stood in the back of the church, with my heart doin' the Cupid Shuffle in my chest while I tried to keep my damn knees from knocking together like faulty wind chimes.

My fingers trembled as they traced the bodice of my dress—one that looked like it had been kissed by angels and stitched by the ancestors.

It was perfect. A couture masterpiece dipped in dreams and wrapped in reverence.

Mermaid-cut with a train long enough to make Beyoncé side-eye, the gown hugged me in all the right places, cinched at the waist, then flowed out like drama and elegance had a baby.

The lace appliqué looked like vines of love, crawling down the silk like they had stories to tell.

Each pearl and crystal sewn in shimmered like stardust had landed on me.

My off-the-shoulder sleeves framed my skin like a soft spotlight. Honey-kissed and glowing, my shoulders looked like poetry in motion. My veil flowed behind me like a silk river, long and regal, trailing my movements like even the air was too in love to let me go.

My locs had been gathered into a braided bun so intricate, it looked like it had been carved by divine hands.

My baby hairs were slicked to the gods, and my edges were laid like concrete at a luxury condo.

My makeup was ethereal. It was a blend of golden hues and rich nudes that made me look like I belonged on the cover of a Black love fairy tale.

Glossed lips. Lashes like butterfly wings.

Cheeks glowing like sunlight dancing on brown sugar.

I looked like love personified.

And still, I had never been this damn nervous in my life.

I clutched my daddy's arm like it was the last piece of land on a sinking ship. My hands were sweating, my knees threatening mutiny, and my throat thick with tears tryna crawl out uninvited.

"Baby," Daddy whispered, his voice scratchy with unshed tears, like gravel soaked in love. "You look so damn beautiful."

I sniffled, blinking fast. "Thank you, Daddy."

He paused, his throat moving like he was swallowing the weight of a thousand memories. “I knew this day would come. I just ain’t expect it to hit me like this.”

He turned, wiping the corner of my eye the same way he did when I was a baby with jelly on my face. “You good, baby girl?”

I nodded, but the truth was, my soul was spilling outta me like sweet tea over ice—slow, sticky, and a little too much to contain.

“Aight.” He cleared his throat. “Let’s go give you away before I change my mind and lock you in your room forever.”

And then I saw him. Jacory James. My forever.

He was standing tall at the altar like he was carved from Black excellence and baptized in cocoa butter.

His tux was tailor-made perfection—sleek black, with a satin lapel hugging his broad chest like it was in love too.

A deep burgundy rose sat on his chest like it was tryna compete with the fire in his eyes.

His locs were fresh and hangin’ just right.

His beard was lined like destiny. His skin was glowing like he’d been kissed by moonlight.

He was damn near trembling with love, with pride, and with every ounce of emotion that a real man let rise when he saw the woman he prayed for walking toward him in white.

He didn't blink. Didn't move. He just stared at me like I was the only breath he had left in his lungs.

I knew then for sure that every trial, every tear, every time I doubted whether I was worthy of this kind of love—it all made sense now. It led me to him, and he had been waiting the whole time.

When we reached the altar, Daddy paused, like he wasn't quite ready to let me go. He held my hand, rubbed the back of it with that calloused thumb of his, then finally placed it in Jacory's.

"I know you are going to take care of my baby, son," he said, voice tight but strong.

Jacory's jaw flexed. "Always."

Behind me, I heard sniffles. Mama was ugly crying into a tissue, her lip trembling like a drumroll.

Daniale had tears rolling down her cheeks, even though she swore she wasn't gon' cry.

Chase was sitting there stiff as hell, wiping his face with his jacket sleeve like his pride had just caught a beatdown.

"Man, what the fuck?" he muttered. "Why y'all got me crying in front of people? I don't like this shit."

The whole church erupted in laughter. Even the pastor had to chuckle, shaking his head with a smile.

Jacory grinned through his tears. "You love us, nigga. Just admit it."

Chase rolled his eyes. “Whatever, bro. Just hurry up and make my sister a wife before I start sobbing like a lil’ bitch.”

The pastor smiled and cleared his throat. “Now, before we proceed, is there anyone who objects to this union?”

Silence.

Then Jacory turned slowly, raised an eyebrow, and shifted his suit jacket to show a lil’ something shiny on his hip.

“Don’t play with me behind my baby,” he said, smooth as silk but sharp as a switchblade.

The entire church fell out . Even the pastor had to cover his face before composing himself. “Well,” he chuckled, “I suppose that answers that.”

He turned to me. “Shaniya, your vows?”

I breathed in slow, like I was about to spill a truth that had lived inside me since childhood.

“Jacory,” I began, voice soft but strong, “you’ve been my best friend, my protector, my peace since we were kids. I’ve loved you through every dark tunnel, through every quiet room, through every moment I thought I was broken beyond repair.

“You have never made me feel like I had to be anything other than me. And today, I vow to always show up. To always fight for us. To always love you deeper than the ocean and harder than the world ever could.

You are my home. My safe place. My miracle. I choose you. In every lifetime. Every

world. Every time.”

Jacory was done. He was shaking. Crying. Barely breathing.

The pastor turned to him. “Jacory, your vows?”

He looked at me like he was looking at salvation.

“Baby,” he said, his voice rough and rich with emotion, “I’ve been yours since I was twelve. There has never been a moment in my life where my soul didn’t beat your name. You have seen me through pain, through failure, through fear. And you still looked at me like I was worthy.

“I ain’t just loving you with my heart. I’m loving you with my breath, my bones, my blood. And I swear—I will never let you go. Not even when this life is over. I’ll find you in the next one. And the one after that.”

Then I turned toward the front row where a single white rose sat in Silas’s seat.

“For my brother, Silas,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “You told me I deserved happiness. And today, I’m finally stepping into it.”

Jacory kissed my hand. “He’s here, baby,” he whispered. “He’s proud of you.”

The pastor smiled, eyes glistening. “Jacory, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“With every piece of me,” he said, loud, sure, certain. “I do.”

“And, Shaniya, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

Tears dripped down my cheeks as I whispered, “I do.”

“You may now kiss your bride.”

Jacory stepped forward and kissed me like the sky was watching. Slow. Tender. Deep. Eternal.

And just like that, I was his.

Forever.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

The sign gleamed under the soft morning sun, bold, powerful, gleaming like a crown jewel on a city block. Silas's Solace Counseling they marked a movement. They marked a revolution dressed in concrete and compassion. They were the bricks and mortar version of everything we'd bled, cried, prayed, and dreamed into existence.

The sunlight kissed the signs with reverence, as if God Himself was co-signing the mission. The gold-leaf lettering shimmered like it had a heartbeat of its own, reflecting purpose, protection, and peace.

When I looked over at my wife—my fine-ass, brilliant, spiritually stacked-up wife—standing next to me in a sleek slate-gray suit that hugged her curves like it was tailored by the heavens, skin glistening like caramel under that golden hour glow, I damn near forgot how to breathe.

Her hair was swept up in a crown of locs, and her presence, my baby's presence, was preachin' louder than the signs.

We really did this.

Inside Silas's Solace, the vibe was everything we dreamed of and more.

It wasn't cold. It wasn't clinical. It didn't smell like bleach and bad news like most therapy offices.

Nah. This place breathed warmth. The walls were soft hues—sandy taupes, sage greens, burnished ambers—like nature had pulled up a seat and said, "Let's heal.

” It felt like a hug, like peace wrapped in paint and patience.

There were plush velvet couches that sat in a circle, each one with a cozy blanket folded over the arm.

Real ones. The type of blankets you grabbed when your chest was heavy and your soul cracked open.

There were no stiff-ass, metal-legged chairs that squeaked when you shifted.

Nah, not here. This was a sanctuary, not a session.

Books lined the shelves—there was everything from grief recovery to Black mental health literature, to journals filled with affirmations and guides for building yourself back brick by brick.

And in the center, there was a mural of Silas.

It was painted in deep indigos and soft silver accents, his smile was wide and real, like he was watching over us in every room. His chain caught the light in the painting, and his eyes, they followed you—warm, present, powerful.

Beneath the mural, in his own handwriting we’d pulled from one of his old notebooks, were the words:

You deserve to live, baby girl. And you gon’ change the world.

That shit hit me in the chest like a prayer.

The corridor connecting to Shaniya’s Sanctum was lined with black-and-white portraits—framed with photos of lives lost too soon. Each name was carved into the

remembrance wall like a sacred altar. This was a space built from grief, molded in memory, and lifted through love.

But it wasn't just about mourning—it was about mending.

There were healing circles gathered in soft-lit rooms with cushions on the floor and incense burning gently.

The scent of sandalwood mixed with lavender drifted through the air like peace itself was floating.

Support groups, therapy rooms, an industrial kitchen where meals were cooked by mamas who had once lost their appetite for life and found it again through service.

And the rec room? That was my favorite part.

It was filled with bright colors. Laughter.

There were basketballs bouncing and kids running free.

Smiles were big enough to break generational curses.

It was a sacred playground for babies who'd seen too much, too soon. This was truly a sanctum for them.

All of it—every inch of it—was for the community. For the culture. For the ones still bleeding and the ones who didn't make it. And my woman, she built that. She built it with strength, grace, and them fire-ass edges laid to the gods.

I turned, taking her gorgeous ass in again, watching how her eyes locked on Silas's mural. She was talking to him in her head—I could tell. I knew her like my favorite

book. Her smile was soft, nostalgic, like a silent “thank you.”

I slid behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist, with my chin resting against her shoulder, my voice a breath.

“You did it, baby.”

She exhaled slowly. “We did it, Cory.”

I kissed her temple. Her skin was warm and soft, like cocoa butter mixed with blessings.

“Yeah. But this—this right here? This is your heart, baby. You manifested this through your healing. You made this sacred. This was your vision.”

She turned in my arms, pressing her forehead against mine, her hands tracing over my chest like she was making sure I was real.

“Are you proud of me?” she whispered.

I chuckled, low and sweet. “Proud? Baby, I’m in awe of you, your strength, heart, and resilience. You out here changing lives like you are the second coming.”

Her eyes got glossy.

“Damn, you ’bout to cry again?” I teased, grinning.

She rolled her eyes, shoved my chest. “Shut up, Jacory.”

But I could feel it. She was overwhelmed. We both were. This was a dream we built with our scars.

We'd barely stepped into her office when her face shifted. She froze, her hand flying to her stomach, her breath catching. Then she was gone. She took off running and headed straight to the bathroom. I stood there, blinking and trying to figure out what the fuck just happened.

Then I heard it. "Bleeehhhhhghh."

That unmistakable sound. She was definitely throwing up. She sounded sick as a dog, and I was concerned because she just seemed fine.

I knocked. "Baby?"

She didn't respond to me. I heard the toilet flush and the water in the sink start to run. She opened the door, and she stepped out lookin' like she just got slapped with a vision.

"You good, baby?"

She nodded too fast. "Yeah, yeah, just . . . bad shrimp."

"Bad shrimp?" I repeated, eyebrows raised like they were tryna climb off my face. "Girl, when the hell did you eat some damn shrimp? You haven't even been wantin' any seafood lately, and that's your absolute favorite."

She waved me off. "Don't start, Jacory."

"Nah, 'cause you have been turning down lemon pepper wings and sour pickles lately, and now you ducking seafood? Uh-uh."

She glared. "Let it go, Scooby Doo."

I narrowed my eyes. “I’mma let it go . . . for now. But I got my eye on you, Mrs. James.”

That night, the whole block pulled up for our grand opening celebration.

We had soul food trays lined up from Shari’s kitchen to the sidewalk.

The music was bumping kids were dancing to them dumb ass TikTok dances that all fucking looked alike, and the uncles were talking about how they used to do real dances and moonwalk “back in the day.”

Chase pulled up in a loud-ass velvet blazer like he was hosting the BET Awards. He looked good but fuckin’ ridiculous as hell in this Texas ass weather with that shit on. I shook my head laughin’ at his clown ass.

“Aye, look at my sister and brother-in-law out here owning shit. I always knew y’all was bougie as hell.”

Daniale clapped back immediately. “Boy, shut up. You’re still sleeping on a futon.”

Chase gasped. “First of all, it’s a memory foam daybed. Respect it, gorgeous.”

I stepped in, deadpan. “Nigga, that’s a glorified pallet.”

Daniale raised her drink. “With no headboard.”

We all fell out.

But even through all the jokes, all the dancing, all the love, I kept peeping my wife.

The way she kept cradling her stomach like it had secrets.

The way she looked at me, eyes soft, like she was about to tell me something that would shift the whole damn Earth.

I didn't know what it was yet. But something told me .

. . life was about to get real interesting.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

I should've known. I should've known. My wife had been acting funny for a few weeks, months even, talking 'bout "I'm just tired," and "it's something I ate." Baby, how much bad food are you eating, the fuck?

She was waking up nauseous, falling asleep in the middle of the day, rubbing her stomach without even realizing it. I didn't say nothing at first. But when she had the audacity to run out of a restaurant mid-bite just to throw up, I called in reinforcements.

Daniale, Chase, and I sat in the living room plotting. Shaniya's ass wasn't slick. She was in denial. So, we were gonna force the truth out of her pretty ass today.

Shaniya walked in, looking at us suspicious as hell. "Why the hell y'all sitting there looking like villains?"

Daniale smirked, holding a little pink bag.

"Sis, we need to talk."

Shaniya folded her arms. "About what?"

Chase leaned back, feet propped up, grinning like a menace. "You tryna convince the world you just 'tired' when yo' ass been passing out like a damn phone on two percent battery."

I sat up, grinning. "And why every time I see you, you hold onto your stomach like an old lady after Sunday service?"

She squinted. “Jacory?—”

Daniale cut in, pulling out the pregnancy test. “Uh-uh, sis. Pee on this.”

Shaniya stared blankly.

Then she scoffed. “Y’all are so dramatic. I am not pregnant.”

I raised a brow. “Baby. Take. The. Test.”

She sucked her teeth, pouted her sexy lips, snatched the box, and mumbled all kinds of mean shit as she stomped her ass off to the bathroom. Daniale grinned. “That’s what the hell I thought.”

She was only in there for about five minutes. That was how long we waited. It was the longest damn five minutes of my life. When the door opened, Shaniya walked out slowly, looking pale. Her eyes were wide. Her mouth parted slightly, but no words came out.

Daniale jumped up. “Bitch, what does it say?”

Shaniya held up the stick. There were two lines. My wife was pregnant.

Chase jumped off the couch. “I knew it! Aye, my sister pregnant, nigga! I’m about to be an uncle in this muthafucka!”

Daniale screamed, grabbing her arms, shaking her like she’d won the lottery. “Auntie Dani in the building, bitch!”

I just grinned like my life had been completed. I walked up to her, pulled her into my arms, and kissed her forehead slowly.

“You are having my baby, my love,” I murmured, voice thick with emotion.

She let out a shaky breath. “I-I guess I am.”

I cupped her face. “Baby, I knew you were pregnant before you did.”

She smacked my chest. “Why the hell you ain’t say nothing then?”

I smirked. “‘Cause this was funnier.”

Daniale and Chase fell out laughing.

The next day, I waited on my wife hand and foot before we went to the doctor.

She tried to fight it.

“Jacory, I can still walk, you know.”

I carried her to the car anyway. “Not today, my love. Today, you are a queen who is carrying a king or queen inside her.”

She rolled her eyes but kissed my cheek and smiled. “You are so damn extra, baby.”

“And you love it.”

We got to the doctor’s office, and I sat next to her like a soldier on high alert—ten toes down, hand-in-hand, breath on pause.

My palm was wrapped around hers so tight, I swore our lifelines braided together right then and there.

The sterile smell of antiseptic filled the air, and that damn paper sheet on the exam table crackled like it had an attitude.

The tech smiled as she prepped the ultrasound, calm as hell—too calm for the madness that was about to drop.

“Alright, let’s take a look.”

Squish. Swirl. Smear.

The cold-ass jelly hit Shaniya’s belly like a slap of refrigerated regret. She hissed, wrinkling her nose.

“Why is it so cool, my God,” she muttered, shivering.

“Gotta wake ’em up somehow,” I joked, earning a side-eye.

The wand slid across her belly like a magic wand about to conjure chaos. The screen blinked on, and the little whirs and whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of heartbeats filled the room like a drumline at halftime. Then the tech paused. Tilted her head. Moved the wand again. Zoomed in.

I frowned. “What? What’s wrong?”

The tech tried to hold back a smile. That alone had me clutching invisible pearls.

She chuckled. “Oh, nothing’s wrong.” Then she hit us with it—the line. “You’re having triplets.”

Boom. Silence. Deafening, air-snatched, jaw-on-the-floor silence. You could’ve heard a damn fruit fly sneeze. My soul briefly left my body to file a formal complaint

with the universe.

Then I shouted, “How many fuckin’ babies did you just say!”

Shaniya’s head snapped to me so fast I thought she pulled a muscle. Her eyes were wide as pie plates, her lips trembling.

“Triplets, Jacory. Triplets.”

I blinked once. Twice. Then I broke into the biggest, cheesiest, cockiest Kool-Aid grin this side of Texas.

“Shit, guess I shot the club up real good, huh?”

The tech straight up choked on a laugh. “I’ve seen a lot of reactions, but that one is new.”

Shaniya covered her face with both hands like she was hiding from her own womb.

“I am so embarrassed.”

I leaned over, kissed her cheek, still grinning like I won a championship.

“Baby, don’t be embarrassed. I did what had to be done.”

“Jacory—”

“I had to make up for lost time! That’s retroactive fertilization, baby!”

Her palm smacked my chest. “You are so ridiculous.”

“You knew what it was when you let me back in the game,” I whispered dramatically. “I don’t miss. I multiply.”

The whole house was lit like a block party during a blackout. Candles were burning throughout the house, and our family was packed tighter than a Popeye’s on Free Chicken Sandwich Day.

Shaniya stood in front of the TV like she was about to deliver a presidential address. She took a deep breath, resting both hands on her belly, which was already looking like it was housing a secret society.

“Alright, y’all,” she said. “So, we’re pregnant.”

The room blew up like Fourth of July fireworks.

“My baby is having a baby!”

Mama Shari hit her knees so fast I thought she was catching the Holy Ghost. Her wig shifted back an inch. “I need a tambourine and a towel!”

Papa Samuel stood there nodding slowly, eyes misty. “My baby girl is gon’ be a mama.”

My mama fanned herself so hard her earrings nearly flew off. “Lord, my son really stepped up. I knew the Lord wasn’t done with him yet!”

Chase popped up like he’d just won a fantasy football draft. “Aye, I’m gon’ be the favorite uncle, no cap. I’m getting my niece or nephew Jordans off rip.”

I grinned wider. This was the moment.

“Wait. Y’all, there’s more.”

The room fell silent like somebody unplugged the aux cord.

Shaniya side-eyed me, lips tight. “Jacory—don’t.”

I licked my lips slowly. Dramatically.

“We’re not just having a baby. We’re having three .”

Boom.

“Bitch, triplets!”

Daniale screamed like Beyoncé had just dropped an album.

Mama Shari gasped so loud I swear it echoed. “I need to sit down. No—stand up. No—lay down! Jesus! Blessed three times! What a mighty God we serve! What a mighty God we serve! Hallelujah!”

Chase jumped back like the floor was lava. “Aye yo, Jacory got that super sperm ! That boy got infinite ammo!”

I smirked, arms crossed, chest puffed. “Y’all already knew what it was. Don’t act brand-new.”

Shaniya rolled her eyes and smacked my arm. “Boy!”

Daniale looked shook. “So . . . three baby showers? Or one with three themes?”

Chase was pacing. “We gon’ need three cribs, three car seats, three of everything . I

gotta refinance my life for these kids already. I can't wait to spoil them, bruh!"

My mama, Justine, held her heart. "Ooh, y'all better let me move in. I ain't never raised triplets before, but I'm ready for the challenge."

Papa Samuel sipped his tea like it was whiskey. "Lord. . . I done prayed for blessings. But this? This is a full overflow, and I'm extremely grateful."

I just stood there, soaking it in. All of it. The noise. The laughter. The chaos. Three little lives already shifting the atmosphere.

Shaniya's belly stretched with life, glowing like the damn sun, and my whole spirit whispered one thing: "We really did that."

And we had a whole lifetime ahead to prove it.

Later that night, it was just me and her. The noise had faded. The laughter from the living room was nothing but a distant hum, like the echo of joy dancing down the hallway. The world outside our bedroom was still spinning, but inside this little pocket of peace? Time stood still.

She laid her head on my chest like she was placing her whole world there, like my heartbeat was her favorite lullaby.

Her breath was soft, steady, warm against my skin, and my hands rested gently on her belly, which rose like a small hill blanketed in life.

Our babies—kicking softly beneath her skin, little drumbeats of a love too big for words.

"What are we gon' name them, baby?" she whispered, her voice quiet, almost

reverent, like the question itself was sacred.

I exhaled slowly, letting the moment settle deep in my chest like warm syrup. The dim light spilled across her face like melted honey, casting shadows that danced across her cheekbones.

Then I said it. The name that had been sittin' on my soul like a prayer I never stopped whisperin'.

“If we have a boy . . . I wanna name him Silas.”

Shaniya's breath caught like it had tripped on emotion. Her whole body paused—still, trembling, soft.

Her fingers tightened around mine, her grip shaking, steady all at once.

“Are you serious?” she whispered, her voice cracked open with tenderness.

I nodded slowly, eyes locked on hers. “He deserves it, baby. He saved you, and now his nephew gon' carry his name. His strength. His legacy. Every time we say it, he'll live again.”

She sniffled, her eyes gleaming with unshed tears, and nodded. “I love that.” Her voice cracked like it was carrying all the weight of grief and gratitude in one fragile sound.

I kissed her forehead, lingering there like a vow, like I was sealing a promise to protect everything we had built.

“And if they are girls?” I asked, my lips still pressed to her skin.

She pulled back just enough to look at me, her eyes searching mine, shining with the quiet kind of joy that felt like a secret between hearts.

She thought for a second then smiled—slow, wide, full of sunlight.

“Sawyer and Sage.”

And just like that, my heart expanded past capacity. I grinned like a fool, like a man who had won every kind of love lottery that existed.

“Sawyer, Sage, and Silas James,” I said slowly, tasting the names like poetry on my tongue. “Damn, baby. Our legacy sounds like a fucking movement.”

She giggled, a soft, shaky laugh that felt like wind chimes in my chest. I kissed her slowly, like she was the answer to every prayer I ever made, and the reason I kept making new ones.

“Baby, we built a whole family.”

She let out a breathy laugh, the kind laced with disbelief and wonder. “We really did.”

I looked down at her, this woman—my wife, my warrior, my muse—lying beside me with three little miracles nestled beneath her heart.

It was in this moment, this breath, this fragile pause between night and forever, that I realized I wasn’t just lucky to love her; I was blessed to live this life beside her.

She was my heartbeat in human form. My compass and my calm.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

It had been seven whole months, and I woke up to tiny kicks tap-dancing against my hand like they was tryna start a second line inside my wife's belly.

It was gentle at first, like a whisper from the universe, but it picked up—soft thumps against my palm that reminded me that our legacy was alive and thriving inside of her.

Shaniya was curled up beside me, her breathing soft and steady, her belly round and regal, full of life, full of love, full of our future. A triple blessing.

Three. Sawyer. Sage. Silas.

Three names. Three heartbeats. Three little lives we had created with nothing but love, late-night cravings, and a whole lotta passion. I was beside myself with joy and love every time I thought about it.

I lay there in that early morning hush, just watching her sleep.

Her skin glowed like honey warmed in the sun, her lashes long and delicate against her cheeks.

Her hand was cradled over the top of her bump like she was already protecting them, already mama bearing it up in her dreams. My hand rested under hers, catching every flutter and kick like I was holding a rhythm only the five of us knew.

I never thought love could feel like this—so infinite, so overwhelming, so consuming. It filled up the room, climbed the walls, kissed the ceiling. It pressed on

my chest in the best way, like the weight of something too beautiful to name.

The alarm clock started wailing like a demon with a hangover, but before I could reach for it, Shaniya groaned and smacked it like it owed her money.

“Turn that shit off,” she mumbled into my chest, voice hoarse with sleep and attitude.

I laughed, my arms locking around her tight like I wasn’t ever letting her go. “Baby, we gotta get up.”

“Why?” she grumbled, already dramatic. “I’m literally growing a whole village. That’s work enough.”

I kissed her forehead, her temple, then the curve of her jaw. “You got a point. But if you don’t get up, I’m carrying you to breakfast like the queen you are.”

She cracked one eye open, side-eye deadly. “Jacory, I swear if you try it?—”

I smirked, rubbing her belly slowly. “You think I won’t?”

She groaned, trying to sit up but struggling with her belly in the way. “See, this is what I get for letting you breathe on me.”

I grinned wider, brushing my thumb across her stomach. “Baby, I ain’t just breathe on you.”

She gasped, smacking my chest. “Shut up!”

“Just saying,” I said with a shrug. “I already knew my swimmers had Olympic potential.”

She rolled her eyes so hard, I think they touched the back of her skull. “Get out.”

“Nah,” I said, kissing her neck. “You stuck with me forever, gorgeous.”

By the time we waddled—I mean walked—into the kitchen, the whole crew was already posted up like they lived with us rent-free.

Mama Shari was making grits like she had something to prove, Papa Samuel was sipping coffee with the patience of a man who’d seen everything twice, and Daniale and Chase? They were already talking noise.

Chase looked up, grinning. “Damn, sis, you getting?—”

Shaniya raised a finger mid-waddle. “Say ‘big’ and I’m throwing this whole plate at your big ass head. I dare you.”

He threw his hands up like he was under arrest. “I was gon’ say glowing! Damn, relax!”

Daniale was already snort-laughin’, nearly chokin’ on her orange juice. “Boy, you are a damn lie. I heard the ‘b’ forming in your throat.”

I pulled out a chair, set Shaniya down like the goddess she was, and kissed her cheek. “Eat, my love. You gotta keep our babies fed. Don’t let the haters distract you.”

She pouted, lifting her fork, and her eyes got a little watery. “Jacory, they are bullying me.”

I turned slowly, eyes narrowing like a movie villain. “Y’all bullying my wife?”

Chase leaned back, smirking. “Ain’t nobody scared of you, nigga.”

I licked my lips. “Bet.”

Two seconds later, his cocky ass was in a headlock.

The whole house exploded with laughter.

Daniale fell off the bar stool wheezing. “He got yo’ ass good, boy!”

Mama Shari was just shaking her head. “Y’all are too damn old for this foolishness, but good looking, son.”

Shaniya sat there, calmly chewing her eggs like she wasn’t just married to a menace. “My man always gon’ ride behind me.”

I kissed the top of her head. “You fucking right, baby.”

Later that afternoon, we were at the doctor’s office for another ultrasound. The lights were low, and the screen lit up with the blurry, beautiful images of our babies, moving around like they were rehearsing for the Soul Train line.

The tech smiled. “Wow. They’re getting big. Just a few more weeks.”

Shaniya turned to me, eyes wide, filled with wonder. “Jacory,” she whispered, squeezing my hand tight.

I kissed her knuckles. “Yeah, my love?”

Her voice cracked like it had been holdin’ this weight for months. “I can’t believe we’re about to be parents.”

I cupped her face, pulled her in close so she could feel the certainty in my heartbeat.

“We were always meant for this. You, me, them—our family.”

She let out a shaky breath. “I love you, Jacory.”

“I love you more,” I whispered, my lips brushing hers.

That night, back home, the moonlight spilled across our bedroom like silver blessings from the sky. She laid on my chest, her belly between us like a sacred bridge connecting our past to our future.

My hands roamed her stomach, feeling those little kicks again, like the babies were trying to say, “We hear y’all.”

“Baby,” I murmured, my voice thick.

She tilted her head up, brushing curls out her eyes. “Yeah?”

“Do you ever think about how far we’ve come?”

She smiled, eyes shimmering like brown diamonds under starlight. “Every single day.”

I exhaled slowly, emotion crawling up my throat. “Silas would be proud of you.”

She swallowed hard, blinking fast. “And he’d be proud of you, too.”

I kissed her, deep and slow.

“We built something beautiful, my love,” I whispered. My hand pressed gently against her stomach. “And this? This right here? This is just the beginning.”

She let out a laugh that trembled. “Yeah, baby. It really is.”

And as I held her tighter, feelin’ our babies move between us like tiny stars finding their rhythm in the galaxy we created, I knew one thing for sure: Forever started here.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

Shaniya + Jacory

I felt like Free Willy—massive, heavy, and constantly shifting to find even a sliver of comfort.

My belly was stretched to the brink, skin taut and warm, like it was holding the whole world inside.

Every little kick reminded me they were getting stronger, more real, and more ready.

I waddled now—there was no other word for it—and even breathing felt like a chore some days.

But beneath all the exhaustion, the swelling, the endless peeing, there was this wild, beautiful anticipation.

I was so ready to meet them. But I was also so ready to not be pregnant anymore.

“Jacory,” I groaned, waddling across the room like a penguin in distress, one hand on my aching lower back, the other cradling the mountain that was my belly. “I swear to God, if these babies don’t come out soon, I’m ’bout to evict them my damn self.”

I looked like a walking watermelon. I was swollen, sweaty, and sick of everybody and everything. Jacory was sittin’ on the couch like it was a regular Tuesday, feet kicked up, remote in one hand, drink in the other, grinnin’ like he wasn’t partially responsible for this three-baby situation.

“You good, baby?” he asked, amusement thick in his voice, like my suffering was some kinda rom-com.

I shot him a death glare that could melt concrete. “Do I look good, nigga?”

Chase, chilling on the other side of the room like he didn’t have no sense, damn near choked on his drink as he burst out laughing.

“She on edge, bro.” He wheezed. “Don’t even engage. That’s a suicide mission.”

Daniale waltzed in with her smoothie, fresh lashes, and a full face like she wasn’t the chaos queen herself. “Nah, engage. I wanna see her drag his ass through this house like a damn mop.”

I pointed at her like I had time for nonsense. “You are supposed to be on my side, heifer.”

She sipped slow, unbothered. “I am. I just also enjoy violence.”

I was about to snatch everybody bald when?—

Pop .

A warm rush of liquid hit the floor like a water balloon exploded between my legs. I blinked, confused. Then I gasped.

Chase’s eyes got big like quarters. “Yo, sis, did your water just break?”

Jacory jumped up so fast he sent the coffee table skidding across the hardwood like a hockey puck. “Oh, shit! Baby, let’s go!”

He was moving like a man possessed, throwing on shoes and damn near leaping over furniture. By the time I got to the car, he was already buckled in, one hand white knuckling the steering wheel, the other holding mine like he could drive and pray at the same time.

“Baby, how you feeling?” His voice was shaky but steady, like he was tryna sound brave while internally combusting.

“I feel . . . weird.” I panted, shifting uncomfortably. “Like my uterus is beefing with me.”

Jacory floored it. We hit curves like we were in a Vin Diesel movie.

Daniale and Chase were right behind us, driving like they had nitrous in the damn trunk.

“I swear to God,” I groaned, holding my side, “if we get pulled over, I’m telling the cops it was your idea.”

Jacory looked insulted. “Baby, you acting like I wouldn’t crash out on the police behind you, the fuck?”

“Focus, nigga!”

We skidded into the ER parking lot like we were auditioning for the next Fast and Furious movie. Jacory jumped out and damn near kicked the door off its hinges.

“Somebody, get a wheelchair!” he roared, arms flailing like a madman.

A nurse came running. Before I could even sit good, the world tilted. My head spun, my heart thudded, and my breath got shallow.

“Jacory . . .” I whispered, my voice trembling. “Something’s . . . not right.”

And then—everything went black.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 6:51 am

And these kids, Lord, help us. The triplets.

Silas, Sawyer, and Sage. They were my lil' three-piece combo sent straight from Heaven and dipped in chaos.

They hit the ground runnin' every morning like they had somewhere to be and a deadline to destroy peace.

There was no such thing as quiet in the James household.

Peace clocked out the day they were born.

This morning, my boy Silas came in swinging a wooden spoon like it was a lightsaber, yelling, "I'm the boss now!

" with nothing but a diaper and glitter socks on.

Sawyer was under the dining room table eating dry cereal out the box like it was survival mode, grinning like she just hit the jackpot.

And Sage, that girl had climbed halfway up the bookshelf like she was auditioning for American Ninja Warrior, quiet as a feather, eyes wise like she already knew secrets we hadn't even whispered yet.

I walked out, rubbin' my eyes, scratching my chest, mumbling, "Lord . . . come get Yo' strongest soldiers. They are giving me a run for my money, and I'm tired."

Then I saw her. Shaniya. My wife. My soft place.

My world. She was standin' in the kitchen like a sunrise in motion—locs in a loose pineapple, one slipper on, hummin' to herself while rocking Sage on her hip and flipping pancakes with the other hand.

That sun was hittin' her skin like gold worships her, and the light been praying to land on her.

“Hey, Daddy,” she said, her sexy voice sweet like syrup sliding down fresh beignets.

I walked over to her, wrapped my arms around her waist, and kissed the spot between her shoulder and neck. “You are still my favorite kind of beautiful, even when you smell like maple syrup and baby wipes.”

She laughed, leaning into me. “Baby, stop being fresh with me. That’s how we got these three little no limit soldiers. Can you go change Sawyer before she turns this kitchen into a crime scene.” Then she added, “And grab Silas before he jousts the couch cushions into the next dimension, please.”

Marriage wasn't for the faint, but this kind of love, it had a backbone.

It had scars and soft landings, arguments and apologies, midnight cries and morning makeups.

This love had soul. We were holding each other down like anchors in a storm, buildin' somethin' sturdy in a world that kept tryin' to shake us loose.

We were still slow dancing barefoot in the kitchen when the babies fell asleep.

Still sneaking kisses in the pantry like high school kids.

I was still falling in love every time she laughed out loud or touched my chest when she was talkin'.

I called her "Baby" so much, it sounded like a prayer.

I made her feel cherished and loved every chance I got.

And we weren't just raisin' babies. We were raisin' hope.

Silas's Solace was a whole movement now. We are helping men find the words they never knew they had. Brothers walked in stiff with silence and left lighter with truth. I saw my old self in every one of 'em, and I helped them breathe.

Shaniya's Sanctum, that was her entire heart beating outside her chest. It was a haven for women who weren't just survivors but fighters.

She poured life into broken mamas, sisters, grandmothers, cousins, and bruised spirits.

Every time I saw her with those women, eyes soft but voice firm, I fell deeper.

She was a healer. My healer. I couldn't be prouder of her.

Today, the backyard looked like a block party dipped in love.

The music was loud, grill hot, and laughter was even louder.

My mama was back and forth from the kitchen to outside with all kinds of pans of meat.

Mama Shari was tryna guard the potato salad like it was classified.

Papa Samuel was flipping ribs like he tryna earn a trophy.

Auntie Rochelle had been dancing since noon when she pulled up.

There were kids screaming and playing and running around.

Dogs were barking, water balloons flying.

That trio of ours were everywhere at once.

Sawyer was in the dog bowl tryna baptize the poor puppy.

Silas was damn near naked in the kiddie pool singing “Wheels on the Bus.” And the last one—Sage, of course—sitting on the cooler holding court like a baby boss.

I was shirtless behind the grill ’cause my baby said I looked like a tall glass of lemonade. And when she said it? I believed it.

Then Chase and Daniale walked in. Late, loud, lookin’ like the pilot episode of a rom-com no one asked for but everybody was watchin’.

“Aye, y’all miss me?” Chase hollered, throwing his arm around Daniale’s shoulders.

She snatched his drink and sipped it like she paid for it. “You talk too much.”

He leaned in close, lips near her ear. “You love it.”

She smiled. Just a lil’. But it was there.

I saw it then, the fire flickering low, just waiting for the wind.

“Baby,” I said to Shaniya, elbowing her lightly. “You see that?”

She nodded slow, rocking Sawyer. “They gon’ burn the whole city down once they stop fronting.”

I laughed. “You think she’s ready?”

“Ready or not,” she said, “it’s coming. Love don’t wait on scared hearts.”

That night, when the stars were sitting heavy in the sky and the babies were finally snoring like tiny engines, I pulled Shaniya into my lap on the porch swing. The air was thick with summer and sweetness. Fireflies dancing. The world quiet.

“You ever think we’d make it here?” she asked, restin’ her head on my chest.

“Every damn day,” I whispered, kissing her temple. “Even in the darkness, I saw this. I saw us.”

She looked up at me, eyes glossy. “We ain’t just survived, Jacory. We lived.”

“Nah, baby,” I said. “We thrived.”

We rocked in silence, our whole world sleeping behind us, the stars bearing witness to everything we’d fought for.

This love was built from ashes and amen. From gunfire and grace. From trauma and tenderness. It was us. Raw. Real. Rising.

And I swear, I’d never let it go.

THE END