

A. B L O S S O M

B. LOVE
PRESENTS

PLAYING WITH
SOUL TIES

PLAYING WITH SOUL TIES

A. BLOSSOM

B. LOVE PUBLICATIONS

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SYNOPSIS

Play around with soul ties and you will get a baby, or however the saying goes.

Marli Martin is the queen of playing games. Seeing her twin sister get dragged through the mud by love made her promise to never partake. She uses men for their body parts and their money. It had been easy. She never fell in love because she never made her heart available. That was until she met her sister's new brother-in-law, Dru, and their souls tied. One night turned into many, and Marli soon found herself playing stupid games and winning stupid prizes.

Rich and successful record label CEO, Dru Willis, prides himself on being a leader. He sets out to accomplish something, and he does just that. Dru has lived his entire life getting what he wants when he wants, so when the one thing he can't have turns out to be the only thing he ever wanted, he doesn't know how to handle it. He finds himself cutting all ties with the only woman who ever had his heart, Marli Martin.

Their siblings force them into each other's space, and there is nothing they can do to stop the strings that bind them from connecting. Dru soon realizes that Marli is the woman he wants, but is he willing to play her silly games? Playing with soul ties can be dangerous, but with every risk, there is a reward. Will Dru and Marli be able to ignite their bond, free of games, or will they discover that if you play around with soul ties, you might get burned?

*This book is dedicated to my parents, Sophia and Burton.
Look, Mom and Dad, I wrote another book!
Continue to watch over me.
I miss you every day.*

*And to my kids, CJ and Nola.
May you one day understand why Mama had to work so
hard.*

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INTRODUCTION

A note from A. Blossom

These characters and their drama first made their debut in *Between a Soul Tie*. It's not required that you read that one first, but it will help you understand the chaos that is Marli and Dru.

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TRIGGER WARNINGS!

This book contains topics of sex, violence, guns, prison, and child endangerment. They are playing a whole lot of games in this book. If any of these trigger you, please proceed with caution.

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PREFACE

You're in Blossom's playhouse. Let's

play. [.](#)

PROLOGUE

Marli

“Stop playing, Dru. We can’t do that here.” Marli giggled as she swatted Dru’s hand from between her thighs.

“Oh, now you got limits on where you take this dick?” Dru replied, leaning down to kiss her neck. A soft moan escaped Marli’s lips. She tried her best to move away from him, but the sensation his kisses was sending between her thighs had her leaning into him instead of getting away.

“My six weeks isn’t up. Now stop!” Her lips were moving, but her hips were rolling in his lap.

“What that got to do with those thick ass lips?” Dru now had one hand on her middle and the other gripping her throat. The sensation was almost enough to make her forget she’d just given birth three weeks ago.

“Dru...” Her plea came out as a soft moan. She couldn’t help it. Dru was her weak spot. It had been that way since the first day she’d met him. He was always breaking down the thick border walls around her heart and getting her to do things out of character. Whenever she was around him, he never failed to make her feel.

“Dru...” She whimpered again, fighting to build up the strength to push him away.

“Keep calling my name like that and we gon’ make another baby!” His voice vibrated around her eardrum and straight into her pussy. Grasping

onto his words, Marli finally found the strength to push herself off his lap. The babies were exactly why they couldn't do this.

"Dru, stop!" She swatted his hands away and scooted out of his lap, just as the nurses wheeled in the two incubators. Marli moved to her sons the same way she did whenever they were brought back into the room from one of the many tests or surgeries they had to have. Born at only twenty-six weeks, Marli's twins had been through a lot, but they were alive and fighting.

"Everything went well. These little guys are champs," the nurse stated as she moved to the computer.

"Verify the numbers on your wristband, please." She spoke the routine protocol for returning newborn babies in the hospital. Marli recited the numbers robotically, placing her hand in the hole and securing her son's small hand.

"That's right, Deuce. You and your brother are fighters." Marli looked up, admiring Dru as he stuck his hand in the incubator, grabbing onto Deuce. Her heart filled and broke every time he interacted with one of her sons. Dru had been present during her pregnancy, but being in the running to be her baby daddy had rubbed him the wrong way. She never expected him to be as supportive as he'd been the last three weeks. He'd been here at the hospital every day since the twins were born. It made what she had to tell him even more difficult.

"The doctor will be in with the results in about an hour or two. Can I get you anything?" The nurse placed her hands on her hips. Marli rolled her eyes as she ogled over Dru. The jealousy that consumed her only further confirmed why her feelings for Dru were dangerous.

"No, thank you, but—" The doors to the hospital room flew open, cutting Marli off. Everyone's eyes immediately traveled to Max as he entered the room, sucking all the air out of it.

"Where my babies?" he questioned as he waltzed inside the room. His eyes moved between Dru and Marli. She hoped he wouldn't be on any bullshit today. Every time Max stopped by, he was always on some bullshit. Marli wanted so badly to turn back the hands of time and never start fucking with Max, but it was too late for that. He was the richest nigga she'd fucked with at the time, and having a paid nigga trick on her was all she was concerned about. It didn't matter that he wasn't an actual good person. He was fine and rich, and that was good enough for her a year ago.

Now she was stuck with the asshole. Marli exhaled a deep breath as Max approached her.

“Hey, baby mama.” He went for her lips, but she quickly pivoted her head.

“Hi, Max.” She rolled her eyes, placing her hand on his chest to stop him from getting any closer. She knew it was all a show for Dru. She hadn’t fucked with Max on that level since she found out she was pregnant. Her eyes went to Dru; he was watching them like a hawk.

“How my lil niggas doing?” he asked as he plopped down on the hospital recliner.

“Um—” the nurse said. Dru interrupted her.

“Aye, don’t address my sons like that, my guy.” Dru’s eyes were on Max as he still held on to Deuce’s hand. Max rose from the bed, and the look on his face let Marli know he was about to crush her entire world.

“Yo’ sons?” Max laughed. Marli’s heart beat fast.

“Max!” She attempted to plead with him to stop, but she knew he wouldn’t. Her pregnancy had become some sort of weird competition to him. Sometimes she wondered if he wanted to be the father of her kids or if he just didn’t want Dru to be.

“Oh, she ain’t told you yet? These my sons, nigga. I don’t even know why yo’ simp ass is here.” The air drained out of the room instantly, and Marli felt like she was underwater with no oxygen.

“The fuck he just say, Marli?” Dru was in her face within seconds, and she couldn’t speak. This wasn’t how she wanted him to find out. She was going to tell him today. She was, but when he showed up to the hospital with flowers for her, she couldn’t find the words. Her heart skipped a beat as she watched Dru’s heart break. Hell, hers was breaking too. She wanted nothing more than for Dru to be the father of her sons, but God was playing a cruel joke on her, giving her an unneeded slice of humble pie.

“Yeah, the DNA results came in two weeks ago.” Max waved his phone in front of Dru’s face. Dru looked intensely at the screen before moving his eyes back to Marli.

“You had me up in here getting attached to babies that ain’t even mine... and you knew!” His voice thundered, causing Marli to release the tears she’d been fighting to hold back.

“I’m sorry. I was gon’ tell you.” She whimpered.

“Once a foul ass ho, always a foul ass h...” Max couldn’t finish his statement because Dru had somehow launched at him, punching him in the face. Max’s body fell back onto the bed.

“Oh my goodness! I’m calling security!” the nurse screamed as she ran out of the door.

“You foul as fuck, man!” Dru’s words cut layers into Marli’s soul.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” She cried.

“Lose my fucking number, Marli.” Dru walked slowly out of the hospital room. All she could do was stand there and cry. Deuce and Tres must have been heartbroken too, because as the door slammed shut, their soft cries radiated through the hospital room.

“I’m so sorry boys.” She sobbed. “Mommy messed up.”

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ONE

Four years later
Marli

“Girl, get in here with my grandbabies before this rain get y’all!” Max’s mom shooed Marli and the boys inside the house just as the rain poured from the sky. Marli wasted no time grabbing both boys in her arms and running up the stairs. She’d just gotten her hair done, and she refused to ruin it before her trip. If her inconsistent ass baby daddy could just be reliable for once, she would have been on her way to the airport for her twin sister’s wedding by now instead of making this extra stop on the other side of town. Marli used her foot to close the door behind them.

“Nana!” Deuce and Tre sang simultaneously, running to their grandma as soon as their mom put them down. Their excitement almost knocked the short, brown-skinned woman on her back. Ms. Woodard greeted them with the open arms of a happy grandmother as she’d always done when they came over. Marli situated the boys’ suitcases by the front door as they blabbered to their grandma about the Easter bunny. It had been the only thing the four-year-old boys could talk about.

“How about you boys gone into your room and play,” Ms. Woodard instructed them. The boys ran off down the hall, not worried about their mother at all.

“Suitcases, Marli? Now you know I don’t mind the boys coming over, but you also know I don’t do unexpected drop-offs. What’s going on?”

Marli instantly rolled her eyes as she took out her phone. She was going to curse Max's ass clean the fuck out for his incompetence. She just knew he hadn't told her to drop the boys off at his mama's house without informing her.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Woodard. Your son told me to leave them here until he got here. My flight leaves in an hour... I'm sorry... I didn't know he didn't tell you." Marli rambled as she typed vigorously on her phone, telling Max how fucking stupid he was.

Just this one time, she needed him to keep his word and be on time to get the kids. They had waited for him all day, and when he finally picked up the phone, "Take them to my mom," was all he had said before hanging up. Marli sighed a sigh of pure frustration as she pressed send on the text message. Marli didn't know what was worse: having no baby daddy or having a half-ass one. Ms. Woodard approached her, placing a hand on her arm.

"Don't worry, baby. It's fine. They can stay here. I'll deal with that son of mine. You go ahead." Ms. Woodard reassured her. Marli was thankful for the boys' grandma. She'd been the voice of reason many times and came through for the boys more than Max ever did.

"Thank you," she replied, hoping she felt how truly thankful she was.

"No problem. I was bored anyway, child." She walked into the living room, signaling Marli to follow her. Marli glanced at her phone, trying to debate if she had enough time to stay for a little bit and make it to the airport.

"Where are you going this time? Are you filming? This another work trip, or you getting to enjoy this one?" Ms. Woodard shouted from the kitchen. She knew she had no choice but to follow her. Marli's mama hadn't raised her to be rude.

"Turks and Caicos. My sister Kay is having a wedding there." Marli walked into the kitchen.

"I thought your sister was already married?" Confusion played across Ms. Woodard's face.

"She is. It's a vow renewal, the wedding they never had, since they eloped five years ago. Our entire family is coming. My little sister Taylor came home from college and everything."

"Oh, that sounds magical. The camera crew not coming, though, are they?"

Marli shook her head.

“Unfortunately, not. My sister and her husband said no.” Marli had been trying for years to get her twin sister, Kay, to join her on the *Hip Hop in Love* reality show, but Kay was against it. Unlike Marli, Kay lived a low-key life. She was married to one of the richest men in the music industry, but she didn’t like the spotlight. Marli hadn’t even asked if the cameras could come on this trip, because she knew Kay and Blue would say no, regardless of the type of money they would all stand to make off a wedding special.

“Good for them. It’s good to tune the world out sometimes. The public doesn’t need to be all up in your business all the time. I wish you and my son would learn to do that.” There it was—the reason that she’d led Marli back there. Marli rolled her eyes. She’d heard this all before. Nobody close to her cared for her lifestyle. Sometimes Marli didn’t care for it either, especially when it was some drama surrounding Max, but social media and reality TV were her livelihood. The more she exposed herself, the more money she made.

“Now, don’t compare my business post to what Max is doing on the gram, Ms. Woodard.” Marli chuckled, referencing her baby daddy’s smash or pass videos and nightly partying. Marli was a reality TV star and social media influencer. She had a reason to post daily. Max was a producer; his job wasn’t directly related to posting content. He just liked the attention.

“I don’t see a difference. It’s all too much if you ask me.” She laughed.

“I hear you, Ms. Wood...” Her voice trailed off from the sound of her phone vibrating in her hand. Glancing at the screen, she cringed at the sight of her sister’s number. She already knew what it was about.

“Yeah, sis, I’m—” Her greeting was cut short.

“Where are you? The flight is supposed to leave soon.” Kay’s voice came thundering into the phone.

“Max didn’t show up to get the kids. I had to take them to Ms. Woodard.” Marli listened as the phone went silent. The breathing on the other end let her know that Kay was still on the other line.

“You could have just brought them. My kids will be there, and they love their cousins.” Kay finally replied. Bringing the boys along had been the original plan, but after she’d put Max on child support, he’d asked for partial custody. This week just so happened to be his week with the boys.

“It’s Max’s week. You know, legally, I gotta leave these kids with him, or he’ll drag me back to court.” Marli’s voice was soft. She hoped she didn’t offend Ms. Woodard with her statement, but she knew firsthand the drama between Marli and Max.

“Yo’ bum ass baby daddy lucky we have our own plane. Just hurry up, sis. If we miss air clearance, we’ll have to wait until tonight.”

“I’m on my way, sis.” Marli pushed end on the phone.

“Go ahead, baby! The boys are fine here until Max shows.” She reassured Marli as she ushered her out the door.

“Thank you again, Ms. Woodard.”

“Deuce and Tres, come say goodbye to your mama!” Ms. Woodard yelled as they walked to the front door. Marli smiled as her boys came running to the door. They were so handsome, the splitting image of her. They were her whole world. Wrapping both of them in a hug, she kissed their cheeks.

“I love you.” Marli pushed their plaits out of their faces.

“We love you, Mama,” they replied. Their eyes darted back toward the back room, letting Marli know they were eager to get to playing.

“Have fun with Grandma and daddy. I’ll call y’all before bed.” She kissed them both again before letting them go back to playing.

“Alright, Ms. Woodard. I’m gon’ I’ll call Max and—”

“Just go, girl. I got Max,” she replied, pushing Marli out the door. The cold rain hit her skin immediately, causing her to run briskly to her car. She was grateful that the rain had slowed a little because she had to get to the other side of town in twenty-five minutes. Turning on her car, she rolled her eyes as her phone rang. As Max’s name flashed across the screen, she exhaled a deep breath and prepared herself for impact.

“Yes, Max.”

“Aye, what the fuck are you talking about, man!” The irritation in his voice only made Marli roll her eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell your mama I was bringing the boys? She was completely caught off guard, and I was the one looking flakey.” Marli’s words were laced with so much disgust. Every time she spoke with Max, she wondered what she’d seen him. Well, she knew what she had seen in him, but she never imagined co-parenting would be this damn hard. Marli was seeing firsthand you never really knew a man until you birthed his child.

“I did, man. She must have forgotten.” The raised tone in his voice let her know he was lying.

“Whatever, Max. Luckily, your moms always come through unlike—”

“I don’t come through for y’all, Marli? Don’t start talking out the side of yo’ ass. I get my kids. I pay yo’ ass a nice amount in child support, too. I created the lane for yo’ ass to even be on that funky ass reality show. You got me fucked up!” Max’s voice thundered through the phone. Marli had lost track of how many times she’d rolled her eyes while he was giving his usual spiel about how he was the father of the year. She was sure if she rolled her eyes again, they would get stuck.

“Are you done? I’m late for my flight.”

“You eager as fuck to get on this lil trip with that bitch ass nigga Dru.”

“If you gon’ be more than a few hours getting the boys, call your mom and tell her.” Marli sighed. She ignored his last statement. She wasn’t about to entertain Max’s one-sided beef with Dru. This trip was about supporting her sister and brother-in-law.

“Yeah, I know I’m right. I’m a tell you right now, he bet’ not be around my...” Marli couldn’t hang up the phone fast enough. Glancing at the time, she now had twenty minutes to get to the airport. Kay said they would hold the plane for her, but she did not want to be a bother. This week was about her sister. She and Blue deserved this, especially after everything they had been through with the miscarriage last year. Marli backed out of Ms. Woodard’s driveway, ignoring the back-to-back calls from Max. Pressing play on her playlist, she let the sounds of her favorite ratchet artist soothe her.

“Fuck my baby daddy!” she screamed. She swore these ratchet songs spoke to her soul as she hit the gas and floored it to the airport.

Two

Dru

“What you saying, J?” Dru rubbed his hand across his forehead as he watched Janel move around the office in tears. He’d heard her loud and clear, but he needed her to repeat the shit.

“I can’t do this anymore, Dru. Eight years! Eight years I’ve been working here, and we have been fooling around all eight of them... but I’m still nothing more than the employee you fuck!” Janel’s voice grew louder as she spoke.

She was visibly upset, and all Dru could do was shake his head. He had expected this conversation to come a long time ago. Janel was right. They had been fucking around for eight years. She was one of the first people he had employed at his record label, Eight24 Records. In the beginning, it was just him, his brother Blue, and Janel. He never meant to start sleeping with her, but about six months into her working there, she was in his bed. Dru knew he had blurred a line, but when Janel didn’t protest it, he assumed she was cool with the arrangement.

“J...” Dru mumbled the nickname he had given her, attempting to get closer, but she held her hand out for him to stop.

“No! Don’t. I want a title, Dru! I want to know I’m not in love by myself. I want to be someone’s wife. Hell, I’ll even take long-term girlfriend at this point, but for eight years, all we do is fuck and handle business! I’m done, Dru. I can’t work here anymore.”

Her words sliced through him, and he just stared at her petite chocolate frame. Her beautiful face was makeup-free and damp with tears. Dru felt bad. He knew he didn't want those things with her. In the beginning, he had real feelings for Janel. She was beautiful and supportive. She was amazing at her job, but he was afraid to commit to one woman so early in his career. He just didn't want to end up like his father, hopping into a marriage or committed relationship before he was ready and breaking hearts. He'd seen the turmoil that his dad had caused his mom when she found out about his side baby. He had decided long ago that he would stay single until he was one hundred percent sure that he was ready. He liked Janel, but he just wasn't sure if she was the one.

"I don't want you to quit your job, Janel. You're an influential part of this label. You helped Blue and I get this bitch up and running!" Dru tried to reason with her.

He couldn't imagine the label without her. She'd started as their secretary, but she'd been moved up over the years to the head of A & R. He hated the thought of her giving up on all her hard work for him. He approached her again. She was being unreasonable. They could stop fucking around and she could keep her job if that was the problem.

"See! It's all business with you! I can't do this anymore, Dru. Do you know how hard it is to work under someone you love who doesn't love you back?" Janel's sobs pierced his heart. The respect he had for her, and everything she'd done for him and his label, was softening his usual hard-ass demeanor.

"Janel—" His head dropped.

"No, you don't! You never loved me, and I was fool enough to think if I just kept giving you my body, you'd change your mind. You'd pick me!" Janel's words held so much sadness. Dru lifted his head and gazed into Janel's doe-shaped eyes. He had love for Janel; he just didn't love her like that.

"I have love for you, J... I—"

"Then put a title on us! Tell me this all has been worth something. You're rich, I get it. You have a lot of women throwing themselves at you. I never said we had to have a monogamous relationship. You can have side bitches, Dru. We can still have threesomes. I just need something more than what we've been doing."

Dru didn't know what to say. He didn't want Janel to quit, but he just couldn't give her what she was asking for. His heart was somewhere else, and it had been for a long time. The room filled with Janel's silent sobs. She'd gotten the message loud and clear.

"I'm ending my employment at Eight24 Records in a week. That should be—"

"Janel, you don't have to quit. We can end this shit between us, move you to a different office. This label is rightfully yours too." He thought what he was offering her was a good deal, but it only seemed to make her cry louder.

"You're going to be late for the flight. I'll have my replacement trained by the time you get back. I take it you want to promote Daniel." She retreated to her desk. Dru looked at the time and sighed. The plane taking his family to Turks for his brother's vow renewal was leaving in less than an hour. He only stopped by headquarters to grab a few things. He didn't expect to see Janel there packing up her office. She was supposed to be meeting him at the airport.

"Janel!" He called her name, causing her to turn around and face him. Her stained cheeks and smeared makeup made him feel bad as fuck for how things ended up between them. He wouldn't force himself to be in a relationship that he wasn't ready for, with a person he didn't love. Janel would make some man happy, but it just wasn't him.

"Blue and I will have a severance package in your account by tomorrow. It's the least we can do. If you don't like the numbers, let us know. If you're not here when I get back, J, I wish you all the best." He headed toward the door. As soon as he turned his back on her, the dam broke. Janel's cries were so loud he could barely keep walking, but he knew that turning around would only give her false hope. Stopping, he took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry for wasting your time, Janel." He somberly walked out the door.

"Took you long enough." His little brother Blue greeted him as he stepped foot onto their private plane. Blue was only younger than him by two days,

but Dru loved to drag it. Their father had been moving recklessly and had his side chick and his wife pregnant at the same time. Dru was born August 2nd, and Blue, whose real name was Amijay, was born August 4th. They were real-life ghetto twins.

“I got caught up at the office.” Dru stepped onto their private plane. He wasn’t the type of nigga to cower away from things, but he was dreading telling his brother about Janel.

“Hold up. Where is Janel? Why ain’t nobody on time today, shit?” Blue looked around the half-empty plane before settling on Dru’s face. He stared at his brother strangely, trying to gauge what was going on. They’d spent enough time together to be able to read each other without saying a word. Blue was not only his brother but his best and only friend. There were no secrets between them. When they were in the streets, the two of them had become so successful by being able to communicate with each other without words.

“What the fuck then happened, nigga?” Blue questioned. Dru let out a sigh. He hated to give his brother the bad news before his trip, but he couldn’t shy away from the truth. He’d made his bed when he crossed the line all those years ago and slept with Janel. It was the rule he preached heavily to his brother, and he had disobeyed it.

“Janel quit,” Dru blurted, attempting to causally move past his little brother and to his seat, but he was stopped by Blue’s hand on his shoulder.

“Nah. What you just say, nigga?” he questioned.

“Janel quit, and I promoted Dani.” He shoved Blue’s hand off his shoulder and pushed past him. Blue followed him as he knew he would. No matter how much Dru wanted to brush this shit over like it wasn’t a big deal, he knew it was. Without Janel, a lot of things wouldn’t run smoothly. That girl went above and beyond her title as A & R.

“What you mean Janel quit?” Blue stopped him again. His voice was just above a whisper. This time, Dru stared into his brother’s smug face, dreading what he had to say. Blue was always talking shit about how him fucking Janel was bad for business. Dru wasn’t trying to hear him, though, not after all the shenanigans Blue had pulled before meeting his wife.

“She wanted me to put a title on our situation.” The look that washed over his brother’s face told him he was about to be on all bullshit.

“I told yo’ ass, nigga.” Blue broke out in laughter as Dru pushed past him again heading to his seat. Blue was about to drag it.

“Don’t mix business with pleasure! Don’t go around fucking our business partners. Stop thinking with your dick! You remember all those things you preached to me, nigga, while you were fucking our secretary!” Blue shouted comically. Dru glanced around the plane to see who was listening.

Blue’s son and daughter, Iman and Imani, sat in the back, playing on their tablets. Blue’s sister-in-law, Taylor, was snapping selfies. Everyone else was outside the plane, talking. Dru shook his head at his brother. He wouldn’t give his silly ass the satisfaction of seeing him laugh. Dru had told his brother all those things. He couldn’t even defend himself. It was different, though. Before Blue had met his wife, Kay, he’d been putting his dick in any and everybody. They’d had to fire so many people because Blue had fucked them and ignored them the next day. Dru had made sure that he only fucked women that didn’t work for him in any capacity, except for Janel. She’d been the exception.

“Aye, you done?” Dru’s tone was sharp and dismissive.

“You might as well call her up and be with her, nigga, because we need Janel.” Blue sat down on the couch next to his brother. Dru couldn’t lie; the thought had crossed his mind on the car ride over here, but being with Janel just to keep her at the label would be foul as fuck. Dru was a lot of things, but he wasn’t a deceitful person. Any girl he fucked with, including Janel, knew he was unavailable for anything but dick and a few gifts.

“You know I thought about it, nigga. I ain’t that foul though.” Dru made himself comfortable on the sectional sofa that wrapped their private plane.

“I bet yo’ ass did. What’s so bad about being with Janel, nigga? You have been fucking her all this time.” Dru didn’t turn his head to his little brother. He was the one person in this world that knew all his secrets. He didn’t have to say anything. Blue knew the answer to his question.

He had seen his heartbreak firsthand both times it had happened. The first time was when his father introduced him to a brother who nearly shared his exact birthday. The second time was when he’d shown up at his brother’s doorstep in tears over two twin boys who weren’t his and their mother. Dru’s heart was a cold-case file. He had always been a mean nigga but after the heartbreak that Marli had caused him, he was unlovable. It was why he couldn’t give his heart to Janel or any other woman. The one time he’d been ready to commit, Marli had practically shitted on him and his heart.

“You already know what I’m about to say.” Blue took out a cigar from the arm of the sofa.

“Yeah, so don’t say it,” Dru replied, even though he knew Blue was going to say it anyway.

“You gotta heal from Pop, nigga. He wasn’t perfect, but he was a good dad. Ma has done her healing and forgiven Dad for his faults. You gotta do the same. It ain’t healthy, and maybe it’s time to forgive Marli too. Y’all weren’t together when she got pregnant, and she was honest with you about not knowing who the father was. Yes, she held the results for two weeks, and that was foul. But you always knew the possibility that the boys weren’t yours. Besides, none of this would have happened if you would have put a title on y’all situation from the jump.” Dru chose not to respond.

Blue was always telling him he needed to heal and forgive, and, in his eyes, he had done that. He had spent his entire life around his father, following in his footsteps and doing as he was told despite the heartbreak he had caused him. Shit, he had been able to still be around Marli and not wring her fucking neck out for that foul shit she’d pulled. Was that not healed?

Dru watched his brother light up a cigar as the rest of their family boarded the plane. This trip was supposed to be a joyous occasion. It was supposed to be relaxing. He’d been looking forward to seeing his brother and sis walk down the aisle and renew their commitment to each other, but now Janel had turned his trip into a working one. He didn’t trust her to make this transition smooth. Her judgment was cloudy.

Pulling out his laptop, he got to work. He would need to go through all of Janel’s caseloads and familiarize himself with everything. He also needed to remove her from all their bank accounts.

“What we gon’ do without Janel?” Blue pulled on the cigar. Those were Dru’s thoughts exactly, but he wouldn’t dwell on it. He knew his business.

“I don’t know, but we’ll figure it out. She said she’ll train Daniel while we’re gone.” Dru took the cigar from his brother’s hands.

“You trust that? You know how a bitter female moves.” Dru was already hip. He hoped that Janel could move on without trying to be foul, but he wasn’t going to get caught slipping either.

“Naw, that’s why I got my laptop.” He pulled on the cigar, allowing the smoke to fill his lungs. He didn’t realize how badly he needed to smoke.

“Let me get mine. I can help you while we on this plane, but once we are in Turks, I can’t do shit. Kay gon’ have my head if she sees me working on this trip. Do me a solid: Don’t tell her Janel quit until after the wedding.” Blue stood and walked to the back of the plane.

“I already know, bruh. Don’t anger sis. Y’all deserve to enjoy this.” Dru responded just as laughter filled the plane. Dru’s head turned toward the sound. He watched as Kay and her twin sister, Marli, sauntered down the aisle. The two of them looked like night and day. Kay was always natural, and Marli was always made up. He didn’t fuck with Marli, but he couldn’t deny her beauty. Her confidence exuded from her skin. She never had a hair out of place; it was the thing that had attracted him to her.

Dru loved a fancy woman—hair, nails, makeup, everything did. It was his weak spot. Eyeing her intensely, he admired her caramel complexion and how it complemented the orange hair she had flowing down her back. They could have been perfect together, but back in the day, Marli was too busy trying to prove that she didn’t need a man to see that. Dru licked his lips before turning his attention to his sister-in-law.

“Sup, sis!” He greeted Kay. He noticed the expression on Marli’s face. She couldn’t stand the fact he chose to ignore her every time they were in each other’s presence.

“She the only person you see?” Marli shot back, but Dru ignored her. She knew he didn’t talk to her ass. He had to see her because his brother was married to her sister, but he didn’t have to speak to her. Marli’s neck rolled in his direction as she stormed off down the aisle. It took every bone in his body not to watch her fat ass bounce away. Marli was the thickest woman he’d ever fucked with, and he knew her ass was sitting up nice in those legging shorts she had on.

“Can y’all be cordial, just for this week, so I can have the wedding of my dreams, please!” Kay’s voice invaded his thoughts. He focused his attention on his sister-in-law.

The last year had been hard for her after she and Blue had miscarried. He wanted nothing more than for her to have a peaceful trip. Over the years, he and Kay had become close. He often found himself just calling her to get her opinion on shit. She was truly his sister. Inhaling another puff of the cigar in his hand, he smiled up at his sister.

“I got you, sis.” Dru held up his arms in surrender.

“Thank you.” Kay moved to her seat. Dru’s eyes found Marli again. She was too busy on her phone to even notice he was looking. Taking a deep breath, he set his laptop on the seat next to him and moved toward her. He could tell she felt his presence because her head lifted quickly in his direction.

“What’s up, Marli.” He greeted her. Her mouth dropped open. This was his first time greeting her respectfully in four years. He could tell she was speechless.

“I call a truce, for the trip. They deserve it.” He didn’t need a response; he was good either way, but when Marli nodded her head, still speechless, he walked back to his seat. A small weight lifted from his shoulders. Not talking to Marli had been hard. It took a lot of energy. As he sat in his seat, he glanced up at her. All the love he had for her flooded him at once. It was almost like talking to her had opened the Pandora’s box that was his heart. Dru sighed as Marli and his eyes locked on each other before she quickly looked away. Dru lowered his head to his computer. He had a lot of work to do.

THREE

Marli

“Excuse me, I need to change rooms.” Marli greeted the receptionist at the front desk of the resort. She prayed they would be able to help her.

There was no way she could spend the week with Dru right next door to her, truce or not. His actions on the plane had messed her head up the entire flight.

Dru hadn’t spoken to her in years. He had been holding a stupid grudge against her for what happened with the DNA test when the twins were born. Dru was always aware of the possibility of not being the father of her boys. She made sure to tell both men at the very beginning of her pregnancy because she didn’t want any drama later. From the very beginning, though, Dru had insisted the babies were his and moved as such. It was what made it so hard to tell him they weren’t once she got the results. She wanted more than anything for Dru to be the father of her boys, but fate hadn’t worked out that way.

Marli tapped on the counter of the resort, nervously awaiting the short, beige-skinned woman to respond. She wanted to relax on this vacation, not be reminded of every bad decision she had made, and that was exactly what having her room next to Dru’s would do.

“Hello, ma’am. What is your name?”

“Marli Martin. I’m in villa twenty-seven fifty-two.” Marli stood there, admiring the view of their resort. It was beautiful. The lobby of the resort

had a nice view of the beach. Marli took in the environment. She was dying to get dressed and bathe in the sand. It had been a long time since she'd taken a trip without the boys or the reality TV cameras and producers close by.

"Ms. Martin, this side of the resort is what has been reserved for your family. If you're looking for privacy, I wouldn't advise you to switch rooms," the desk clerk responded, causing Marli to turn around. Marli briefly contemplated her options. If she wanted to move to a different room, she'd have to leave the private villa. Kay and Blue had reserved an eight-bedroom private resort villa, to house their family while they were here. Kay had taken the liberty of assigning everyone their rooms. There were other villas on the property and even a public resort. Marli sighed as she realized her options were slim. She didn't need an entire villa to herself, and she didn't want to give up her privacy by moving to a public resort.

"Never mind." She sighed.

"Maybe talk to your family if you'd like a different room," the desk clerk offered.

"Thank you," Marli replied as she moved from the reception area and headed back to her family's villa. Maybe she was overreacting. Dru had called a truce for this trip; maybe being next door to him wouldn't be so bad. As she walked the hallway of the villa, she was glad nobody was in the halls. She loved her family, but she wasn't in any mood to talk.

Reaching her door, she glanced at Dru's door. She'd let her sister have it later, because she knew this was her doing. Kay was always trying to intervene and fix things between Dru and Marli, but there was nothing to fix. That ship had sailed a long time ago. Dru wanted nothing to do with her, and she was too busy navigating being a mom and dealing with Max's toxic bullshit to care. Entering her room, she headed straight for the shower. This would probably be the only day she had to relax and chill out in her room before her best friend, Erica, and Kay's best friend, Nesha, got there. They had planned to have their usual girls' night in, doing facials and drinking wine. On top of that, the next few days would be filled with wedding activities.

Kay had planned a bunch of excursions and family dinners. Maybe she could get some content for her Instagram. She had a few outfits she needed to post for sponsors.

Marli undressed and stepped into the water, allowing the stress of the day to wash away. She was living the life she'd always wanted, but it was getting tiresome. Max always had her in blogs looking like a bitter or dumb baby mama. She was always being discussed and scrutinized. In some spaces, she was a huge star, and in others, she was a nobody. Her dating life was nonexistent because she'd sworn off industry men. Marli was at the stage of life where she wanted more than sex and money but was too afraid of getting hurt to look for it. Besides, every man that crossed her path didn't compare to the one she'd messed up with when she was young and reckless.

As thoughts of Dru flooded her brain, she scrubbed her body harder. She hated that he hated her. Most of all, she hated that five years ago, she was a silly girl chasing niggas with a bag, so scared to get hurt she'd pushed the only man who had shown her real love away. When she'd met Dru after Kay married his brother, she was already messing with Max. She made it clear then she was only interested in dick because she was. She had seen her sister get dragged through the mud behind a nigga, and she didn't want that for herself. Plus, she knew what type of man Dru was: rich and had a lot of women at his disposal. She took the city girl approach when it came to love. Dick and dollars were all she needed from them.

When Dru started showing interest in her, she felt like she'd hit the jackpot. She had two rich niggas tricking on her and sexing her good. Getting pregnant was never a part of the plan, but it was the thing that had changed her. It had changed her and Dru's dynamic greatly, and her feelings had gotten involved, but she was afraid. She feared getting hurt. So instead of cutting off Max and having a real relationship with Dru, she kept fucking with him. Now, Dru hated her, and Max was the baby daddy from hell. It was the cards she'd been dealt.

Turning off the water, she stepped out of the walk-in shower and sauntered over to the bed where her suitcase lay. Marli looked over the outfits and thought about the content she wanted to create for her one million followers. Finally deciding on filming a plus-size vacation lingerie try-on haul, she got dressed. The first number was a pink two-piece lace set. It fit her body like a glove. Looking herself over in the mirror, she smiled. Marli knew she was beautiful. She had always loved every part of her body, even when society had told her not to. Blowing herself a kiss for approval, Marli headed onto the patio to set up her camera. The swim-up patio would be the perfect backdrop for her photos. As she stepped outside, her eyes

immediately found Dru. He was going for a swim in the pool that sat behind their hotel room.

“Shit.” She cursed to herself. There was nothing to divide their patios from each other. Marli tried her best not to look, but it was hard. Dru was hands down the finest man she’d ever slept with, and that was saying a lot because Marli had been with some fine rich men. Dru stood from the water, and time stood still. The water dripping from his body only highlighted his toned, muscular, tattooed torso. Marli’s eyes traveled the length of him. They landed on the third leg in his swim trunks. Subconsciously, Marli licked her lips as thoughts of how Dru stretched and pleased her body came flooding into her brain.

“Keep your eyes over there unless you ready to legally change your kids’ last name,” he blurted, taking her by surprise. This whole Dru talking to her thing would have to take some time to get used to. She smirked at him mentioning her kids. If she could change the hands of time and make Dru their father, she would. Certainly, it would have been better than dealing with Max.

“Ain’t nobody looking at you.” She turned her lips up in his direction and continued setting up her tripod. His mean ass was too damn arrogant, but it was the thing she loved most about him. Dru knew he was fine. He knew he was rich, and he exuded it in every inch of his being. It was what made it fun for her to play him in the past. Marli used to love the challenge of treating extraordinary men like regular negros.

“Yeah, OK.” Dru hissed on his pursuit to his patio. Marli hoped he would go inside, but her dreams were short-lived when he took a seat on the patio chair that sat in the corner of the patio. She could feel his eyes on her, but when she turned to look, he dropped his head and typed on his computer. She could feel the tension between them rising. It was awkward, but she wouldn’t address it. Instead, Marli focused her eyes back on her tripod. She just needed to get a few shots and then she could retreat inside. Finally getting everything situated, she posed in a chair on the balcony. As she arched her back, she let her eyes travel back to Dru. This time, she’d caught him watching her.

“Now who needs to keep their eyes to themselves?” she sassed, mimicking what he’d said to her earlier. Dru chuckled, slowly returning his eyes to his computer. Not having his attention was doing something to her she wasn’t sure of; all she knew was that she wanted to keep his eyes on

her. Marli repositioned her tripod and sauntered over to the stairs that led into the pool. She knew just what to do to get Dru's attention. Placing her backside to where he could get a good look, she seductively bent over, allowing her hands to touch her ankles. It was his favorite position, and she knew there was no way his eyes weren't on her.

Give him a show, she thought as she arched her back and made her right ass cheek jump and then the left. The waves that ripped through her cheeks must have been too much because before she could catch her balance, she was in the water, waving her arms around. The water rushed around her body, dragging her under as she fought to get up. It seemed like the more she thrashed her arms around, the harder it was to catch her balance. If she could just bring her feet to the ground she could stand up, but every time she tried, she fell deeper into the pool. Suddenly, a pair of rough hands, which she was sure were Dru's, lifted her carelessly from the water, cradling her in his arms.

"You all right?" He carried her inside his suite. All Marli could do was cough as the embarrassment of what had just happened set in. She'd almost drowned trying to twerk and tease this man. Dru laid her on the bed and disappeared briefly before returning with a towel. Draping the towel over her body, he joined her on the bed.

"I can't believe I almost drowned," Marli mumbled, still in shock.

"Yo' ass was not drowning. Just being your usual dramatic self." He swiped the hair from in front of her face. Marli chuckled before flicking up her middle finger.

"Fuck you," she stated, rubbing her hands across her nose. Her nose and chest were on fire from inhaling and swallowing the chlorine water, but other than that, she was fine.

"That's how you thank the man that saved your life?"

"I wasn't drowning, remember." She rolled her eyes. The look in his eyes had her following his gaze.

"Oh my God!" She hopped up from the bed, pushing her enormous breasts inside the tiny top. Had she not embarrassed herself enough? She needed to get her half naked ass back inside her room. She turned on her heels, moving toward the door.

"I don't know what yo' ass embarrassed for. It ain't nothing I ain't already seen or tasted on yo' body." Dru caught up to her, blocking her from moving any further. Having him this close to her awakened every feeling

she'd tried to suppress over the years. Marli looked up at Dru, expecting him to say something, but he didn't. He just gazed down at her. They stayed there for a minute, silently gazing into one another's eyes. There was so much Marli wanted to say, but she didn't know how Dru would receive it. Their friendship had gotten so far off course, she didn't even know how to start a conversation with him anymore.

"You are so damn beautiful." Dru's words sailed through her to a place in her heart that had been broken. She didn't even realize how much she needed to hear him speak those words until he'd spoken them.

"I... um..." Marli opened her mouth to respond, but her words were cut off by Dru's soft lips. His tongue didn't have to force its way inside, because her lips easily parted for him and pulled his mouth in. The sweet taste of mint coated her lips. Dru was the only man who made her weak in the knees from just a kiss. As if he felt her knees buckling, Dru grabbed onto her ass, pulling her body into his, holding her steady. This kiss was long overdue. Marli could feel every feeling she had attempted to bury for Dru spilling out. Her middle was awakening. Dru walked her back toward the bed, his mouth still on hers. Nothing needed to be said as he pushed her down on the bed and opened her legs. This was insane. How could two people go from not speaking for four years to this? Marli couldn't quite wrap her head around it, but as Dru pulled her lace panties to the side, she didn't care to. Her body was in control right now, and it was longing for Dru.

"Damn." Dru growled as he swiped his tongue down her lower lips, making her body shiver.

"Ooh!" A moan escaped her mouth.

"This pussy still tastes just like water." He latched onto her pearl. Marli's hands instantly found the top of his curly afro. She intertwined her hands into his beautiful coils. The harder he sucked, the more she pushed his face into her middle, probably cutting off his oxygen. She was going to make him regret not talking to her for four years. Her body had missed him. She had missed him, and all she wanted to do in this moment was savor every minute of it.

"You gon' cum for me, Marli?" Dru's muffled voice invaded her ears as he sucked and licked her as if he needed her pussy juices to stay alive. Marli couldn't think straight. All she could do was close her eyes and allow her body to succumb to his request.

FOUR

Dru

“Yes! I’m cumming!” Her thick legs shook as they locked around his neck. He welcomed the feeling of suffocation as Marli’s legs trembled, closing around his head. He didn’t care about breathing. In his eyes, Marli’s sweet pussy was well worth suffocating. Slurping up the taste of her, he continued his tongue assault on her swollen nub. Having a room next to Marli’s was a bad idea, but nobody thought he would fold this fast. They had only been on the island for two hours, and he already had his nose in her pussy. Four years of silent treatment had gone down the damn drain the moment she shuffled her thick ass on that balcony, wearing next to nothing.

Gripping her thighs, he forced her legs open and repositioned his body on top of hers. He didn’t know how they had gotten here. He was just supposed to grab her crazy ass from the pool when she’d fallen in, but as he lined his ungloved dick up with her entrance, it was too late to turn back now. Something was tugging at him to reconnect his body to hers. It was clear that Dru was no longer in control, but something much greater. Slowly, he breached her walls, and the euphoric feeling engulfed him on impact and had him about to nut right then and there. She felt better than before, better than Janel or any other woman he’d been with in his lifetime.

“Shit!” He hissed as he steadied himself inside her. He wasn’t about to give a piss poor performance. Marli gasped as he made himself comfortable

between her legs.

“Why does it feel so good?” she moaned, her nails clawing at his back. She had taken the words right out of his mouth. The feeling that was sweeping through him was more than just an orgasm. He felt like he was home. Nothing else mattered except for pounding into Marli’s tight middle.

“‘Cause that pussy is still mine.” He found her sweet spot and worked it over.

“Yes!” She cried, even though he hadn’t asked her a question.

“What was that?” He slowed his movements. He knew Marli liked sex talk.

“Yes! It’s still your pussy!” Her soft voice filled the walls around them. Dru leaned forward, catching her lips as he dug into her slowly, each thrust pulling their souls closer together.

“Ooh! Dru!” Marli moaned into his mouth in pleasure.

“That’s right. Tell me how good I’m making my pussy feel.” He leaned up, increasing the force behind his strokes. He loved watching Marli take all nine inches of his dick. The way her pussy was spitting on it was a masterpiece. He bounced his eyes from Marli’s face to her pussy. The grip that Marli had on him tightened, and he knew she was cumming on his dick.

“I’m cumming!” She confirmed his suspicions. He wasn’t done yet though. He needed more. He wanted to savor this feeling forever. As her legs trembled, he increased his pace.

“Yes! Dru, fuck me just like that. Oh my God!” Tears flowed from her eyes as she rolled her pelvis into his. Leaning down, he kissed her tears away.

“That’s right, fuck me back. You know I like that shit!” He whispered into her ear. Marli rolled her hips into his. Marli rolled her hips into his harder as her head fell back, and her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

“I’m cumming again!” Her scream was so loud he was sure everyone in a close enough radius could hear her. Her walls tightened around him, and he couldn’t stop himself. He was on the verge of exploding.

“I’m right there with you, baby!” He moved faster and faster as he exploded inside of her walls. He stayed there for a minute allowing them both time to catch their breath before retreating to the bathroom to grab a towel to wipe up her juices. The reality of what Marli and he had just done sank in. They’d just had sex, and he didn’t know what would be next

between them. When he was being honest with himself, he could admit that he loved Marli; that shit was apparent the moment she'd first told him she was pregnant, but she'd crushed his love in the same sentence by admitting that he was only in the running to be her child's father.

His thoughts raced as he stared at the towel under the water. He had gotten caught up in his head. Walking out into the bedroom, his footsteps slowed at the sight of an empty bed. She was gone without even a word of goodbye. Dru couldn't do anything but laugh to himself. This was the type of shit Marli did, run. It was ultimately what had landed them both here. Had she not been running from him, she wouldn't have even been fucking with Max in the first place. Shaking his head, he walked back to the bathroom, tossing the towel that was meant for Marli in the bathroom hamper. He wanted to go next door and yoke her ass up, but he wouldn't. She'd done him a favor and saved them both the awkward conversation. This was for the best. Dru and Marli were both too fucked up in the head to have anything more than what they'd had.

⋮

FIVE

Marli

“Marli over there babysitting that damn shot!” her best friend, Erica, shouted over the loud music that filled the beachside bar they were situated at. Marli sighed as she looked between her friends and the pink drink that rested on the bar table. She’d only taken a few sips, which wasn’t like her. Marli was the party starter. She was normally the one throwing drinks and ass whenever they all got together. Tonight, though, she couldn’t seem to focus on anything but Dru. It had been three whole days since she’d fled his suite with a thoroughly fucked and wet ass. Still, she couldn’t shake him. Her feelings and mind were at war. After they’d gotten done fucking, the weight of everything set in, and her mind defaulted to what she did best: avoid. It was childish, and she half expected Dru to follow her to her room, but he hadn’t. He seemed to be avoiding her just as she was avoiding him.

“Yeah, yo’ ass quiet. You good, sis?” Kay questioned, shaking Marli from her thoughts.

She focused on her sister. She was visibly concerned, and that made Marli realize she was killing the mood. This was her twin sister’s night, her long overdue bachelorette party. Marli smiled up at her sister. She was gorgeous in her white lace mini dress and white veil. It was a sight she had never gotten to see, since Kay and Blue had met and gotten married without

anyone knowing. Kay deserved a nice night. She needed to get herself together for her sister.

"I'm fine, just in my head about work," she lied. She wouldn't worry her sister with her problems tonight. Kay eyed her strangely, her twin intuition kicking in.

"You sure? It may help to get it off your chest." Kay placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Positive. I'm fine, see," Marli replied, taking the shot in front of her to the head.

Kay, Nesha, and Erica all stared at her with weird looks on their faces. They didn't believe her. They'd all been friends since high school, so they could tell when something wasn't right with each other. It was a gift and a curse, really, because having three people who knew her so well made it hard for her to hide anything, and she typically didn't have to. With Dru, though, everything was different. If she had told them they'd slept together, they would be riding her back again. From the very beginning, they'd all been telling her to stop playing with that man.

Marli locked eyes with her sister and two best friends.

"I'm fine, y'all, promise!" She grabbed another shot that sat on the bar in front of them and took it to the head.

"Now let's go fuck this island club up!" She yelled as she ran off toward the dance floor. She didn't waste any time bending over and shaking her ass. Marli was a twerker. She had no problem throwing her ass anywhere she went. She let the music soothe her thoughts as she bounced her ass to the beat. The girls all joined her, and so did a small crowd. This was the distraction she needed.

Turning it up a notch, Marli dropped it low while making her cheeks jump. She motioned for her sister to join her. When she did, the crowd erupted around them. People were snapping pictures and recording them everywhere she looked. Marli didn't mind it. She figured they either recognized them from the blogs or television, or they just found two thick ass twin sisters throwing ass interesting. Marli continued to dance, playing into the crowd, letting her thoughts of Dru fade away.

"Fuck the club up!"

"Fuck the club up!" They yelled at the top of their lungs just as a tall figure appeared, towering over them. Marli chuckled as her brother-in-law came into view. Blue didn't say anything as he picked Kay up out of the

crowd and carried her off, leaving all the girls standing there, shaking their heads.

“She not coming back, is she?” Erica nodded as they watched Blue carry Kay into a private room. Their lips never left one another’s.

“Nope!” Marli admired her sister and brother-in-law. Their love was beautiful. Blue did not play about her sister, and it was refreshing to see because Kay had gone through so much with her ex. Seeing Blue love her sister almost made her want that for herself, but that would involve opening her heart up to love, and that was scary. Trusting someone with her heart would mean she had to be vulnerable. What if she got her heart broken? Marli didn’t know if she could handle that.

As the crowd dissipated around them, Marli caught the eyes of the one man she was willing to try to love. His gray eyes stared into her soul from a secluded section of the club. This was the first time she’d laid eyes on him since they’d had sex, and for the life of her, she couldn’t stop staring at him. The feeling must have been mutual because Dru didn’t look away either. Her feet moved toward his section without her instructing them to. Maybe it was time to clear the air.

Before she could make it halfway across the dance floor, a tall chocolate woman she recognized as one of Dru’s whores appeared on his side. Her feet immediately halted.

“Rayna?” she whispered to herself. Marli’s eyes were stuck staring at the two of them. Rayna kissed Dru’s cheek, and Marli’s stomach turned. She didn’t realize Dru had brought a date on this trip. Her blood boiled as jealousy set in. She expected to see Janel, but oddly, she hadn’t come. Maybe he’d traded in Janel for Rayna. Either way, Marli was sick. Turning on her heels, she headed straight to the bar. Now she needed a drink. This was why she didn’t do relationships. Niggas would always be dogs. Dru had fucked her, knowing he had invited Rayna on this trip.

“Can I have a flight of shots? Patrón, please,” she instructed the bartender as she made herself comfortable on the stool. She took one last glimpse of Dru and Rayna. Now the bitch was sitting in his lap. Marli shook her head. Rayna was new to Dru’s roster, a model that he’d started fucking with a few years ago. Marli had never met her, but she paid attention to the blogs.

“Is this seat taken, beautiful?” A deep voice laced with a heavy Southern accent came from behind her. Marli turned to see a gorgeous chocolate man

standing beside her.

“Ummm, no,” she replied.

“I’m Nate.” He situated himself on the barstool next to her. Marli hoped he didn’t try to spark up a conversation with her. All she wanted to do was have a drink and go back to her room alone. Marli had long ago stopped doing random hookups. She could truly say motherhood had matured her. The things she’d done in her early twenties, hooking up with random men, being promiscuous, they no longer interested her. Her motivations had changed. Her only concerns were raising her sons and working so she could give them the world.

“Here you go.” The bartender returned with her shots. She wasted no time grabbing one of them and taking it to the head. Her eyes found Dru again. Now Rayna was sitting on his lap with her mouth on his neck. Marli felt sick. She grabbed another shot, taking it to the head as she cut her eyes away from Dru and Rayna.

“If you give me your name, I’ll help you make him jealous,” the man next to her stated. Her head swiveled in his direction. *Is it really that obvious?*

“Yeah, it’s that obvious.” Nate grinned, showcasing his diamond studded smile. It was crazy how he knew what she was thinking. Marli blushed as she finally took in the stranger. He was handsome—tall, chocolate, low-cut waves. Marli smiled at him before peering back up at Dru. Rayna still sat on his lap, but his eyes were on Marli.

“I’m Leigh.” She introduced herself, giving him the alias she used to keep men in the club from recognizing who she was. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn’t. Most of the time, people just told her she looked like Marli from *Hip Hop of Love*.

“Nice to meet you, Leigh,” Nate replied as he moved closer to her. “I’m a touch yo’ inner thigh; smile and laugh.” He placed his hand on her exposed thigh.

“Excuse me?” Marli’s eyes grew big. She was about to slap his hand away, but he leaned closer to her ear.

“We got his attention; don’t look though. Giggle and place your hand on my chest,” Nate whispered. Marli didn’t know if it was the liquor, Nate’s charm, or this lingering thing with Dru, but she did as she was instructed.

“That should do the trick, beautiful.” Nate backed up from her a little and went back to his drink.

“Where are you from?” Marli questioned. Now she was intrigued by him and his cool demeanor. The least she could do was have a conversation with him.

“Detroit, and you?”

“Saint Louis, but I’m back and forth between Saint Louis and Atlanta for work.” She eyed the two remaining shots in front of her, realizing she shouldn’t have anything else to drink. Tomorrow was her sister’s vow renewal, and she was the maid of honor.

“Would you like these? I’m going to call it a night.” She pushed the mahogany flight paddle in front of him. Nate smiled before taking both shots.

“Let me at least walk you back to your room.” He stood, extending his arm for her to grab. Marli wasn’t naïve enough to let a stranger walk her to her room. She wasn’t about to end up drugged and sex trafficked.

“No, thank you. I think I can manage.” She stood, moving past his arm.

“At least let me walk you to the door,” he insisted. Marli nodded as she took his arm, and he led them through the crowd. Her eyes searched for Dru one last time, but he and Rayna were gone. Marli shook her head and focused her attention back on Nate as she exited the club.

“It was nice meeting you, Leigh.” Nate took her hand and kissed the back of it.

“Same to you.” She prepared to walk away, but he caught her arm.

“Can I have your number...” His words trailed off and his eyes showed that of defeat. Marli followed his gaze to see Dru approaching them.

“Nah,” Dru replied as he tossed Marli over his shoulder. Everything happened so fast that Marli didn’t have time to say bye to Nate. She hadn’t even been allotted enough time for her brain to process what was happening.

“Dru! What the hell!” she shouted as he secured her on his shoulder.

“Shut up, Marli,” was all he said as he walked off down the dimly lit dark path to their villa. She wanted to be angry, but this was exactly the reaction she wanted to get out of him. Looking up, her eyes searched for Nate, but he had already walked off. She sighed a sigh of relief. At least he had gotten the picture and bowed out peacefully. Marli smirked from her position on Dru’s shoulder. She should have been upset at how he’d just snatched her ass up, but her insides were leaking, and her heart was

throbbing. She had Dru's attention, and it felt damn good. Now that was all that mattered.

⋮

SIX

D^{ru}

She was baiting him. He knew it, but that didn't stop him from pushing Rayna off his lap and moving toward her. These were the types of games Marli liked to play. She was a tit-for-tat type of female, and though it was frustrating sometimes, Dru could admit he liked the shit. He liked how Marli was confident and comfortable in her skin. She moved like a man weaving her way through the opposite sex but was still soft enough to sit in her femininity. Dru had fucked with a lot of women, but Marli had been the only one to treat him like just another nigga on her roster and not the rich boss nigga he was. She acted as if niggas like Max or the square ass nigga she was sitting with at the bar were of the same caliber as him. He was Dru Willis, the music mogul, and co-founder of Eight24 Records. He'd signed some of the biggest artists in the world. He was worth over three-hundred-million dollars, but Marli didn't care about any of that. To her, he was just another nigga she'd fucked. She didn't even realize how much of his heart she had.

As he watched her link arms with the stranger, his feet moved faster. At that moment, he wasn't sure what he wanted from Marli, but she was done playing him like some lame ass nigga.

"Where are you going?" Rayna questioned as Dru reached the stairs in his pursuit of Marli. Her voice was laced with irritation. Dru didn't care though. He was on a mission.

“I’m about to head out. Jake will make sure you get to the airport.” He kissed Rayna on the forehead. Rayna’s eyes widened.

“I thought I was staying longer, you know... be your date to the wedding.” She pouted. Dru shook his head. Rayna knew they weren’t on that type of time. He flew her out here and there and they fucked. That was all there was between them. She wasn’t even supposed to be on this trip, but after Janel had bowed out and Marli had disappeared, he thought why the hell not. It was fucked up, but it was what it was.

“I’m gon’ be busy tomorrow, but we can link next week when I get home.” He kissed her forehead again before taking off down the stairs. He didn’t see Marli anymore, and that made him quicken his pace to her. There was no way he was about to let her get fucked next door to his hotel room. As he reached the exit to the club, he saw Marli hand in hand with the strange nigga from the bar. He could tell by the way he had his phone out, he was attempting to get her number. Swiftly, Dru walked over to them.

“Nah!” He lifted her over his head and secured her.

“Dru! What the hell!” she shouted. Dru eyed the nigga she was talking to, daring him to say something. He didn’t.

“Shut yo’ ass up.” He smacked her on the ass as he took off toward their hotel rooms. He was expecting her to be pissed or have some slick shit to say, but nothing came. As he walked, Marli’s thick ass jiggled on the side of his face. Her sweet smell lingered under his nose. The thong swim bottoms she wore under her cover-up did nothing to keep her ass or even her fat pussy lips inside. Yeah, she had him fucked up.

“I look like the type of nigga you can keep playing with, Marli?” He moved his arm slightly to swipe a finger across her pussy lips. She jumped a little, but no response came from her mouth.

“Oh, you don’t hear me?” Dru swiped another finger through her slick folds. This time, he allowed his finger to breach her walls.

“Oh my God!” Marli gasped.

“You was gon’ give that nigga my pussy?” His thick digits fondled her insides as he spoke. Dru didn’t care who saw them as he walked the dimly lit pathway.

“You gave my dick to Rayna,” she countered, and a soft moan escaped her lips.

“Oh, it’s yo’ dick now?” He loved to hear her say that shit. Marli would always try to fight it—to fight him. She didn’t want to claim anyone and

didn't want to be claimed by anybody.

"Fuck!" Marli moaned from the friction he was causing as he shoved his fingers in and out of Marli's wet juices. His desire for her was rising, making his steps increase. They didn't have far to go to reach their rooms, and Dru couldn't fight it anymore. He needed to be buried so deep inside her walls that she never looked at another nigga again. Pulling his hand from her insides, he sucked his finger one by one in his mouth. Marli's pussy juices were without a doubt a secret recipe that was made especially for him.

"You keep playing with a real nigga, Marli." He reentered her vagina, shoving his three fingers in this time. He hooked his fingers around her G-spot and tugged.

"Ooh! Dru..." She panted. He could feel her lips tightening around his fingers, about to give him exactly what he had been asking for.

"You better not ever smile in another nigga's face while I'm right there." He smacked her ass just as they approached their doorstep.

"Fuck you, Dru." She panted, catching her breath as he placed her on her feet. Dru didn't give her a chance to move as he backed her into her room door.

"You want to fuck me?"

He pressed his body up against hers. His eyes filled with passion as they gazed at each other, their eyes and bodies having their own conversation. Dru could feel the strained strings of their connection repairing themselves. He had kept himself away from her too long. The boys not being his, Marli's reluctance to commit—it all seemed small now. The more he tried to forget her, the more he thought about her. Dru slipped a hand into Marli's bikini top, removing her breast. He fondled it a bit before placing his lips on her erect nipple.

"Dru, we can't..." Her words trailed off as Dru's mouth sucked her titty in. Releasing her for a moment, he brought his forehead to hers while swiping his hand between her legs. He could feel her pussy jump with anticipation.

"The only person saying we can't, is you."

"That's exactly what you've been saying the last four years." Marli panted. Dru put his hand around her neck.

"None of that matters anymore. We both did silly shit back then. It was all a result of us playing games." He could feel her body relax at his words.

“Tell me we can,” he whispered, a desperate need in his voice. His words had so much more meaning beyond just this moment. He hoped she understood.

Marli kissed him. Her tongue pulled him in. He took that as a sign of consent. If he didn’t get her inside this room fast enough, he was going to fuck her on this doorstep for all their family to see. Quickly, he pressed her key fob wristband to the door, unlocking it, as he pushed her inside. They wasted no time shedding their clothes as they stumbled into the dresser that was situated by the entrance. Bending her over, he admired her ass cheeks, which provided a magnificent view, before he pushed into her. His eyes focused on her reflection in the mirror. The sex faces she made spoke to something inside of him, the part that had written Marli out his life. He continued to push deeper into her, her walls sucking him like a vacuum.

“Oh!” Marli’s head fell back and forward as he moved in and out of her with precision. Everything that hadn’t been said between them was being said as Marli’s juices wrapped around the base of his dick.

“Shit!” Dru grunted. Marli’s pussy was too good. He knew the moment that he’d entered her three days ago he wouldn’t be able to stop himself. Marli locked eyes with him through the mirror, and Dru’s heart bled. Briskly, he pulled her body up to his and wrapped his hand around her neck from behind.

“You hurt a nigga’s feelings,” he moaned into her ear, finally admitting the truth he’d been holding in for four years.

“I’m sorry!” Marli whimpered in ecstasy.

“You sorry?” Dru questioned, every roll of his hips conveying his emotions. He squeezed her neck tighter. He wanted her to feel every word, every emotion he’d felt. “When the twins turned out not to be mine, that broke me.” He panted. He had never expressed that to anyone other than Blue or his mama. It felt good to finally get it out. Marli dropped her head back on his chest, attempting to give him her eyes.

“I know... ooh... it broke me too. I’m sorry, Dru! I’m so sorry.” Her apology was mixing with the orgasm that was ripping through her.

“All a nigga wanted to do was be with you.” Dru stroked into her. Marli’s tight walls pulled the semen from him.

“Fuck! You fuck me so good!” She screamed as if she didn’t give a damn about anyone hearing them. Marli threw her hips back, slamming her round ass into his pelvis.

“Be still!” He let his hand land across her ass. Marli was trying to pull his nut out early, but he wasn’t going out like that. He had a point to prove. Her stubborn ass was going to know today that he was the only nigga worth her time. Speeding up his pace, he drilled into Marli’s guts, desperate for her. The remarkable feel of her pussy nearly brought him to tears.

“We could have been so good together.” He pressed his lips into her neck as she whimpered, tears running down her pretty round face.

“Shit!” He grunted. Pleasure ripped through both of their bodies.

“Ooh! Dru!” She wet his dick again as he filled her insides. He wasn’t even thinking about using protection. If a baby grew from this, it just grew. Nothing in life happened by chance, and Dru was ready to be a father. Pulling out of her, he lifted her like she weighed nothing and carried her over to the bed. He wasn’t done with her yet, and he wasn’t sure if he ever would be. Laying her down on the bed, he stared down at her, all her beauty smiling back up at him.

“You not about to keep nutting in me!” she blurted, causing Dru to laugh before crawling between her thick thighs.

“Yeah, I am.” He entered her. A moan escaped both their lips. Marli wasn’t in control of this thing between them anymore. He thrust into her harder and faster, trying to knock every inch of resistance out of her body. Dru didn’t come on this trip with plans of getting involved with Marli, but now he couldn’t think of a better way to spend his trip.

“I’m serious, Dru,” Marli moaned.

“Shut up... take this dick... and accept my kids.” With each word, Dru pumped into her with more force. Marli didn’t utter a response as her eyes fell to the back of her head and her screams filled the room. She was cumming again. It was the most beautiful sight. He didn’t let up. He kept pumping, the sounds of her moans and juices gushing edging him on.

“Tell me what you want, baby!” Dru spread her thick thighs apart, inching deeper into her middle. He didn’t know if something real was possible with Marli, but what he did know was she’d never be pleased with another nigga fucking her. He was sure of it.

“Your kids! Baby! Fill me up!” she begged, changing her tune. Her pleas were enough to push him over the edge.

“Got damn!” Dru moaned, his seeds spewing into her insides as Marli trembled beneath him. He couldn’t believe he’d stayed away from her for

so long. Rolling off her, he kissed her on the forehead. He needed to smoke a blunt to rejuvenate before he climbed back inside her.

"I'm going to take a smoke," he replied. Marli's eyes were already closing. Pulling up his shorts, he checked his pocket for the blunt he'd rolled earlier. He was glad it was still there along with a lighter. Walking quietly onto the patio, he took a seat on the top stair that led to the pool. Dru took in the tropical scenery as he placed the blunt to his lips and sparked it up. He had only inhaled and exhaled the substance twice when he heard the sliding doors open. A naked Marli sashayed her voluptuous body onto the patio. Dru couldn't take his eyes off her. He loved everything about her body—her tattoos, her cute, natural pudge, the stretch marks she wore with pride; she was a work of art. Dru looked around and jealousy coursed through his veins at the thought of someone getting a glimpse of her beautiful curvy body.

"Thought you needed some company." She found a seat on the bottom step. The pool water came up to her neck. Dru wasn't prepared for what she did next. In a matter of seconds, she'd pulled his penis out and began sucking.

"Damn, girl." Dru moaned as she shoved him deep into her mouth right there on the patio. Marli didn't express her feelings, but he had learned a long time ago that giving head was her way of expressing how she felt. Dru grabbed the back of her head, fisting her orange extensions in the palm of his hand.

"Suck that shit," he coached, even though none was needed. He threw his hips upward, fucking her mouth. It was a beautiful sight. Marli's face was wet, her makeup was smudged, and strains of wet hair clung to her face.

"You so fucking pretty right now!" He shoved her head down, forcing himself to the back of her throat. The gagging sounds mixed with the sounds of the water put him over the edge. The night sky provided their only solace from someone seeing them. This was the thing he liked about Marli; there were no restraints. She was free spirited, and that often meant she was down to take his dick anywhere. Dru pulled Marli's head from his dick. He was ready to dig in her guts again. Lowering his body in the pool, he pulled Marli on top of him.

"Remind me why I should never stop talking to yo' good pussy ass again!" he barked.

“With pleasure.” Marli whispered seductively as she lowered herself onto him. It was going to be a much-needed long night.

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SEVEN

Marli

“At least I know why yo’ fast tale ass late for your sister’s big day!” Marli’s mom, Loretta, shouted, jolting both her and Dru from their sleep. Instantly, Marli sat up in bed, wrapping the cover over her and Dru’s naked bodies. She didn’t know how her mom had gotten a key to her room, but she expected it had something to do with her sister. Kay probably never expected their mom to find her sister lying naked and tired from a night of passionate sex with Dru. A normal mother would have run out embarrassed, but Marli’s mom stood there staring, a goofy smirk plastered on her face.

“What are you doing in here, Ma?” Marli questioned, turning to look at Dru. His light skin was telling on him. His cheeks were blush red with embarrassment as he tried to stop his erect penis from peeking through the covers. Marli blushed at the awkward stare down that was happening. It had been nearly a decade since her mother had caught her naked lying up under the opposite sex.

“Y’all asses is late, and they sent me to fetch y’all, chile. I ain’t know I only had to make one stop!” Loretta paced the room, picking up clothing.

“You are supposed to be in hair and makeup, and you, Dru, next in the barber’s chair.” She tossed Dru’s clothes to him on the bed before walking out of the room. She couldn’t tell if her mother was pissed or amused. Marli didn’t know what was more mortifying: being late for her sister’s wedding

preparations or having her mother catch her in bed naked with Dru. Either way, she had no time to think about it. Turning to Dru, she attempted to speak. It was time to do the awkward goodbyes; instead, he met her with his lips.

“Don’t overthink it. We’ll talk later,” he said, climbing out of the bed. Marli sat there for a minute, staring at him. She was speechless. If today wasn’t so important, she’d ask him what he meant, but she had to get going. They had to get going. The sound of her phone vibrating broke her out of the trance she had fallen under. Her sister’s name beamed across the screen.

Twin: Nothing is going right! Everybody is drunk and hungover!

Twin: Where are you?

Twin: This was a stupid idea!

Twin: It’s bad luck because I let my husband slut me out in them people club last night.

Twin: I’m sending mama.

“Oh my God! Kay!” she shouted as she read the messages. Stumbling out of bed, she darted past Dru to the shower. At that point, the only thing on her mind was getting to her sister. She’d missed all this the first time. She wasn’t going to miss it again, and Kay needed her.

Jumping in the shower, Marli washed her body. Her night with Dru was on replay in her mind. He had snatched her ass up from outside the club and fucked the shit out of her, all night into the morning. She was in a state of disbelief, but the throbbing in between her legs was the evidence. She had never been fucked the way Dru had fucked her last night. He had given her the type of dick she ran from because she knew it would have her sitting outside his house at four a.m., singing Monica. It was why Janel had been his glorified fuck buddy for umpteen years. Dru was dangerous, and he messed with her already conflicted and confused brain. Cutting off the water, Marli stepped out of the shower and quickly dried her wet body before entering the bedroom. Her eyes searched for Dru, but she knew he was gone.

“I sure hope this means another wedding is in the works, and y’all are done playing those silly childish games with each other.” Her mother’s voice startled her. Marli didn’t realize her mom had come back. She was hoping to avoid this uncomfortable situation altogether, but she should have known better. Her mother was not the one to hold her tongue. Marli moved around the room briskly, throwing some items in a tote bag. Maybe her

mom would get the picture that her only focus right now was getting to Kay.

“Marli Iman Martin! I know you hear me speaking to you!” Her mother stood from her seat and approached her.

“I... um... it’s not like that with Dru and I.” Marli attempted to clean things up. The last thing she wanted to do was go into details about her slipup with Dru. Marli was open and honest with her mom about a lot of things, but her sex life—she didn’t get into the details of that. Her mom didn’t agree with the way Marli ran through men. Like any normal mother, she wanted to see her daughter settled down, married, and in love. Her mother was old school. She believed that a woman should be modest, and that logic was something Marli had thrown out a long time ago.

“Not like that? I’m old enough to recognize the remnants of sex, Marli.” Loretta waved her hands through the air. Marli rolled her eyes slightly as she slid on her bridesmaid’s robe and slippers.

“I know you are, Ma.” Marli could barely get her words out before her mama was going upside her head.

“Don’t you get smart with me, got damn it!” Marli rubbed her head where her mom had hit her.

“I’m sorry, Ma!” Marli shrieked.

“Sorry, nothing. Now I don’t say much. I mind my business,” Loretta started. *No, you don’t*, Marli thought as she side-eyed her mom.

“But chile, I know I raised you better than to keep continuously letting these men use you for sex. You’re a beautiful girl, Marli. You deserve better.”

“I use them for sex, Ma!” Marli blurted right before her mama smacked her across the head again.

“Same damn difference. I wish you would just get into a committed relationship. Those boys don’t need to see you parade all these different men around... and don’t start that bullshit about not wanting a relationship. You aren’t fooling anyone but yourself.” Marli let out a deep sigh. She had this same conversation a million times with her mom. It wasn’t that she wasn’t listening, but her mama didn’t understand. Like most people, she thought Marli’s sleeping around meant something was wrong with her, that she must have low self-esteem or something. Those ideologies were the exact reason Marli was the way she was. Society raised women to aspire to be the perfect mate for a man, but then raised men to be flawed and

promiscuous. It didn't make sense. It was why so many women got their hearts trampled on. Marli wasn't going for that.

"But I don't want a relationship, Ma." It was a half-truth. She didn't want one until she met Dru. Now she was just scared.

"And why not?" Loretta placed her hand on her hips. It didn't matter what Marli said, her mother would disagree.

"Cause the women that are in the relationships are the ones that must endure the most of a man's crap. I'll pass." Marli finished putting the last of her things in the bag. She was just about ready to head out, but she could feel her mother's eyes burning a hole in her.

"If you believe that, baby, I failed you somewhere." Her mother's voice was laced with so much sadness it made her feel bad. Slowly, Marli went and sat next to her mom. The last thing she wanted was to insult her parenting.

"It has nothing to do with—"

"Your daddy was a good man. He loved me with his whole heart, and I ain't have to endure a damn thing. He never cheated, never put his hands on me. He loved this family. Loved his girls."

"Ma, I didn't mean..." Marli dropped her head. She didn't have anything to say.

"And your sister has found real love. They celebrating five years of marriage today. That man gives her the world and shows her nothing but love and respect. Society has its narrative to what black love is and should look like, but baby, everybody ain't suffering from struggle love. There's a man out there who will love and worship you. Don't get caught up in society's narrative." Marli couldn't do anything but let her mother's words sink in. She didn't agree with everything her mother said, but one thing she knew for certain was that her dad had loved her mom, and Blue loved Kay. She couldn't dispute that, but Marli wasn't naïve enough to think that it was every woman's narrative. She surely had no hope it would be hers.

"Dru is a good man, Marli. I know y'all young and think y'all just having fun, but you love that man, and he loves you. Everybody can see that." Marli's breath hitched at the thought of Dru being in love with her. She'd never considered it. A while ago, he'd mentioned being in a relationship, but Marli didn't take him seriously because he was still sleeping with Janel. It was why she never cut off Max. Love was never on

the table for her, so she never even once thought about the fact that she may indeed be in love with Dru. She was speechless.

“Now, I’m not saying you need a man, but baby, having someone who loves and protects you will allow you to thrive in your softness. The boys need a real father figure and you need someone that you can grow old with. That’s something I would love for you to experience because I had that, and it was so special, baby.” Loretta touched her daughter’s hand. Marli could feel the love in her mother’s words.

“I hear you, Ma, I do.” She squeezed her mother’s hand.

“Now, hear this. I think you may have that in Dru, baby. Don’t be so scared of getting hurt that you miss out on real love. Although I got the feeling that, when he’s ready, he’ll come get you.”

Marli shook her head at that last part. *What does she mean come get me?* Her mom meant well, but Marli wasn’t sold on the whole relationship, love, and marriage thing. Her mom had, however, opened her mind up to the fact that she may be in love with Dru.

“Oh, there y’all are!” Nesha barged into the room, breathing hard. Both Loretta’s and Marli’s heads turned in her direction. They already knew why she’d come.

“Kay is freaking out!” she blurted, making both women stand to their feet.

“Come on. Your sister is acting like she ain’t already married this damn man. She wasn’t freaking out when she married the damn man after only knowing him a few days!” Everyone in the room burst out laughing as they walked out of the room, rushing to get to Kay.

“You look stunning, sis.” Marli swiped a piece of hair out of her sister’s face as she stared at her in amazement, tears rising in both their eyes. Marli didn’t realize how emotional seeing her twin sister as a bride would make her. Kay was stunning, her hair flowing down her back in tight pin curls. Her makeup was soft and elegant. Kay looked as if she had walked right out of an Instagram wedding post, and Marli couldn’t take it. The whole thing had a bunch of emotions rising in her. This was the moment the two sisters had often dreamed about with each other when they were little girls. Marli

smiled at the thought of the two of them dressed in blankets and marrying their stuffed animals. Everything had come full circle, and even though Kay was already married, seeing her finally get to have the wedding of her dreams with her friends and family was exciting.

“Now don’t you start crying too. Mama has enough waterworks going for the both of us.” Kay fanned the air in between them. Marli chuckled. Their mother had been a sobbing mess all morning, carrying on about finally getting to see her daughter as a bride.

“I almost can’t help it, sis. You look so radiant. This dress was the perfect choice.” Marli held up Kay’s hand and twirled her around. Kay ran her hands down her blush pink, beaded, mermaid style gown. Kay’s curves were going to be the talk of the night.

“It was, wasn’t it!” She shrieked.

“Oh, mija. You are gorgeous. Amijay is going to cry.” Dru and Blue’s mom walked into the room. Marli tensed at the sight of Ms. Natalie. They hadn’t had the best relationship since the DNA debacle. Ms. Natalie wasn’t too fond of Marli allowing her to believe that she had two new grandsons when she didn’t. They weren’t mean to each other, but they weren’t friendly either.

“Hey, Ma.” Kay greeted her mother-in-law as they embraced each other in a hug.

“I’m going to be the one in tears. Have you seen him, Ma? How does he look?” Kay kissed her cheek.

“Like your husband, you won’t get me to snitch. No, no, mija,” Ms. Natalie replied. The ladies giggled as they stared at each other, everyone taking in the beauty of the day.

“I found the tissues!” Loretta entered the room, waving a box of Kleenex. Marli smiled at her mom as she burst into tears again at the sight of Kay and Ms. Natalie embracing.

“Oh, where is that damn photographer? He should be capturing moments like these,” Loretta complained through her sobs.

“Marli, can you go look for him? We need pictures of the bridal party,” her mother demanded. Marli didn’t protest. She knew there was no use going against her mother. Backing out of the dressing room, she headed down the hall in search of the photographer. There were a few places he could be, but Marli figured she’d start with Dru’s dressing room. Knocking on the door, Marli waited for someone to answer. She could hear the

commotion die down before the door was snatched open by one of Eight24's artists, Tez.

"Sup, girl. You at the wrong room, ain't you?" he greeted. Marli didn't say anything as she pushed past him, walking into the room. She didn't think twice about barging into a room full of superstars or anyone not being dressed. She was on a mission. If she didn't retrieve the photographer, she knew her mom would throw a fit.

"Damn, girl. You rude!" Tez shouted as he shut the door behind her. Marli stopped, glancing around the large room.

"Who was it..." Dru appeared from behind a door. His words trailed off as he noticed her. Their eyes locked on each other, and suddenly, her mother's words played in her head. *That man loves you.* For the first time, she saw it. As she stared at him all dressed up in his tan tux, the love in his eyes radiated straight through her. It froze her in place, wiping her memory of why she'd come there in the first place.

"Sup, sis. What's going on? Kay ain't getting cold feet, is she?" Blue joked, shaking her from her trance.

"Um, I was looking for the photographer." She darted her eyes away from Blue. "But I see he not in here, so I'm a head out!" She attempted to turn on her heels, but Blue's voice halted her.

"Naw, he just left, but try texting him," he called out.

"A text, yeah... Why didn't I think of that?" The words rushed out of her mouth. She was discombobulated by the realization of Dru's feelings for her. Blue turned his head left to right, looking in between her and Dru. He knew something was going on.

"Yeah, shoot him a text. I'll text you the number." Marli nodded her head, once again turning on her heels to leave, and once again, she was stopped by Blue's voice.

"Aye, sis, how she look?" Marli turned around to face her brother-in-law. A huge smile plastered across her face. The fact that he was anxious to see the woman he'd been married to for five years was cute. Marli thought for the first time that maybe she and Dru could have a love that pure.

"You're going to need a tissue." She watched as Blue nodded his head and patted his pockets.

"Aye, somebody get a nigga a tissue or something." Blue looked around the room. Marli smirked as she turned on her heels to leave the room. She didn't want to have to be in Dru's space longer than she needed to be.

“I’ll walk you out.” Dru’s voice came from behind once she reached the door. His hand beat her to the doorknob. If Marli thought she wouldn’t fall and make a fool of herself, she probably would take off running.

“Damn, you clean up nice,” he whispered in her ear as they stepped into the empty hallway. The warmth of his breath absorbed into her neck and went straight to her vagina. He was making it hard for her to concentrate. Marli took a step back, only for Dru to follow her.

“You don’t look too bad yourself.” She swallowed, attempting to silence her rapidly beating heart.

“That eye fuck you just gave me in there says differently.” He licked his lips.

“What do you want, Dru?” She folded her arms across her chest as she rolled her eyes. Maybe her attitude would get him to leave, to stop staring into her soul the way that he was.

“Let’s start over. Unblock my damn number. I need to have access to your pussy.” It was a demand, one that made the seat of her panties wet and her blood pressure rise. Marli had only blocked his number because he’d blocked hers. It was silly, and it made no sense, but those were the types of games Marli and Dru played.

“I... don’t...” She couldn’t complete her sentence. Dru touched his finger to her lips, silencing her.

“You heard what I said. Unblock my damn number. Number shouldn’t be blocked anyway.” He backed away from her without saying anything else. She couldn’t do anything but stand there and stare at his fine self as he opened the door and walked back into the dressing room.

I do believe you’re in trouble, Marli thought as she headed down the hall. Removing her phone from her boobs, she saw the text from Blue with the photographer’s number. Clicking the number, she texted the photographer before going to Dru’s contact and unblocking his number.

EIGHT

Dru

“You want us to act like we ain’t see that?” Blue greeted Dru as soon as he re-entered the room. By the way everyone had been staring at his and Marli’s interaction, he knew it was coming. Most of the people in this room knew he didn’t speak to Marli, and he tried to put on a front in front of them, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t ignore her beautiful ass standing there in that tight purple dress that showcased all her damn curves. She’d been on his mind since he’d left her this morning. He wanted to text her, he had, but he realized that his number was blocked. So, when she came busting her thick ass into the dressing room, he couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Looking around the dressing room, Dru noticed all eyes were on him. Their nosy asses were waiting for him to disclose his business. Dru looked at all of them with the same blank face he always wore. Everyone in that room knew he wasn’t discussing his personal life.

“I don’t know what you talking about, nigga.”

“You don’t know anything about what Marli was doing in the pool on your lap last night?” Blue smirked, causing Dru to cough. Flashbacks of him and Marli in the pool outside their room flashed in his head, her wet pussy slapping up and down on his dick. It was the highlight of his night. He wasn’t even surprised that someone had seen them.

“Yeah, we saw you. Y’all rooms right across from ours.” Blue laughed.

“Again, man, I don’t know what you talking about,” Dru repeated with a slight giggle. He wasn’t about to confirm nor deny anything until he knew for sure what he and Marli were doing.

“Yeah, OK. Max gon’ whup yo’ ass about his baby mama.” The room burst into laughter, but Dru didn’t find anything funny. Max was a fucking non-factor as far as he was concerned. The nigga had ample time to claim his fucking family, and his ass had failed to do that.

“I ain’t worried about that nigga.” Dru dismissed the conversation as Tez attempted to pass Blue a blunt. Dru shook his head as he snatched the blunt from his brother’s hands.

“Naw, bruh. Sis ain’t about to be mad at me ’cause yo’ ass standing up there high,” he stated as he inhaled the smoke into his lungs.

“Man, come on. My nerves bad.” Blue couldn’t even get the sentence out without laughing.

“You already married to her, bruh. Remember, after only three days of knowing her. You weren’t high then!” Dru snickered.

“Man, fuck you!” Blue shot back as he walked to the mirror. Dru smiled. His little brother was renewing his vows. A while ago, he never would have thought he’d see the day. Dru stayed bitching at his brother about where he stuck his dick. Now, he’d been faithfully committed to one woman for five years. Dru walked up to his brother, patting him on the back of his blue tuxedo.

“I ever told you I was proud of you, boy?”

“Aye, don’t start that mushy shit.” Blue waved him off, but Dru ignored him. He had something to say.

“I never thought I’d see the day yo’ ass got married. Now, you standing here celebrating five years. You are a great dad and a great husband. You and sis are goals. Watching y’all make me believe in love and loyalty, nigga. You know Pops fucked me up with the way he stayed cheating on my mom. Yo, bro, you make me believe that being with one woman is possible. I’m proud of you.” Dru embraced his brother in a hug. He didn’t get emotional much; he was a mean nigga, but this day was tugging on his heartstrings.

“I appreciate that, man. Maybe you and Marli will make it here someday. I’m rooting for y’all, nigga.”

“Maybe,” Dru spoke under his breath. His brother knew that out of all the women he’d been with, if he was going to settle down and be faithful to

anyone, it would be Marli. He just didn't quite know if she was ready.

"Aye, y'all, it's time to go," Tez announced. Dru looked around as two of their other artists, who were acting as groomsmen, stood.

"Let's go get yo' ass married, again," Dru said as they filed out of the room.

Everything was moving fast; they'd arrived at the beach and took their places in front of the gondola. The small crowd of family and friends stared at them with smiles. Dru touched the button with his father's picture that was pinned on him. His heart was full, and he hoped his father was proud of the men he and his brother had become. The music changed, and Marli appeared at the end of the aisle. Their eyes locked on each other immediately. Every step she took toward the front made his heart beat faster. She was fucking gorgeous. The sounds of Monica played as she swayed down the aisle. Dru didn't know whether it was the emotions of the day or not, but something was waking up inside of him. Despite all the drama, the paternity of her children, and four years of silent treatment, he knew Marli was his person, the only woman that had ever ignited real emotions inside of him. As she got closer and closer, what he wanted between them became clearer and clearer.

"Lock it down, nigga," Blue leaned over and whispered in his ear. Dru nodded his eyes, never leaving hers, even after she'd taken her space at the front of the gondola. Dru didn't see anyone else going down the aisle because, in his head, the only two people present were him and Marli.

"Please stand for the bride!" the officiant announced, causing him to look toward the entrance of the aisle. As Kay and her uncle came into view, his head immediately turned to his brothers. Kay was the most gorgeous bride he'd seen. He knew his brother wouldn't be able to hold in his tears. Without saying anything, he reached into his suit pocket and handed Blue a tissue.

"Thank you, bro. She fucking beautiful." Blue sniffed, wiping the corners of his eyes with the tissue.

"She is," Dru replied, his eyes moving back to Marli as Kay made it to the end of the aisle.

“Do you give this woman to be married to this man, again?” the officiant proposed.

“I do,” Kay’s uncle answered. Blue greeted him with a handshake and a hug as Kay stepped onto the stage. Kay and Blue embraced with a kiss, making everyone in attendance swoon. The shit was beautiful, and Dru felt fucked up because he couldn’t keep his eyes off Marli. Her hair was up, showcasing all her facial features.

“Got damn, you look beautiful, baby.” Blue took the words right out of his head, only Dru’s weren’t meant for Kay.

“As a request of the bride and groom, we’re going to skip right to the vows,” the officiant called out. Dru was glad to hear that. The sun was starting to cause sweat to form on his forehead, and he couldn’t wait to get out of his hot suit. Besides, he was ready to get to Marli. His body was beckoning to be in her presence. As Blue grabbed the microphone, Dru’s eyes found Marli, and this time, her eyes were on him too.

“Kaylee Willis, the last five years have been filled with a lot of things I never thought I’d do... a lot of me apologizing for shit without understanding why... a lot of sleepless nights with the twins, facials, and girly movies I never expected to like. We’ve had a lot of unforgettable adventures. We’ve become quite the power couple. We’ve made a lot of money together and had a lot of sex.” The guests erupted in laughter.

“Thank you for taking a chance on me after only knowing me a short while.”

“Less than a week!” Ms. Loretta called out from the crowd. Kay and Blue both laughed.

“After only knowing me for a week, you took me as your husband, and it’s truly changed my life. Being able to love you and having your love has been the best thing that has ever happened to a nigga. I hope to love you for a thousand more years.” Dru smiled at his brother’s words. Every word seemed to speak to something in his soul. Blue handed the mic to a sobering Kay, but not before swiping away her tears.

“On our wedding day, I promised to be the best wife I could be to you. I didn’t even fully understand what that meant at the time. We didn’t know each other. All I knew was it felt right. The last five years have been so amazing getting to know you, learning you. We’ve raised two children together, built a home, and opened so many businesses. We’ve traveled and

experienced the world together. Last year, when I lost the baby..." Kay's words trailed off and her voice cracked.

"When we lost the baby... you showed me what it meant to truly love someone for better or for worse. You showed up for me every day that I couldn't show up for myself. Amijay Blue Willis, tackling therapy together was the highlight of my year. We've written an epic love story, baby. I look forward to what's on the next page. I hope I've been the best wife because, Amijay, you've certainly been the best husband. I love you."

Blue didn't waste time going to her. As he wrapped her in his arms, they both were in tears. Dru moved to them both, handing them the handkerchief. Their love was beautiful to watch. He glanced over at Marli again, tears running down her face from the beauty of the scene in front of her. He knew why she was crying, but it didn't change the fact that he didn't like it. He never wanted to see water falling down her pretty round cheeks. If it wouldn't cause a scene, he'd go to her, but he knew he needed to stay in place. He'd have plenty of time the rest of the trip to be in her presence. Dru turned his attention back to Blue and Kay. They were exchanging rings. Kay's eyes ballooned at the size of her upgraded ring. Dru smiled because he knew how nervous his brother had been to purchase her the 2.4-million-dollar ring. Kay wasn't materialistic at all, and she didn't like spending a lot of money.

"Blue!" Kay gasped as she jumped into his arms and connected her lips to his.

"I guess we can skip to that part." The officiant laughed, causing everyone else to giggle.

"Amijay and Kay have expressed their love to one another. Therefore, it is my pleasure to now pronounce them husband and wife, again. You may now officially kiss your bride!" He could barely get out the last part, as applause erupted, and they found each other's lips again.

"I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Amijay Willis." Kay and Blue turned to face everyone in attendance. Their twins, Imani and Iman, ran to them. Dru joined everyone in clapping. The sight of his brother with his family pulled at his heartstrings. As the wedding recessional started, Dru walked over to Marli, his heart yearning for her. As she grabbed his hand, he pulled her in close.

"Our time coming, baby," he whispered in her ear. Marli giggled awkwardly as if he was playing. He hoped she knew he meant every word.

NINE

Marli

The beautiful sounds of Mario singing “I Choose You” live, sailed through the air as she watched her sister and brother partake in their first dance. The ceremony had been emotional, but the fact that Dru kept staring at her with love in his eyes had stolen the show. Everyone probably thought she was crying because of the vows Kay and Blue had exchanged. That was part of it, but the way Dru was staring at her awakened so many emotions that it caused tears to flow from her eyes. For the first time ever, she felt like she was falling in love.

“The couple would like to invite the best man and the maid of honor to join them,” Mario announced. Marli’s head snapped in the direction of Kay and Blue. This was a surprise. No one had mentioned a dance. Before she could freak herself out, Dru was there, holding out his hand.

“May we?” he inquired, looking down at Marli. She was conflicted. She wanted to dance with him, but she was scared. Too much had transpired between them since touching down on the island. She was sure being close to him would cause her to unravel.

“I’m not asking, Marli.” He took her hand, pulling her up and leading her to the dance floor next to their siblings. Marli’s eyes found her sister’s, and she stared her down.

“What the fuck, Kay?” she mouthed in her direction. Kay giggled instead of responding. Marli knew her sister had set her up, but there was

nothing she could do now. Dru pulled her into his hard body, resting his hands on the arch in her back. His smell was the first thing that sucked her in. Dru always seemed to smell like a fresh one-hundred-dollar bill. It was a smell Marli quite enjoyed. For a moment, the two of them just allowed the music to sway their bodies. Marli's chest rose and fell rapidly. She was nervous.

"Baby, I've already been inside you; it's no need to be nervous." He spoke in a tone that only she could hear. Marli tried to control her breathing, but she couldn't. It was silly. She could fuck this man with no pause, but this dance was terrifying her. The intimacy of it, the music sailing through the air, Dru's hard body pressed against hers—it was all too much for the girl who didn't do love. Marli had never shared a moment this personal with anyone.

"You look like a whole damn meal tonight, girl," Dru whispered. Marli giggled. It was just what she needed to relax. They fell into a rhythm, and everyone around them seemed to disappear. It was only the two of them on the dance floor. Dru pulled her into his chest, and her arms wrapped around his neck. Dru peered down at her with that infamous look in his eyes. At first, it terrified her. Now, she desired it.

"We should talk about me meeting the boys." His words caused her to still, but Dru continued to sway her body. She was speechless. He had met the boys, countless times, but as their uncle Blue's brother. She knew by his tone what he meant.

"You and the boys are mine; I'm not playing with you anymore." He continued to move her body to the smooth sound of the music.

"Dru..." She attempted to protest, but he interrupted. Leaning down, he placed his face in the crook of her neck as he spoke the song lyrics Mario was singing. Dru sprinkled kisses along her neck, and Marli melted in his hands. Every word he repeated about choosing her was speaking to her heart. Maybe she did love Dru. She joined him in singing the words of the song. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"While we are on this island, it's me and you. When we leave this island, it's me and you. You understand?"

Marli nodded her head in response. She didn't have any more fight left in her when it came to this thing brewing with Dru.

"Good, now let's—" His words were interrupted as Loretta barged in between them, causing them to let go of one another. Confusion settled on

both of their faces as they stared at her.

“Marli, baby...” Her mother panted. Marli had never seen her mother look so disturbed. At that moment, Marli knew something was wrong.

“It’s Tres, baby. He shot himself! My baby shot himself! They just rushed him to the hospital!” Loretta cried. Marli could feel the air being sucked out of her body. Her knees buckled, and her legs gave out.

“I got you.” Dru engulfed her, catching her before she could hit the floor. He was the only thing stopping her from completely crumbling.

“He... what?” She could barely form the words. Loretta moved to her, taking her daughter’s hand into hers.

“He shot himself! He... He... Ms. Woodard just called me. They’re on the way to the hospital.” Loretta could barely speak as the tears cascaded from her eyes. Marli was in shock. How did a four-year-old shoot themselves? Her brain couldn’t wrap itself around what she was being told. The more she thought about it, the more she lost it. Uncontrollable sobs spewed out her mouth.

“My baby! Oh my God! Oh my God!”

Dru pulled her in closer. He was talking, but her ears had completely shut off. Everything was moving in slow motion around her. She could see Kay and Blue approaching her, along with Nesha, Erica, and Ms. Natalie.

“What’s going on?” Blue questioned. Marli responded with a scream.

“Tres was shot! Tres was shot!” Loretta screamed. Blue’s head dropped, and Kay’s eyes immediately filled with tears as her husband embraced her. Everyone was now staring at them. The music had stopped, and the room was now filled with chatter.

“I’m having a car brought around. I’ll call the pilot and get the plane prepared,” Dru informed everyone.

“Aight. We coming too,” Blue replied.

Dru shook his head.

“It’s y’all day, bro. I got her.” He started to move Marli toward the exit.

“Naw, that’s Tres. That’s my nephew. We can’t stay here, not knowing if he’s okay.” Kay wiped the tears from her eyes.

“We can wrap everything up here and be on the first plane back in the morning,” Erica added. Nesha nodded in agreement.

“Yes, mijo. You all go. I’ll watch the kids,” Ms. Natalie volunteered. Dru didn’t say anything further. He nodded as he took out his phone to get everything moving. His arms were still holding up Marli. She could hear

everyone talking and moving around her, but she was frozen, a thousand worst-case scenarios playing in her head. What if she didn't make it to him in time? She couldn't even begin to fathom what she'd do.

"God, I pray you guide the doctors' hands and minds that are caring for Tres. Help them to heal him. I pray you bring comfort to his loved ones and allow us to make it safely by his side." Dru prayed as he picked Marli up bridal style and walked to the exit. His words penetrated Marli's ears and went straight to her heart.

"Jesus, we are all anxious right now. But we trust you, Lord God. We trust. In Jesus' name, amen." Dru finished his prayer just as the car pulled up in front of the resort.

"Amen," Marli replied. It was the first thing she'd spoken in the last five minutes. Dru's prayer was just the thing she needed to settle herself. Her baby needed her to be strong. Dru placed her in the car first. Then her sister and mother slid next to her. Dru and Blue sat in the seats in front of them.

"Call the hospital and let them know you're on your way. Give them your number so they have your direct line," Dru informed Marli. She nodded as she took her phone out of her breasts. She'd had it on airplane mode during the ceremony and reception. As soon as she turned it on, she noticed the alerts coming in, all from Ms. Woodard. Her baby had been shot. This was really happening. Marli's tears increased, and she buried herself in her sister's chest.

"Everything will be okay because it has to be!" Kay cried. Marli responded by allowing the tears to flow all the way to the airport.

Lord, let my baby be okay.

TEN

Dru

Marli cried the entire three-hour and forty-five-minute flight from Turks and Caicos to Saint Louis. He didn't blame her. Not knowing what was going on with her son had to be a lot to deal with. The last thing they'd heard was Tres was in critical condition and undergoing surgery, but no one had been updated on the severity of his gunshot wound. Dru opened the door of the black SUV. Before he could grab her hand, Marli took off running to the hospital entrance. Her mother and sister were all sprinting behind her. Luckily, the women had changed into a pair of leggings, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes that Kay kept on the plane. Marli was so distraught that Dru had to help change her clothes. As the women ran through the hospital en route to Tres's room, Dru and Blue fell in step behind them, not running but walking briskly to keep up. He didn't want Marli to face any of this without him by her side. He wouldn't allow it. She needed a safe place to land while her world was falling apart, and he would be that for her.

As they approached the elevator, Dru glanced around at the people who had their cameras out snapping pictures. This was going to be on the blogs for sure. Dru pulled his phone out. He needed to text Janel so she could get ahead of the press. As he punched in her name, he quickly remembered she'd quit. *Damn*, he thought. He wasn't sure if she'd already made her exit because he hadn't heard from her. His pride wouldn't let him contact her, though, especially not about Marli. He knew Janel didn't care for her.

Exiting her contact, he texted the public relations manager directly, informing her of the situation. Marli wasn't a member of his record label, but he'd meant what he said about her sons and her. They were his, and he wouldn't spare any expense to make sure they were safe. Besides, he knew Max wouldn't hold off the media circus. He would welcome it. Dru wouldn't be surprised if the cameras were already up there.

"Oh good, Marli! You made it. This the doctor right now," an older dark-skinned woman shouted at them as they exited the elevator and stepped into the waiting room. He assumed her to be Max's mom because of the facial similarities. Marli rushed over to the crowd of people who were all standing in a circle around the doctor. Everyone followed behind her. Deuce ran over, wrapping his arms around his mom's legs.

"Oh, baby!" Marli kissed his forehead, bringing him into her chest before letting him back down and facing the doctor. Dru didn't waste any time grabbing her hand. Whatever the doctor was about to say, he wanted her to know she didn't have to face it alone. He was there. Dru glanced around the room, observing the people around him. He didn't recognize anybody but Max. His clothes were covered in blood stains, most likely from transporting Tres to the hospital. Max's eyes bounced from the doctor to Marli and then to Dru. A snarl appeared on his face before returning his attention to the doctor.

"Like I was saying, Tres suffered a gunshot wound to the abdomen that caused some peritonitis and abdominal bleeding. He had a through-and-through gunshot wound to his small bowel as well as a partial injury to his large bowel. It took us a few hours to control the bleeding, but we were able to repair those two injuries and stop the abdominal bleeding before too much blood was lost."

"He's okay?" Marli gasped. Her voice sounded more like a question as she squeezed Dru's hand tighter.

"Yes, he is okay. Due to his size, we are going to keep him in the ICU for twenty-four hours, to monitor his progress. If all is well, he can be moved to a regular floor to continue his recovery and go home in a few days."

Dru released the breath he had been holding since Ms. Loretta barged in between their dance. Hearing Tres was going to be okay was the best news he'd ever gotten. Marli turned to him, falling into his arms. Her body instantly relaxed.

“He’s okay. My baby is okay!” she shouted into his chest. Dru wrapped his arms tightly around her. He allowed her to get all she needed from the hug. This all could have turned out so much worse, and he was glad it hadn’t.

“Where is he? Where’s my baby?” Marli turned back to the physician.

“He’s in recovery. Tres is young, and his abdomen is so small. We want to be extremely cautious with this, so we’re keeping a close eye on him. You will be able to see him soon. The nurse will inform you when he is ready,” the doctor explained. Marli nodded.

“Are there any more questions for me?”

“Will he have any long-term effects from this?” Max’s mom questioned. The doctor rubbed his hand across his head.

“We are unable to predict the future, but I can tell you that gunshot wounds in children, especially when they are this young, do have lasting effects. He may experience pain for years to come, have surgery related complications, and struggle with his mental health. I would recommend looking into counseling, but make no mistake: Your son is lucky to be alive. Many children don’t survive incidents of this nature. Please take this as a lesson on gun safety. The nurse will let you know when you can see him. I have to get back to making my rounds.” He turned and walked away, leaving them standing there. This time, Dru wrapped his arms around Marli. The saddened look on her face showed she needed a hug.

“We’ll get him any care that he needs, aight?” He whispered in her ear. Dru knew money wasn’t the magic cure for situations like this, but he also knew without it, things could be a whole lot worse.

“Aye, you just gon’ hug up with this nigga while yo’ son fighting for his life? That’s some real ho shit,” Max’s voice sounded from behind them. Irritation immediately seeped into his skin. *This nigga!* Dru didn’t do beef, but he didn’t fuck with Max. They used to have a good business relationship. He was a dope producer. They’d come into the music industry together, and for a minute, every Eight24 artist had a beat produced by Maximums. That was until Dru realized he was a pussy. Once Max found out that Marli had been fucking them both, the dramatics started. Nigga started sneak dissing on social media and being flakey on studio sessions. Dru didn’t play those petty ass games. He was a street nigga before he was a businessman. He’d killed men for less. So, ceasing business with Max was a no brainer. He guessed Max didn’t like the lost income, because,

suddenly, Dru was public enemy number one. Dru gave no fucks though. He let his silly ass beef by himself. Like even now, he was more concerned by Dru's presence in Marli's life than he was about his own son.

"Max, are you serious right now?" Marli let go of Dru, briskly stomping over to Max.

"As a fucking heart attack! Yo' ho ass halfway across the country riding dick, and our son in the damn hospital. Then you got the damn nerves to bring this trick ass nigga up here. You foul as fuck!" Max moved into Marli's face, waving his hands. His tone was already a violation in Dru's eyes, but waving his bitch ass hands in Marli's face was an infraction. Dru wouldn't be able to take too much more of his ass. Turning his head, he eyed his brother.

"He ain't worth it," Blue mouthed in his direction, and Dru took a deep breath. This was about Tres and comforting Marli.

"You're the reason our baby is even in here!" she shouted. "What you do, huh! Leave your gun laying out and our sons unattended while you go fuck some stank ass ho!"

"Man, you don't know shit. I told they lil asses not to touch it!" Max's face was now two inches away from Marli's. This nigga was a sad excuse for a father. People always talked about how mothers should let their kids go with the father regardless, but this was the prime example of why it wasn't always the best choice. Sometimes, just being in your kid's life wasn't enough. Dru approached them slowly. He wasn't the type of nigga to let a man argue with a woman. He didn't care that they were in a hospital. He would lay Max's ass out about his, and as of seven hours ago, Marli, Deuce, and Tres were his.

"Nigga, what you walking up for?" Max glanced over Marli's shoulder at Dru.

"Excuse me, Miss, you all can go back now. It's quite a few of you, so we'll allow three at a ti—" The nurse couldn't finish her statement before Marli, Dru, Max, and Ms. Woodard were all charging in her direction.

"The fuck this nigga going?" Max scuffed. Dru ignored him as he continued walking. As far as Dru was concerned, Max's ass could wait. Any nigga that was careless enough to leave a loaded gun laying around his kids didn't deserve to ever be around them again.

"Aye, if you let this nigga go back there... I swear to God!" Max shouted as he grabbed Marli by the arm. Without saying a word, Dru got a

good hold of Max's collar, bringing him into his chest.

"You swear to God what?" Dru chastised him as Blue walked up behind him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Not here, not now, bro." Blue attempted to calm him. Glancing around, Dru noticed the scenery around him. Tears were falling from Marli's eyes as she looked on in shock. Everyone was staring at him. Max's mom was screaming for security. He didn't give a fuck now. Max was out of fucking pocket. Tightening his grip, he pulled Max closer to him. Leaning down, he spoke into his ear.

"Let's get some shit clear, bitch ass nigga. Seven hours ago, I promised that beautiful thick ass woman over there, she was mine. That includes her boys. If you ever put yo' muthafucking hands on her again or fail to protect Deuce and Tres, I will forget that I'm retired from this street shit and blow yo' fucking brains out." He shoved Max to the ground.

"Y'all married?" Max blurted. He pushed up from the floor, attempting to charge at Marli like the bitch he was.

"No!" His mom called out, jumping in front of him. Dru lunged at him. He was going to beat this nigga within an inch of life for not adhering to his words. Before Dru could reach him, Blue had pulled him back.

"Not here, bruh! Chill!" Blue shouted at him, finally making him realize the severity of his actions. It had been a long time since he'd behaved like this. Dru didn't lose his cool. He had too much to lose, but for Marli and the boys, he would lose it ten times over.

"I'm going to have to ask you all to leave. We can't allow rowdy visitors in the ICU." Another nurse walked over to them.

"No, please, they'll leave." Marli pleaded with the woman. Her words hit Dru in his core. Slowly, he approached her. She couldn't be talking about him.

"I ain't going no damn where; that's my mutha fucking son," Max boasted, hitting his fist against his chest.

"Shit, me neither." Dru stared into Marli's eyes.

"Simp ass nigga!"

"Aye, Max, fuck you!" Dru barked.

"Bit—"

"Just go, please, just go!" Marli interrupted. Her mouth was saying one thing, but her eyes were saying another.

"Marli, I'm—"

“Dru, just go. He has a right to be here. I... just want to see my son.” She sobbed. Dru’s heart broke as he stared at her. Flashbacks of the night that broke his heart four years ago in the same hospital played in his head. Maybe he was naïve to think Marli was mature enough for a real relationship.

“You sure about that decision?” He glared at her. Marli didn’t say anything; she just nodded her head in defeat as tears stained her cheeks. Dru nodded his head. He felt like a fool. He was ready to go to war behind this girl, and this was how she played in his face.

“Bet.” He walked toward the elevator. Pulling out his phone, he texted his driver to pull around, not saying anything further. If she didn’t want him there, he would leave. He didn’t have time to play games with her ass. Say what you wanted about Janel, but she was always consistent; she knew what she wanted. As he stepped onto the elevator, Blue joined him. They rode in silence down to the hospital lobby. When they reached the exit, Blue grabbed his arm. He was the only nigga that could get away with some shit like that.

“She don’t really want you to leave. Give her a minute, bruh. This was a lot in a short time,” he pleaded.

“Man, fuck her!” he blurted, pulling away from his brother and heading to the car that had just pulled around.

“You don’t mean that!” Blue shouted at him, bringing his steps to a halt. He didn’t mean it, but he couldn’t stop the love he had for her in his heart. Turning around, he looked at his brother.

“Make sure her and the kids are good. Send me the bill for any and everything they need or want.”

Blue nodded his head before walking back into the hospital. Dru climbed inside the back of the black SUV. He’d be lying if he said his feelings weren’t hurt. He loved Marli, but maybe it was too late for them to be more than they had already been.

“Where to, boss?” the driver asked, looking at him through the rear-view mirror.

“Janel’s house,” Dru replied, pulling out his phone to text her he was on his way.

ELEVEN

Marli

Marli wasn't sure, but she was certain she'd gained and lost a boyfriend all in a matter of seven hours. That had to be a new world record. As the elevator door closed on Dru, regret for what she'd said immediately sunk in. She didn't really want him to leave. He'd been the only person keeping her sane. Under different circumstances, she might have gone after him, but her son was her priority right now. She'd reach out to Dru later and apologize. Turning to the nurse, she wiped her eyes.

"I'm ready," she whispered. Kay grabbed ahold of her sister's arm, and they followed the nurse down the long hallway that led to Tres's room. Ms. Woodard was right behind them. She was glad that Max hadn't tried to come back with them. She didn't want to see his stupid ass face. The fact that he'd allowed their son to shoot himself disgusted her to her core. Max was a lot of things, but she never thought he'd be this damn careless. She would never trust him with her boys again. As they approached the room, silence fell over them. Marli expected to hear the usual EKG beeps, but there was nothing. Just dead silence.

"Is he awake?" Marli took a deep breath, attempting to prepare herself for the sight that awaited her beyond the hospital door.

"No, he's asleep. He will probably sleep most of the day due to the anesthesia and the pain medication," the nurse stated.

“Okay.” Marli pushed open the door. Tears immediately pooled in her eyes, and her breathing became erratic. Nothing could prepare her for what she was seeing. Her baby boy was lying there with tubes down his throat, he was hooked up to all sorts of machines. There was a large bandage over his wound. Marli’s heart was broken. Ms. Woodward and Kay both placed their hands over their mouths. The sight of Tres had to be too much for them, too. Her baby didn’t deserve this, and the more she stared at her son, the more hate she formed for his father. He was truly a trash ass parent for this.

“It’s okay, sister. He’s okay.” Kay rubbed Marli on the back. She heard her sister’s words, but she couldn’t help but think of the long road to recovery that was up ahead. Building enough courage, Marli moved to Tres’s bedside. He looked tired, and there were small specs of dried-up blood around his mouth from where they’d placed the tubes, but other than that, he looked like himself.

“Mama’s here, baby. Mama’s here.” She touched his hand and gently kissed his forehead. He was sleeping so peacefully like none of this had happened. She hoped like hell this wouldn’t affect his sweet, childlike innocence. The longer she stared at her baby, the heavier her heart became. She needed to have a seat. Searching the room, she spotted a blue hospital recliner in the corner next to his bed. Sitting down, she placed her face in her hands and allowed the tears to freely flow. The fact she even had any left was surprising. She had barely stopped crying since she received the news. Kay hovered over her for a second, dropping to her knees. She wrapped her arms around her sister, and they wept uncontrollably together.

“I’m so... so sorry your day had to end this way!” Marli cried.

“Don’t you dare apologize. Don’t you dare.” Kay shook her head. “My nephew being okay is the most important thing right now!” She cried, kissing her sister on the forehead. The sound of the hospital doors creaking open made them lift their heads. The sight of two tall, dark-skinned uniformed police detectives entering the room made Marli gasp. She wasn’t expecting to see them. Her first thought was they were coming to ask her about the commotion in the lobby. She prayed they weren’t coming to put her out. She had no intentions of leaving her son. Kay stood to her feet and rounded the chair Marli sat in.

“Hello, Ms. Martin. I’m Detective Dan, and this is Detective Collins. We realize this may not be the best time, but we want to ask you some

questions about your son's accident. We can do it now, or we can leave our cards and you can speak with us in the morning." Detective Dan spoke. Marli let out a sigh of relief. They were just there to ask questions about Tres. She didn't have many facts, but she would greatly tell them what she knew. Maybe they could even help her to piece together what was happening since no one was volunteering the information.

"No, I can answer them now," she replied. She didn't have anything to hide.

"Do you know what happened?" Detective Dan began as his partner took out a pen and paper.

"Um, only what I was told. I was out of town for my sister's destination wedding." She pointed to Kay. "The boys were with their father; it was his scheduled weekend."

The detectives both nodded. "Got it, and when were you notified, and what did they say?"

"My phone was turned on airplane mode because of the wedding. I didn't get any calls or messages. My mother informed me around four that um..." Marli's voice cracked. "Umm... that my baby had shot himself."

Kay rubbed her sister's back as the detectives scribbled down what she was saying.

"You said the boys were with their father... Does he usually have guns laying around? Do you know if he owns any guns?" Detective Collins questioned. Marli was slow to speak. She knew her words would implicate Max, but she wasn't going to lie to protect him, especially when her son was lying in a hospital bed. Marli looked at Ms. Woodard. She hated that such a sweet woman had raised such an asshole of a son. Ms. Woodard's eyes filled with sorrow.

"Yes, he owns several. I always tell him to put those damn things away. You see, my son is famous, and he's been shot at before, so he carries for protection. I've never seen them out around the boys." Ms. Woodard answered for her. Marli was shocked that she'd said that. She knew Ms. Woodard was aware of what they were implying.

"And you are?" Detective Dan turned his attention to Max's mom.

"Dad's mom," she stated. "I'm the first person my son called when it happened. I alerted Marli's mom as well." Ms. Woodard nodded in Marli's direction.

“Have either of you ever seen him leave any guns out around the children before?” The attention was back on Marli, though they’d addressed it to both of them. Marli hadn’t, but she didn’t spend a lot of time with Max and the kids together. They co-parented, and that was it. There weren’t any times when they’d spent family time together.

“No,” Marli and Ms. Woodard replied in unison. Marli took a deep breath before continuing.

“Not that I know of. We aren’t together. We just co-parent. I’m not around when he has them, so I can’t speak on that.” It was the honest to God truth.

“Last thing, Miss Martin, how old is your other son?”

“Four, they’re twins.”

The detectives nodded.

“Thank you, ladies. We hope your son recovers well. Here is our card in case you need anything.” Detective Dan handed Marli a white business card. Marli tucked the card in her boobs as the detectives turned to leave the room.

“Detectives, is my son going to go to jail?” Ms. Woodard asked. Detective Collins turned to face her.

“Ma’am, we are still investigating. We do have to take him in for questioning, but ultimately, that decision to file charges is up to the prosecutors,” he stated as they exited the room. This time, Max’s mom burst into tears. Marli and Kay moved to her quickly, embracing her in a hug. Marli didn’t know what to say. There were truly no words. The entire situation was heavy for everybody. The possibility of Max going to jail and her sons being without their father was a lot to wrap her head around. Mistakes happened, but this wasn’t a mistake to be taken lightly. Tres could have died. Marli was glad he was being detained. Still, she felt for Ms. Woodard.

“Thank you, babies.” Ms. Woodard straightened her back. “I’m gon’ go get myself together. I’m gon’ let Max or your mom come in and see him,” she spoke through sniffles. The girls let her go, and she shuffled toward the door. Marli turned, kissing Tres again before following Ms. Woodard out the door. If Max was coming in, she wanted to get out of dodge. As they neared the waiting area, the sight of two of the reality show’s cameramen caused Marli’s heart to skip a beat. She really couldn’t believe that Max would stoop this low. Maybe they had come on their own.

“Um... what the fuck?” she blurted as she approached the camera crew. “What are you doing here?”

“We are here to get some hospital footage of you and Max,” one of the guys answered.

“Yeah, this gon’ be good. This the hot topic on all the blogs,” the other man stated as he removed his camera from the case. Marli felt as though she was being pranked. They couldn’t be serious, and this couldn’t be her life.

“No, we’re not filming this.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Max said you are,” the men responded. Marli’s blood boiled as she looked around for Max, but she didn’t see him.

“He’s talking to the police,” the cameraman offered. Marli took a deep breath. She could feel the bitch in her rising.

“We are not filming this. That is fucking final. You all can leave!” She placed her hand on her hip and pointed toward the entrance. The two men looked at her and continued to put up their equipment. They were moving as if her words meant nothing. *Aw, they don’t hear me*, she thought. Grabbing the first piece of equipment she could find, Marli threw it on the floor, shattering it into pieces.

“You hear me now?” She snatched the camera out of one of the men’s hands and launched it across the room. Her mother moved toward her, attempting to calm her down, but it was too late. All the pain and frustrations of the day had forced itself to the forefront, and she couldn’t bottle them back up.

“I said leave, the fuck! I’m not filming my son in no damn hospital for likes and money!” She was screaming at this point, grabbing anything that was in her reach and throwing it.

“You’re going to pay for that!” The cameraman shook his head as he gathered his equipment and headed to the elevator.

“Aye, wait! Wait! Where y’all going?” Max appeared from a side hallway. Launching a tripod at his head, Marli approached him. His chestnut skin and dimples were no longer attractive. She could barely stand to look at him.

“We are not filming this, Max. Are you crazy?”

“Yes, the fuck we are. The blogs gon’ tell it anyway; we might as well capitalize on it,” Max responded. Marli couldn’t control herself anymore as she lunged at him. Her hand connected with his face.

“I hate you!” She sobbed. “You’re a sorry fucking excuse for a father!” Max attempted to grab her, but Blue stepped in between them. Marli had forgotten he was even there, but apparently, he’d been watching the whole time.

“I wish the fuck you would, nigga!” Blue barked.

“Sure the fuck do!” Loretta walked up next to her son, gripping her purse. Usually, the drama in her life was scripted or exaggerated for television. This, though, was her reality. As Marli stood there looking at this mess, she felt broken.

“Maxwell Demetrius Mitchell!” Ms. Woodard shouted. Her voice demanded attention and caused them all to stop moving. “I don’t know where I went wrong raising you, but God dammit, we are not filming this. Tell those damn camera crews to leave, now!” Her voice thundered. Max frowned. He turned to follow the cameramen down the elevator but was stopped by two more detectives coming up the stairs.

“Maxwell Mitchell, you have the right to remain silent.” The detectives began detaining Max. Marli collapsed into the waiting room chair as she watched Max being handcuffed and led away by the police, the camera crew filming as they followed him.

“We not filming this!” Max thundered. The weight of the day released from her all at once as she balled up in the chair. This would have to do as her safe place to fall apart. Everyone ran to her, providing their comfort, but the one person she wanted wasn’t there. She’d sent him away, foolishly, and knowing Dru and his pettiness, she’d probably lost him forever.

TWELVE

Twelve Weeks Later
Marli

Marli walked down the clinic stairs, shaking her head. Her worst fears had been confirmed. Pregnant. She had called it. As soon as her breasts started aching, she knew what was going on. This wasn't her first rodeo. When she'd gotten pregnant with the boys, her boobs ached so bad, she would just lie in bed and cry. As she strutted through the parking lot, the summer sun beamed down on her, making every step she took toward the car seem taxing. This was the last thing she needed right now with Tres's recovery. Her baby had undergone strenuous rehabilitation. Due to complications from his surgery, he ended up having to have two more operations. It had been an uphill battle, but he was finally beginning to make a full recovery.

"When you gon' tell him?" Kay questioned as they made it to the door of Kay's Tesla. Marli had asked her sister to tag along because she was the only person available at the time. Erica was out of town for her flight attendant work, and Nesha was back at home in Texas. She thought about coming alone, but she was too much of a chicken. Marli didn't address what Kay had said. She'd been trying to get the tea on who the father was since Marli had mentioned the possibility of being pregnant.

"Sis, I know y'all not on good terms, but you gotta tell Dru you're pregnant." Marli's head snapped around at the mention of Dru's name.

Marli never told Kay about sleeping with Dru in Turks and Caicos, so the fact that she had just dropped his name was a shocker. Had Dru been discussing their time with Blue?

"I don't think you can get pregnant by someone you haven't fucked." Marli smirked, allowing the lie to roll right off her tongue. This baby was one hundred percent Dru's. She hadn't been with anyone else in over six months.

"Girl, please. You know we saw y'all in that pool the night before my vowel renewal." Kay started the car, a smirk appearing across her face. Marli's eyes grew wider, and her mouth fell open. She couldn't do anything but giggle as a flashback of that night played in her head. She and Dru had been fucking for hours when he went outside on the patio to smoke. Marli soon joined him, and after she'd dropped to her knees to suck his dick, she ended up riding it in the pool. Marli turned her head to her sister.

"Y'all, as in you and Blue? Why you just now saying something?"

"I was waiting on yo' secretive ass to spill the tea." Kay and Marli both laughed.

"Okay, we fucked a few times in Turks. That still doesn't mean it's his," Marli sassed. She hated lying to her sister, but if Kay knew, it was a possibility that Dru would find out. She knew Kay and Blue pillow talked, and Blue wouldn't waste any time telling his brother she was pregnant.

"Marli, you are twelve weeks pregnant, and my wedding was three months ago. I can count!"

"I slept with someone else right before my trip, so you're wrong."

Marli rolled her eyes, telling another lie. The truth was, she had attempted to call Dru multiple times, but he'd either blocked her number or didn't want to talk to her. Sure, she had alternative methods of reaching him, but she felt stupid, popping up pregnant. He would probably think she was a joke.

"I can't tell him if he has me blocked. Besides, I don't even know if I'm keeping it." She mumbled another lie. She was keeping her baby.

"No problem. I'll call him right now, and you can tell him you want to kill his baby." Kay took out her phone.

"No! You need to focus on driving this damn car!" Marli shouted playfully at her sister. If he wanted to know, he wouldn't be ignoring her. She'd seen him with Janel on the blogs. He wasn't thinking about her. He hadn't checked in on her or her son once. She already had one crazy co-

parenting situation. She didn't need two. Looking out the window, she grabbed her belly. She and her baby would be better off without Dru. Years ago, when she'd asked to be pregnant by Dru, she didn't think her request would be delayed for four years. God must have been being funny.

"I don't think you should kill it, but it's not my choice. I'll say this: Not being the twin's father hurt Dru... I've never told you this, but he showed up at our house that night, bawling his eyes out. If that's Dru's kid in your belly, killing it without telling him will crush him." Kay said her piece and focused her attention back on driving. Marli dropped her head. She never knew how badly Dru had taken the DNA results. She knew he was pissed, but tears? Her heart filled with regret. Maybe God was giving them a second chance to get the shit right.

"I'll tell him after my trip," Marli replied as they pulled into the airport drop-off lane.

"Are you sure y'all gon' be okay? Kay questioned. She had been concerned about Marli and the boys traveling to Atlanta for the weekend by themselves. It wasn't ideal because Tres was still not one hundred percent healed. He was always tired and couldn't walk or play for long periods of time, but Marli had to be in Atlanta to film some footage for the show. After all that had happened, she wasn't letting Deuce and Tres out of her sight. So, they were coming too.

"Yes. Don't forget Mama coming too. I'm sure it'll be fine," Marli replied.

"I'm referring to you taking the boys to see their daddy while you're down there." Kay parked the car. Marli sighed. Things with Max had gone from bad to worse to just plain complicated. After being arrested, he was charged with Class B child endangerment. The detectives had concluded that he'd left the boys unattended in the living room with a loaded gun lying on a table. They'd stripped him of his custody rights, and he was currently awaiting trial. The whole thing had been a mess. He'd been removed from the reality show and destroyed all over social media. Marli hated Max, but she also felt bad for him in a way. He was still their father, and the boys missed him. They were only four; they didn't understand all the politics of why they couldn't see him. He'd been staying at his home in Atlanta, working, and had asked if the boys could come for a few days. Marli had ruled out them staying with Max for a few days but had decided that she'd take the boys to see him a couple of times while they were down there. She

wanted the boys to spend time with their daddy, especially with the possibility of him doing jail time for Tres's accident. She just wouldn't leave them alone with him ever again.

"The boys miss him, sis. This has been so hard on them. Max has been acting like he has some sense lately, so hopefully, it's a good two days." Marli sighed.

"You gon' tell him about that?" Kay pointed toward Marli's belly.

"Why would I? It's none of his business." Marli rolled her eyes.

"How do you plan to hide your morning sickness? He's going to know."

"Max should be too focused on spending time with the boys to realize anything that's going on with me." She rolled her eyes.

"It's not his baby, is it?" Kay mumbled. She was being funny. Had to be. Marli gasped and cut her eyes at her sister who'd obviously lost her damn mind.

"Hell no! Now you know Max ain't hit this since the boys were small babies!" she shouted.

"Just checking. Yo' ass be so secretive." Kay chuckled.

"It's no secret. I don't fuck with Max like that anymore." Marli rolled her eyes as she opened her car door to exit. Her mother was already there with the boys, waiting for their flight. Kay exited the vehicle, helping her sister get her luggage out of the back seat.

"Tell Ma I said hi. I would walk you in, but I have to go pick Iman and Imani up from preschool." She kissed her sister on the cheek.

"Okay, no problem. Thank you! Love you." She took the handle of the rolling suitcase from her sister's hand and walked toward the entrance.

"Love you!" Kay shouted from the distance. Marli waved.

"Good luck hiding that from Mom!" Kay yelled, causing Marli to swallow hard. She might be able to keep her pregnancy a secret from a lot of people, but Loretta Martin was going to smell the pregnancy on her the second she walked into the room. She already had. Her mom had been asking her questions and talking about her fish dreams for weeks now. Marli was grateful her mother was coming. She needed extra help with the boys now that Tres had so much going on. She would also be able to watch the boys while she went to set so they wouldn't have any alone time with Max.

As Marli went through TSA pre-check, her thoughts went to Dru. She was having his baby for real this time. There was no possibility of him not

being the father. A part of her was happy, but another part of her was terrified. She didn't know how Dru would react. Would he play her for Janel? She didn't know. She'd told Kay she would tell him after her trip, and she would, just not right after. She wanted to wait until after she got out of miscarriage territory, around sixteen weeks. There was no point in getting Dru in an uproar if the baby wouldn't even survive, right?

"Mama!" Deuce shouted, running up to her as she approached their terminal.

"Hey, baby!" She leaned forward, kissing his forehead. Her eyes went to Tres. He was slowly walking over to her. Running had been hard for him since the surgery. He still had abdominal pain and swelling. Marli sped up her pace, pulling Deuce along.

"Mama! It's a dinosaur!" Tres yelled happily, pointing to the T-Rex hat he was wearing on his head. Marli smiled. The boys had all kinds of souvenirs. They had hit their grandma's pockets up at the gift shop.

"I see, baby! Come here!" Marli leaned down, kissing Tres on the forehead. Marli walked over to her mom, giving her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Your sister couldn't come in?" She greeted Marli, causing her to giggle.

"She has to pick up the twins from school," Marli responded. Loretta folded her arms across her chest.

"Um huh. So how far along are you?" Ms. Loretta blurted, making Marli cough.

"Huh! What?" She'd caught her off guard. Loretta didn't say anything as she held up her phone. Sure enough, there she was in 4K, on the Hollywood tearoom page, leaving the pregnancy clinic. Marli's head dropped. *Fuck!* There went her attempt to keep this a secret.

"Twelve weeks." Marli sighed.

"Um huh. So, who is the daddy this time?"

Marli thought to lie, but she knew better. Her mama probably already had done the math in her head.

"Dru," she whispered.

"Umph. Well, maybe this will be enough to stop y'all from running around here playing these childish games." Loretta folded her arms across her chest. Marli didn't say anything else; she just sat there, staring at the boys. She expected her mom to continue, but she hadn't.

“We are now inviting passengers with small children, and any passengers requiring special assistance, to start boarding Flight 289 to Atlanta,” the flight attendant announced. Marli stood, gathering her things. She placed Tres in his wheelchair and headed toward the exit.

“We get to see Daddy!” The boys shouted as they handed the flight attendant their ticket. Their excitement to see Max pulled on her heartstrings and made her roll her eyes at the same time. She hoped the baby growing inside of her had that much love for Dru. Boarding the plane, Marli sighed. She would tell him as soon as she got back from Atlanta. With Hollywood tearoom telling business, she hoped she even had that long.

⋮

THIRTEEN

Dru

“What you want for dinner, baby?” Janel questioned as she sauntered her way into the studio where Dru was working for the evening.

She’d been back working at Eight24 Records since the day Dru showed up at her doorstep. He didn’t necessarily beg her back, but he did agree to put a label on their situation. They were now dating with the intention of seeing where things could go. It had been so far, so good. Nothing had really changed on Dru’s end, but Janel seemed to be happy. She offered him peace and consistency, something that Marli just couldn’t do, and that seemed to be what he needed right now.

“I was thinking we could order out and spend the night in.” She walked over to him. Dru heard her, but he didn’t look up. He was too occupied staring at a picture on the Hollywood Tearoom page of Marli leaving a pregnancy clinic.

@hollywoodtearoom: Attendees, look who was spotted outside of a clinic known primarily for pregnant women. None other than Hip Hop in Love star Marli. A pregnancy hasn’t been confirmed yet but it’s giving very much pregnant! If you’ve been keeping track of the drama, attendees. Just a few weeks ago we reported that Marli and producer Maximus’s son had been released from the hospital after tragically shooting himself in the stomach. Maximus has been brought up on child endangerment charges but is out on bail. It looks like now they’re adding a new baby to the mix. What

do y'all think attendees do these two need to be adding another child to this madness?

Dru stared at the picture in disbelief. He didn't know what to feel. The thought of Marli being pregnant by another man, again, was fucking him up inside. There hadn't been a day that went by he didn't think about her. He'd covered all of Tres's hospital bills and had visited him every night after Marli had gone to sleep. She didn't know he was there, just like she didn't know he had been talking to Tres and Deuce on their iPads. He just wanted to check up on them, let them know that they had someone in their corner. He was mad at Marli, but he wasn't going to completely abandon her kids. He just couldn't play those silly games with her anymore. One minute, she wanted him, and the next minute, she was running or pushing him away. It was cool five years ago, but he was older and in a different head space. He was starting to want the type of love his brother had found in Kay.

"What you lookin'..." Janel slid into his lap. Her words trailed off at the sight of his phone screen.

"You dodged a bullet with that one. I mean, getting pregnant when you're under investigation for your other kids is crazy." Janel shook her head as she attempted to connect her lips to Dru's, but he moved his head.

"Naw." He waved her off. Her statement was wild, and he wasn't going to let her speak on a situation she didn't know anything about and then allow her to kiss him in the mouth.

"If she's pregnant, she sure isn't that far along; she's not showing. Her nasty ass could be there for an STD, for all we know." Janel rolled her eyes. Dru's eyes zeroed in on the picture. Except for her cute natural pooch, Marli's stomach was still visually flat in her gray crop top and short set. There wasn't any sign of her being pregnant. He ignored that hating shit Janel was spewing as the realization that he could very much be the father of Marli's unborn child set in.

"Shit," he whispered under his breath. Sliding Janel off his lap, he sat back in the office chair. He needed to think.

"Um, you that offended I talked about that ran-through hippo?" Janel questioned. She was way out of line now, and any other day, Dru would check her. Right now, though, Dru's head was too cloudy to care about any stupid shit that Janel had to say.

"Give me a minute. Order whatever you want for dinner," he said as he waited for Janel to leave and close the door to the studio. He stared at the

picture again. Swiping to the next slide, the silver car door of a Tesla told him just who would be able to shed some light on the situation. Exiting the app, he went to his brother's number and placed the call.

"Sup, bro?"

"Marli pregnant?" Dru didn't even let Blue's face appear on the screen before he bombarded him. It was no need to sugarcoat shit for his brother. Blue knew what was up.

"Damn, nigga! I expected this call yesterday. Tearoom posted that picture sixteen hours ago. You slipping." Blue laughed.

"Fuck you. Answer the question. I know yo' pillow talking ass know," Dru fired back.

"You know, I thought it was fuck her?" Blue joked. Dru flashed him the middle finger. His brother was getting a kick out of this shit, but he didn't feel like playing with his ass today. Blue laughed in response before turning the phone on Kay. She was doing her best to look everywhere instead of the screen. That confirmed his first question: She was pregnant.

"Sis, is it mine?" Dru asked the second question that was plaguing his brain. The way the color flushed from her face combined with her inability to make eye contact had him standing up from the rolling chair. Kay looked torn as she bounced her eyes between the ground and Dru.

"I can only confirm that she is pregnant. I can't confirm or deny you're the father," Kay blurted so quickly Dru almost couldn't understand her. Rubbing his head, he took a deep breath as he walked over to his desk. There were a lot of what-ifs at play right now. He and Marli didn't think twice about using protection.

"How many weeks is she?" That question would help to settle this matter. Anything more or less than three months would disqualify him, and he could relax his nerves.

"Twelve weeks," Kay whispered as she slapped her hand over her mouth. Dru's body froze, and his heartbeat sped up. Marli was pregnant, and the timeline was adding up to him possibly being the father. Slowly, he plopped down in his chair. If Marli was pregnant, he wanted to know right away if it was his. His first thought was to go to her.

"Where is she?" Dru hoped Kay didn't hear the desperation in his voice.

"Um... I can't tell you that, brother. I already said enough." This time, she looked directly at the screen.

“Is she at home? Is she in Saint Louis?” Dru ignored her and kept firing questions. He was going to pull up on her one way or another. This way, though, he wouldn’t have to waste any time searching the city for her. Kay shook her head. If she wasn’t in Saint Louis, it was a good chance that she was in Atlanta. Dru knew that was where she filmed.

“Is she in Atlanta?” he blurted. Kay’s eyes grew wide. *Got that ass*, he thought.

“I can’t confirm or deny that she is in Atlanta, but she and the boys may be stopping by Max’s for a few visits this weekend.” Kay threw her hand back to her mouth. The mention of Max’s name pissed him off. Was this another situation from the one before? Maybe the baby was his. Dru swiped his hand across his forehead.

“I’m gon’ go now, but you ain’t hear any of this from me.” Kay turned the phone back to a laughing Blue.

“You a simp ass nigga,” he joked.

“Thanks, sis. I got to get back to work.” Dru ignored his brother. He had already made up his mind that he was about to pull up on her. He wouldn’t be able to sleep at night knowing that the one woman he really loved may be having his child.

“Don’t hurt my sister, Dru!” Kay shouted right before he hung up the phone. He wasn’t going to hurt her, but he damn sure wasn’t about to let her play in his face. If she was pregnant with his baby, her ass should be in his face right now and not in her fuck ass baby daddy’s. Dru stood from the chair and moved away from the audio mixer. If he left within the next hour, he could be in Atlanta before it got dark. Exiting the studio, he was met with a tearful Janel leaning up against the hallway wall. It was clear she had been listening in on his conversation. He wasn’t sure how much she’d heard, but it was enough for heartbreak to be plastered on her face.

“J, move any appointments I had this weekend to next week. I’ll be in Atlanta for a few days.”

Janel’s head dropped in defeat.

“Atlanta?” She was confused. “You never mentioned going to Atlanta this weekend?”

“It just came up,” he blurted. He didn’t want to have to explain this to her right now. He knew he should, and he would, after he confirmed if Marli was having his baby.

“You fucked her?” Janel’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“J, I’m not trying to—”

“Did you fuck her? Is she pregnant by you!” Janel yelled. Dru dropped his head. He didn’t want to break her heart. He wasn’t entitled to answer her; they were dating, exclusively, but he was still single.

“It was before you, Janel.” He attempted to dismiss the conversation and walk toward the door.

“Before me? Before me! How can it be before me, Dru? I knew you first. I was here first! Gosh!” Janel was visibly pissed, and Dru couldn’t deny that she should be.

“Before we put a title on our situation, Janel. It was in Turks,” he offered. Janel laughed.

“And then you came back here and acted like you missed me... like you wanted to work on us.” Janel lifted from the brick wall. Dru attempted to walk away. None of that was an act. At the time, he had missed her. He did want to work on them being something. It just wasn’t for the right reasons.

“Look, J, I’ll explain all this shit when I get back, all right?” What Janel said next caused him to freeze in his tracks.

“I don’t know what you see in that fat skanky ho!” Janel barked. Dru didn’t waste any time closing the space between them. He was done with her disrespecting Marli.

“Janel, I’m sorry that you have to find out about me possibly having a baby like this, but this yelling and making a scene in our place of business, not about to happen. I’ll be in Atlanta for two days.”

“Is she in Atlanta?” Janel questioned. He nodded his head. She already knew the answer to that shit. He knew she’d been eavesdropping.

“No matter what I do, I can’t get you to fall in love with me. Ever since you’ve met her, I’ve been playing second best. It doesn’t matter if she has your kids or not. It’ll never be me, will it? I... I’m not playing second to her anymore, Dru. Make a choice.” Janel neared him, tears rimming in her eyes. Dru let out a deep breath. He was fucked up for what he’d done to Janel. He dragged her back in, knowing he wasn’t over Marli. He was foul. It was misleading, and it was against everything he stood for. He didn’t know what he could do to fix it, but she was right. Even without the baby, Marli had his heart. He couldn’t keep dragging Janel through the fire.

“You right, J. I love her, and I can’t shake that shit. In another life, it would have been me and you. You got so much going for yourself. You’ll land on your feet.” He closed the space between them. “I say this with so

much love in my heart, but you were right to quit the first time. We should have left it there.” He wrapped his arms around her. The tears flowed from her eyes. It was harsh, but it was the truth.

“I was done! You could have left me alone!” She cried into his chest.

“Anything you need, Janel, I got you. You want to start your own label? I’ll fund it.” He wasn’t just trying to soften the blow; he meant it. He never meant to hurt Janel like this.

“You could have left me alone!” Janel sobbed.

“I know, and for that, I’m sorry, J. I’m sorry.” He kissed her forehead before letting her go. Her body fell to the floor, and it took everything in him to not go to her. Right now, though, his most important priority was finding out if Marli was carrying his seed.

⋮

FOURTEEN

Marli

Marli stared down at her phone in disbelief at the email that had just come through from the *Hip Hop in Love* producers.

Marli,

We regret to inform you that you will not be a part of the cast on this upcoming season of Hip Hop in Love. This decision is effective immediately. The following are the reasons for your dismissal:

- *Damage of cameraman's property*
- *Lack of storyline*
- *Current legal issues surrounding you and your co-star.*

Please return any show property such as wardrobe or other items that you have in your possession. The issuance of your final payment will be delayed if you delay or fail to do so. Thank you for your time and all you have done for the show. We wish you the best.

Regards,

Laura Straut

TV BTB

“What’s wrong, Mama?” Deuce asked, climbing into her lap. Marli, the boys, and Max were all sitting in his living room having a family game night. The last day and a half had been going great as far as the daily visits with Max were concerned. He was behaving like the perfect father, and the boys were enjoying every minute of it. It had been nice to see, and it made her feel sad that the boys didn’t have this family dynamic daily.

“Mama!” Marli didn’t purposely ignore her baby, but she was distraught. Her brain was trying to wrap itself around the email she’d just read. She was being fired from the show. She suspected that something strange was going on because when she showed up to set today, everyone was staring at her. They had no scenes for her to film and told her to come back tomorrow.

“Mama, it’s your turn,” Tres called from the floor. Marli looked down at the Chutes and Ladders board.

“Um, Mama has to go to the bathroom.” She stood from the sofa and walked off down the hallway and into the bathroom. As soon as she shut the door, Marli allowed the tears she was holding to flow freely down her face. Staring down at her phone, Marli read the email again. She was being fired from her job. The reality show made up half of her income.

“Marli, you good?” Max’s voice sounded from the other side of the door. Marli wiped her tears and flushed the empty toilet before opening the door.

“I’m okay. Just had to use the bathroom,” she lied.

“Why you crying then?” Max invaded her space.

“I... I...” Marli took a deep breath, allowing the words to leave her mouth. “I was fired,” she finally said.

“From the show?” Max was shocked. Marli nodded her head and held up her phone for Max to read. She really should have known this was coming after Max had been removed as a recurring guest. She had only been offered the show because she was Maximus’s baby mama.

“I’m sorry. This shit is all my fault.” He embraced her in a hug. Marli wrapped her arms around him and allowed her sobs to flow. She was vulnerable, and her judgment was cloudy. Being without a job was going to be an adjustment for her. Sure, she had her social media money, but that was sure to change, too, without her being on the show. Marli had enough savings to survive for a while, but she would have to budget better.

“Don’t trip, all right? I got y’all.” Max held her tighter. It felt strange; she and Max hadn’t had this type of interaction in years. Her hate and disdain for him seemed nonexistent at this moment. Maybe Tres’s accident had changed something in him. Maybe it was what Max needed, to grow up. Maybe they could move forward with a healthy co-parenting relationship.

“See, this why we need to keep me out of jail.” He pulled away from her, looking her in the face. “Peep this. My lawyer said if we hang out, post up family content and shit, the judge will probably lessen my charge. I could be looking at community service and a nice fine,” Max rambled off. Marli didn’t say anything. Her brain processed his words slowly. She had yet to figure out how she felt about Max going to jail. His negligence could have killed their son, but he was still the boys’ father. She wasn’t going to jump through hoops and pretend to be a big happy family to keep him from behind bars, though. He chose to leave a loaded gun out around their four-year-old boys; he needed to face the consequences of his actions. If that was jail, so be it.

“I was thinking we could post some family game night pics, and then tomorrow, we could go do something fun. If it’s cool with you, we can have the photographers come and catch some off guards.” Max had to be out of his mind. The more he talked, the more Marli cursed herself for bringing the boys to see him. Max had begged to see the boys. Now Marli was just realizing it was all a publicity stunt.

“You did all this so you won’t go to jail?” Marli asked, disgust settling on her face. “I pray they lock yo’ ass up!” She attempted to push past him.

“I’m just trying to—” Max went to speak, but a loud pounding on Max’s front door interrupted him.

“Who the...” Max exited the bathroom and stormed to the front door. Marli followed him. She wanted to get out of here. She was thinking about taking the boys to a hotel for the night and flying back home in the morning. Without work, and Max being on bullshit, she didn’t have a reason to be here. The loud knocking increased as they neared. Max swung the door open. Marli expected to see one of Max’s girls but was stunned when she saw Dru and two of the big bodyguards that sometimes accompanied him around.

“This little family night is over. Let’s go!” Dru’s eyes locked on Marli. He looked pissed and amused at the same time. Marli rubbed her eyes. Her

vision had to be deceiving her.

“Dru? What... are you doing... here?” She stumbled over her words. Her mind immediately thought the worst. Did something happen to her sister? She stared at him, trying to gauge the urgency of the situation, but she couldn’t.

“Are you pregnant?” Dru blurted. Marli choked on her spit.

“Pregnant!” Max’s head made a one-eighty-degree turn in Marli’s direction. Marli stared at Dru. She knew after seeing the blogs that he would be curious about her pregnancy, but she never thought he would show up at Max’s house. This was not how she wanted to tell him, but she couldn’t lie now.

“Yes.” Marli dropped her head.

“You pregnant?” Max moved toward her, leaving the door wide open for Dru to step inside.

“Is it mine?” That was the next question out of Dru’s mouth. Marli dropped her head.

“Yes.” Her voice cracked a little.

“You pregnant by this nigga?” Max approached her, his voice thundering, causing her to jump. Everything was happening too fast. Within a second, Dru had Max by his collar, dangling him in the air.

“Marli, get your shit. It’s time to go.” Dru directed his statement to her while still staring Max in the face. Marli was so taken aback she didn’t know what to do.

“Dru... I... go where...? I—”

“Frankly, I don’t want to hear none of that stuttering shit. The moment you found out you were carrying my seed should have been the moment you told me, not come yo’ ass down here trying to play house with yo’ sorry ass baby daddy,” he interrupted her. Marli looked toward the living room where the boys were still playing. She hoped they didn’t run in here and see this.

“The boys are here.” She spoke softly, trying to reason with Dru to stop the shenanigans. The look he gave her let her know he was beyond reasoning at this point.

“Good, bring them too. They don’t need to be around this careless ass nigga anyway. It’s unsafe.” Dru was way past being reasoned with.

“Fuck that. You not taking my kids, Marli!” Max shouted at her. Dru brought him closer to his face.

“You not in the position to say shit to her. Aye, put this nigga up until we leave,” he called out to Jake as he threw Max to the ground. Jake wasted no time picking Max up and tossing him over his shoulder.

“Aye! Y’all got me fucked up!” Max wailed his arms wildly, landing punches on Jake’s back. Jake didn’t seem to be bothered by it though. He just carried Max down the hallway, opened the bathroom door, and threw him in.

“Let me handle this, baby mama. Go get your stuff.” Dru walked past her down the long hallway. He entered the bathroom, and the door shut behind him. Marli looked down the empty hallway mortified. She had never seen this side of Dru. There was commotion for a minute and then dead silence. The bathroom door opened, and Dru and Jake calmly walked down the hall and back to the foyer. What was happening? What had just happened?

“Dru, what the hell did you just do?”

“Don’t worry; his bitch ass still breathing. He just napping. Get the boys and let’s go!” Dru walked toward the front door as if she was just supposed to start moving at his command.

Marli stood there, anger rising inside her. She didn’t like being ordered around unless she was being fucked good. Dru knew that. She couldn’t be controlled. Yes, Dru had every right to be upset, but he was insane if he thought she was going with him after he’d barged in here like a damn gangster and ordered her out.

“Your feet not moving fast enough for me. Our plane waiting, baby,” Dru called from the door. Marli’s feet began to move, but she had no intention of going with Dru. She was going to grab her boys and her mom and get far away from both her baby daddies.

“What’s all the commotion...” Loretta came down the stairs. The moment she saw Dru, she stopped. Her eyes bounced to Marli.

“Oh, hey, Ms. Loretta. I was just coming to get Marli and the boys. I didn’t know you were here. You’re welcome to join,” Dru causally stated as if this whole thing was normal. Marli glanced at her mom. Surely, she would stop this mess—tell him that her daughter wasn’t about to be demanded around like a damn dog. Loretta’s eyes found hers again, and Marli saw amusement.

“Oh, baby, I was beginning to worry about you,” Loretta shouted playfully at Dru. “I’ll go pack the boys and my things.” She turned to go

back up the stairs. Marli's mouth fell open. Her mom wasn't going to be the voice of reason. Marli couldn't believe her mom was going along with this mess. Maybe everyone had lost their minds.

"Dru, we are not going with you. We can talk about this when I get back to Saint Louis," Marli tried to reason with him.

"Naw, we gon' talk about it now on the plane. You can grab your things or leave them, but you, baby mama, are coming with me." Dru started moving toward her. Marli took a step back. She was not going with this insane man.

"I'm ready. I'll get the boys." Loretta returned, carrying her and the boys' luggage. That had to be a record time for packing up three people.

"Ma, we not going with him. He is clearly out of his mind!" Marli shouted, still stepping backward as Dru approached her.

"Ant, go help Ms. Loretta!" Dru ordered one of the security guards, ignoring Marli completely. Both men moved to Loretta, grabbing the bags from her hands and carrying them down the stairs.

"Take her things out." Dru turned his attention back to her, the look in his eyes letting Marli know he meant business.

"Dru, have you lost your—" Marli didn't get to finish that sentence because Dru had lifted her bridal style and walked toward the door.

"Yeah, very much so. You got a baby by a boss nigga now. Let's go." Dru carried her out of the house. Under different circumstances, Marli's panties would be soaking wet by his aggressiveness, but she was angry and a little embarrassed. This man was carrying her out of this house like a damn baby.

"I think you just like me picking you up," Dru whispered in her ear. Now she was angry, embarrassed, and wet between her thighs. Marli pouted. She was upset at herself for reacting to him. She needed to say something; she couldn't go out like this.

"Just because I'm having your baby doesn't mean you can come and just kidnap me from places you don't like, Dru," she fussed.

"That's exactly what that means, baby mama." He grinned. They finally made it to the car. Dru slid her in the back seat before joining her.

"Your mom and the boys are in the other car. We need to talk." The tone in his voice was serious. Marli looked behind her at the black SUV that trailed behind them as they pulled off. Sighing, she surrendered the little

fight she was putting up. After all, she was relieved to be gone from Max's house.

"Are you going to be able to get out of filming tomorrow?" he asked. Marli looked out the window. With everything that had just happened, she forgot she'd been fired.

"Um... I don't have to... I was fired," she admitted. Dru stared at her for a minute before looking down at his phone.

"I just sent you ten thousand dollars." Dru looked up at her. Marli's eyes ballooned as she snatched her phone from her chest. Sure enough, there it was, the green money notification.

Dru sent you \$10,000.

"I'm gon' send you ten thousand dollars every day until you give birth," Dru said nonchalantly. Marli's mouth dropped open as she quickly punched in the numbers on her calculator app. *Is he crazy?* That was over two million dollars.

"It's just something so you ain't gotta be worried about finances while you figure shit out."

"Dru..."

"Don't overthink it. I'm not about to have you stressing over that job while you are carrying my baby," Dru announced. This was crazy, but Marli wasn't the type to return gifts.

"Thank you," she expressed. His sentiments were greatly appreciated. Marli stared at Dru. She didn't know what to say. She should probably tell him about the pregnancy since that was what he had come all this way for.

"I'm twelve weeks pregnant. That's about three months. I don't know what I'm having yet. I've suspected I was pregnant for about two months, but I just confirmed it yesterday," she rambled. Dru stared at her, nodding his head. He was taking in what she'd said.

"I'm only gon' ask you once... You one hundred percent sure this baby is mine?"

"Yes!" She touched his knee.

"You gon' be offended if I ask for a DNA test?" Dru stared at her, awaiting her response. Marli shook her head. Given their history, she wasn't taken aback at all. She would gladly give him a DNA test. Marli was proud that this time she knew exactly who her baby daddy was.

"There's a woman on the plane waiting to take a blood sample. It's one hundred percent safe for you and the baby, but if you not comfortable," his

hand touched hers, “we can wait.”

“No, it’s fine.” Marli would do whatever he needed to come to terms with it. She had nothing to hide.

“Aight!” Dru nodded. They sat in silence for a minute. Marli just looked out of the window. This was really her life. She was twenty-nine years old and pregnant with her third child.

“Is it only one baby? Have you seen it yet?” Dru broke the silence between them. Marli went to her phone and pulled up the ultrasound the clinic had texted her yesterday after her appointment.

“Yes, look.” She held up the ultrasound picture. Dru took the phone from her hand. He stared down at the picture. Taking his fingers, he zoomed in.

“Only one,” he mumbled to himself. “This the head?” He leaned over. Marli nodded.

“Yes, and the feet are here.” She pointed.

“This a whole lil baby!” Dru was ecstatic. “Have you told the boys?” The smile on his face was a good contrast to the mug that had been on his face when he’d barged into Max’s house.

“No, um, I was going to do it after the trip.”

“Can we do it together?” He continued staring down at the picture.

“Um... sure.” Marli smiled at his statement. She was glad he wanted to be a part of that conversation. Marli stared at Dru as he just sat there staring at the picture. The sight was filling her heart. This was unlike the first time she’d told him she was pregnant, in so many ways. Maybe this pregnancy would be good for them. Maybe this was the start of something different for the both of them.

FIFTEEN

Dru

My baby is perfect, Dru thought to himself as they pulled into the airport. He'd sent the ultrasound picture to himself, and now he just sat there staring at it. He felt a connection to the baby already. He knew it belonged to him. He could feel it. He was still going to get the DNA test, though, because he'd felt a connection with the boys, too, when Marli was pregnant, but he'd been wrong. Exiting the car, Dru held out his hand for Marli. The other SUV pulled up, and Ms. Loretta and the boys hopped out. Deuce took off running toward him.

"Uncle Dru!" he called, dapping him up. The twins called him uncle because that was what Iman and Imani called him. Nobody ever saw it necessary to correct them. Dru glanced up at Tres. He was attempting to run, but you could tell it was hard for him. The sight made Dru wish he would have done more than just put Max to sleep. His pussy ass deserved more for what he'd done to Tres. Quickly, he closed the space between them.

"Hey, what's up, Tres?" He reached him. "You need a lift?" Dru didn't wait for him to respond; he picked him up and threw him on his shoulders. Tres burst into giggles as Dru carried him toward the plane.

"Hey! Uncle Dru, I want to ride too!" Deuce begged. Dru didn't waste any time swooping him up too, securing him under his arm. He could hear Marli complaining from behind them, but he ignored it and kept heading up

the stairs to the plane. These were her kids, he understood that but she had no jurisdiction here as far as he was concerned.

“I got y’all some snacks.” He placed the boys in their seats.

“Yes!” Both boys shouted as he secured them in their seat belts.

“I’m gon’ put a movie on for y’all.” He tapped the screen, pulling up a superhero movie. The boys smiled as they stuffed the popcorn he’d given them in their mouths. Dru stood there staring at them for a minute. Tres and Deuce were the spitting image of their mother, but their hair and Tres’s gray eyes reminded Dru so much of him and Blue. The boys needed a real father figure in their life, not one that half ass watched them and treated their mother like trash. Now that he was going to be the father of their sibling, he would have to make sure they saw firsthand what a real man brought to the table.

“Ouch!” Marli’s scream made him get out of his head. Turning around, Dru spotted Marli sitting in the recliner chair up front getting her blood drawn for the DNA test. Walking toward her, he sat down in the adjoining chair. He appreciated her doing this. He wasn’t going to be a sitting duck this time, waiting around for confirmation. He trusted when she’d said the baby was his, but he still needed that piece of paper for his peace of mind.

“When can we expect the results to come back?” Dru asked the nurse he’d paid to give the DNA test.

“Within a week or two,” she responded as she placed the blood vial in a plastic bag. Dru nodded his head. Only five to fourteen days stood between him confirming if he was indeed going to be a father. As he settled in his seat, he glanced over at Marli as she talked to her mom. If he was for certain the father of her baby, there was no way he wasn’t going to go hard for her. Dru never intended on having only a baby mother.

It was late when the plane landed back in Saint Louis. Marli and the boys were still asleep. Dru and his bodyguards had carried them all off the plane and put them in the car. They were on the way to his house, but he’d been requested by Ms. Loretta to drop her off at home. Dru was glad she’d requested it, because he wanted to talk to her. He wasn’t expecting her to be at Max’s when he pulled up to get Marli and the boys. When he saw her, he

didn't know what her reaction would be, but seeing her offering him her full support was refreshing.

"In all my years of living, I've never been snatched out of somewhere that briskly." Ms. Loretta spoke, breaking the silence that had fallen between them. Dru smirked. He wouldn't consider Ms. Loretta willing to pack her and the boys' things in under ten minutes as being snatched, but he'd met her enough to know she was dramatic. Dru turned to her.

"I apologize for that, Ms. Loretta. You know with your daughter, you gotta make a scene to get her attention."

Ms. Loretta laughed. "Don't I know it. That girl is so stubborn. I don't know where I went wrong or right with that one."

Dru shook his head, humored. "She's a piece of work, Ms. Loretta, but you should be proud. She's strong and independent but still soft as silk. In all honesty, Ms. Loretta, I love her."

Ms. Loretta turned her head toward him. "Oh, I know you love her. Only a man in love does what you just did." She grinned. Dru couldn't help but laugh. Ms. Loretta had seen him at his most savage, and he only hoped it didn't deter her answer to what he had to ask her next.

"I don't know exactly when, Ms. Loretta, but I want to marry her." He paused to gauge her reaction. A comforted smirk appeared across her face, so he continued. "We got a lot of stuff to work out before then, like I gotta get her to be receptive to dating me, but I knew a long time ago Marli was the only woman I wanted forever with. I got a little off course holding on to some stubbornness of my own." Dru blew out a breath. "She's having my baby, and I have no intentions on only making her my baby mama. I just wanted you to know that."

Ms. Loretta nodded. "It'll happen. Just keep bossing her around. I think she liked it."

Dru burst into laughter. Marli liked it. Her vagina was omitting her sweet smells the entire plane ride home. Had the boys and Ms. Loretta not been present, he would have had her bent over and broken her back in.

"Marli has always been so determined to be different. I don't know if that came from being a twin or not. I know that she had the unfortunate experience of watching her sister accept less than she deserved from Jashaun. Maybe that made her fearful of it." She shrugged. "I'm sure you know the girls' father passed away when they were younger. I tried my best to make sure they felt loved... that they felt their dad's love, but I don't

think it was enough. All three of my girls have trouble when it comes to men and love. Be patient with her. Show her what love has to offer her. She'll come around, and you got my blessing when the time comes to marry her."

Dru was happy to hear she approved. Now he just had to get Marli on board. He thought about everything she'd said. It helped to shine a light on some of Marli's ways and some of his own. He and Marli both had daddy issues. Maybe they could heal that shit together. As pulled up to Ms. Loretta's home. He exited the car, rounding the rear to the passenger side door. He opened the door and escorted Ms. Loretta up to her front porch.

"Don't let up on her; she needs this. She needs you. My grand babies do too." She entered the house, and Dru took her bag inside just as his phone rang. It was Jake. With no hesitation, Dru answered his phone.

"Sup!"

"Dru, man, she's refusing to get out of the car and go inside. She trying to call an Uber and everything." Jake's voice sounded stressed, causing Dru to laugh as he swiped his hand across his head. This girl was going to be the reason his hairline receded. He knew Marli would protest going to his house, but at this point, she didn't have a choice. He wanted her in his sight, at least until they'd gotten the DNA results, though he wanted it to be longer. This would have been a lot easier if she would have stayed asleep.

"Aight, let me speak to her." Dru looked at Ms. Loretta as she stared on, amused.

"Um... she won't take the phone," Jake mumbled. Dru couldn't believe how she had a nigga as big as Jake mumbling and stuttering. She must have been showing her ass.

"Put it on speaker," Dru ordered. There was shuffling on the other end, and then he could hear heavy breathing. "Marli!" he called. She didn't say anything, but he knew she was listening.

"Take the boys and go inside. I'm dropping off yo' mom, and then I'll be there."

"I want to go home, Dru!" She screamed into the phone.

"You are home, baby mama," he joked, but the heavy breathing on the other end let him know she didn't find it at all funny.

"I'm not about to play with you, Dru... I..." Dru stopped listening to her rant because it didn't matter what she said. She wasn't leaving his house.

“Pick her ass up and take her inside. I’m about fifteen minutes away,” he directed to Jake. “We’ll discuss this all when I get there. Stop making a scene in front of the boys,” he told Marli.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” He heard Marli scream as the phone hung up. Dru wasted no time heading to the door. He needed to get there before Marli had his security quitting with her antics.

“I gotta go, Ms. Loretta. Thanks for the talk.” He embraced her in a hug.

“Don’t let up; go get yo’ family, baby!” Ms. Loretta shouted behind him as he ran down the stairs to his car.

“Next time I see you, I’ll be calling you mom.” Dru climbed into the driver’s seat. He didn’t have any time to waste. Marli wouldn’t stay in place much longer. In a matter of minutes, Marli, her heart, and his unborn child would be gone.

SIXTEEN

Marli

“Don’t touch me!” Marli swung her purse at Jake. If he thought his big ass was going to manhandle her, he thought wrong. She couldn’t believe she had slept the entire flight home or allowed someone to carry her off the plane. How could she be that tired and comfortable? When the car came to a stop, she first fluttered her eyes open to see that she wasn’t outside of her house. Ant was carrying the still sleeping boys up the long pathway to Dru’s home. As Jake approached her again, she swung her purse again; this time, she aimed for his head. She wanted to go home. She didn’t know why Dru had brought her and the boys to his house. He had to be out of his mind. First, he’d snatched her out of her baby daddy’s home, and now he was demanding her inside his. The entire thing was absurd. If this was what being pregnant by Dru was going to be like, she didn’t know what she was going to do. Despite her best efforts, Jake swooped her up out of the SUV and tossed her over his shoulder.

“Put me down! I can walk!” she pleaded as she hit him on the back of his head. Jake ignored her, carrying her into Dru’s large mansion and up the stairs. She took in her surroundings as they moved down the long hallway. She spotted Ant laying the boys in two twin-sized beds. She hadn’t remembered Dru having such a room the last time she was there, but that was years ago, and he did have a niece and nephew now. She was just glad the boys hadn’t seen her being carried through the house, kicking and

screaming. Once they reached the end of the hall, Jake's feet stopped moving. He opened the double door and tossed her inside before exiting.

Marli stood there for a minute before moving to the door. It wasn't locked. She could just get the boys and go, but it was late, and they were sleeping comfortably. She would stay out tonight, but first thing in the morning, she was going to get her boys and go home.

Stepping away from the door, she turned around, taking in her surroundings. She was in Dru's room. She knew because she'd been there before. Marli had half the mind to break up all his shit, but she decided against it. She had to co-parent with this man. Besides, she wasn't going to give him back the money he had just given her in damages. Plopping down on the bed, she stared up at the ceiling. The black ceiling mirror greeted her, causing her to smile. She'd helped Dru pick this out back when they used to mess around. *He kept it!* Her heart smiled and then frowned as she thought about all the pussy he'd probably gotten up under it. The wrestling of the door caused her to sit up. The scowl was still plastered on her face. Dru walked in, looking as beautiful as always. His demeanor sucked up all her restraint.

"Why am I here, Dru?" She greeted him.

"Because I want you to be." He closed the space between them. His smell hit her nostrils first, making it hard for her to remember why she was mad.

"I'm serious, Dru. I could have gone home."

"It's late; you and the boys were asleep. Besides, we got more to talk about." He walked over to the hamper and took off his shirt. Marli could barely concentrate as she watched his bare chest come into view. *You're mad at him*, she told herself.

"I agreed to take the test, but I never said I was going to stay here. I have a home and kids, Dru. The boys need to be at home in their own bed."

Dru removed his gun from his pants and took off his two-thousand-dollar jeans. "You finished?" he questioned. Marli didn't know what to say. He was standing there in only his boxers like everything was fine.

Her eyebrows bunched together, and her forehead wrinkled. "Umm... what you doing?" she asked.

"About to give you this dick; you're cranky." He moved toward her, shedding his boxers. Marli was speechless as she stared at a naked Dru. His body was a chiseled, tattooed masterpiece, and she wouldn't even get

started on his third leg. She couldn't find her voice, but her vagina was speaking loud and clear. Dru pushed his body against hers, his hand wrapping around her neck.

"Just so we are clear..." he whispered against her neck, "you aren't going anywhere any time soon. That seed growing inside you is mine. So, by default, so are you. You understand?" He snaked his other hand up her shirt, finding her swollen nipples. A subtle moan escaped Marli's lips.

"Um." She loved a reckless talking man. Damn, she couldn't resist him. Her mind didn't want her to give in, but her body was already dripping with anticipation of him penetrating her walls. Her mind was torn. Having sex with Dru would further complicate their relationship. She wanted to successfully co-parent their child and nothing else.

"Get on yo' knees, baby mama. I want to talk, and I need to make sure you are listening." His voice was low and demanding. Her eyes went to his, attempting to gauge his seriousness. The darkness in his eyes told her he meant business. She wanted to object, grab her sons and run out of there, but something inside of her had her obeying his demand. Effortlessly, she dropped to her knees. Her face lined up perfectly with his manhood. Her mouth watered as she gripped his dick in her hands. The first touch had her pussy throbbing. Parting her lips, Marli guided him inside her mouth. Dru was girthy, and anytime she sucked him, she struggled with opening her mouth wide enough to accommodate him. Sucking the head, she took both of her hands and stroked his shaft. Dru liked his head sloppy, and that was just what she was going to give him.

"Umm." She slurped. Dru's head fell back, and his hand latched onto her hair.

"You look so fucking pretty eating this dick, baby." He pushed into her mouth, forcing himself to the back of her throat. Marli welcomed the gagging feeling that was caused by the tip of his dick hitting her uvula. She loved when Dru fucked her mouth; it made her feel empowered. Dru snatched her head back, making her look up at him.

"I'm done playing these silly ass games with you, baby mama. I rather play with your pussy." He moved her head on and off his dick.

Her mouth was as wet as her pussy. She moved her head down further, attempting to swallow him whole.

"Fuck!" he moaned, thrusting into her mouth so hard she could feel it in her middle.

“I have no intentions of co-parenting with you, baby. You are mine. Have been for a long time. As far as I’m concerned, you are my woman, those my sons, and this y’all residence.” Dru’s words awakened the emotions she kept trying to bottle inside.

“I’m scared,” she breathed out onto his dick. It was the first time she’d admitted that to him. The idea of loving Dru and trusting him with her heart was frightening. As she stared up at him, his dick tickling her throat, her core throbbing, it was clear that she needed Dru. She needed Dru in every way possible.

“Ain’t nothing to be scared of, baby. We family now, and I got you.” Pulling her up, Dru wrapped her legs around his waist, bringing her face to his.

“I got you, always.” He kissed her lips as he carried her over to the bed. He wasted no time removing her pants and positioning himself at her entrance.

“Stay.” He breached her walls slowly. Marli’s heart swelled. His words seemed so final like she’d be committing to staying forever. At that moment, though, she didn’t care. Her head fell back from the way Dru was rocking into her. He felt extra good today. The pregnancy had made her walls more sensitive.

“Stay.” Dru thrust into her harder.

“I love this pregnant pussy.” He moaned as he pushed into her deeper.

Marli responded with a whimper as she wrapped her arms around his back. She needed him to dig deeper and deeper. The more he stroked into her, the more whole she felt. Her body was quaking around him. She could feel herself cumming hard for him.

“Ooh!” Tears pooled in her eyes. “I love...” She caught herself. “I love this dick!” Her eyes closed, and her legs trembled. This man was fucking her so good she’d almost admitted to herself and him that she loved him. She couldn’t do that. That would be breaking her biggest and only rule.

“One day, baby mama, you gon’ admit to loving the nigga it’s attached to, too.” He leaned back, gripping her neck.

“You gon’ stay, baby mama?” He was fucking her so hard the tears finally dropped from her eyes. She closed her eyes, attempting to avoid the question, but the feeling only ignited. He knew what he was doing. Picking up her leg, he placed it on his shoulder, going deeper than Marli knew was possible.

“Where you live at now, baby mama?” He grunted. Marli couldn’t resist it anymore.

“Here! I live here with you!” she yelled. Her pussy walls contracted. She felt like she’d cum four times in one orgasm.

“That’s fucking right! Because I already had the boys’ beds moved over here. I’ll have the rest of y’all stuff moved tomorrow.”

Wait! What? Marli didn’t have time to process or protest what he’d just said because in one swift motion, Dru had exited her, flipped her over on her belly, and reentered her.

“Fuck!” They both moaned in unison. Marli buried her head in the pillow. Good dick just made her commit to moving herself and her kids in with this man.

“Mama, when we go home?” Tres yelled as he waddled out of Dru’s swimming pool.

Marli nearly choked on her spit. They’d been at Dru’s for three days now and the boys hadn’t mentioned going home. They were too busy having fun. Dru’s house was massive. He had tons of things to do. She had to tell them something, but she was hoping for more time to figure out what to say.

She’d never even dated anyone she’d brought around the boys. Now here she was pregnant and uprooting them from their home. That had to be in the mom handbook as bad parenting. She was crazy for doing this and for the last couple of days, she’d been getting up intending to go home. Dru was relentless though, because every morning he ate her like a Christmas ham and delivered mind altering dick. Now here she was on day three, sitting on the side of the pool as Dru and the boys played tag in the water.

“Mama, is it time to go home?” Tres asked again. Marli looked down at his wet face and mess of curls sticking to it. She took a deep breath.

“You trying to leave me, lil dude?” Dru grabbed him from her lap and swung him in the air. Marli looked up. She’d never even noticed him get out of the water. Tres broke out in a fit of giggles as Dru tickled him. Marli smiled as she watched them. She loved how Dru interacted with the boys. Since they’d been there Dru had made sure to spend time with them each

day. He wanted them to feel comfortable was what he kept saying. It was a good contrast to what they'd experienced with Max. Maybe it would be good for them to have a male figure in the home with them. Marli looked on as the boys tussled. Deuce had now joined them. Their laughter radiated through the trees. Seeing how happy they were with him made her feel better about the move.

"It's time to tell them." Dru turned to her. He had both boys in his arms. Marli took a deep breath. She wasn't ready but she knew she had to tell them soon. This was life changing news. Dru wasn't going to let her out of it this time... She could see it in his eyes.

"Okay." It was a soft reply, and her heart was pounding in her chest. Dru sat down in the lawn chair next to hers. Tres crawled into her lap and Deuce got comfortable on Dru.

"Mommy and Dru have a special surprise to share with you," Marli started. The boys looked on with excitement written all over their faces.

"You two are going to be big brothers. Mommy and Dru are having a baby."

The boys looked at each other. Their faces wrinkled in confusion.

"A baby? What baby?" Deuce asked.

"Your little brother or sister. They're growing inside of my belly." Marli took Deuce's small hand and pressed it on her belly. Tres joined them. They were silent for a moment, processing the news.

"Are we going to have to share our room?" Deuce asked. Both Marli and Dru laughed.

"Naw, lil dude. I have plenty of rooms here. Everybody can have their own," Dru replied.

"At home, we only have two rooms." Deuce held up two fingers.

"Home is wherever we are together and right now..."

"Forever," Dru corrected. Marli rolled her eyes.

"This is our home," she finished.

"Uncle Dru's home is our new home?" Tres questioned. Marli nodded.

"Yeah, is that cool?" Dru held out his hand for the boys to give him a high five. Deuce and Tres both slapped his hand.

"Yes! We love your house. It's cool!" Deuce started the sentence and Tres finished it.

"It's your house now too, and you know what else?" Dru stood from the chair, placing Deuce on his feet.

“You're it!” He tapped Deuce on his shoulder and took off into the pool. The boys giggled as they ran off behind him.

“Hey, no running!”

Marli recognized the voice of Dru's mom instantly. She had a distinct Hispanic accent. Marli's head whipped around fast. Dru's mom always made her feel so uncomfortable. She wasn't rude or anything, but Marli knew she didn't care for her. Now that she knew how heartbroken Dru had been about the DNA of the boys she fully understood why. Ms. Natalie sashayed over to Marli and took the seat next to her.

“Hello, Ms. Natalie.”

“Hello, Marli, how are you?” Her greeting wasn't its usual cold tone. This time it was light and cherry.

“I'm doing okay, you?” Marli turned to Ms. Natalie. She was such a beautiful dark-skinned woman. At her age she was gorgeous. Marli could only imagine what she looked like in her prime.

“I'm just fine. You and Dru getting serious?” She raised her eyebrows. Marli didn't know how to respond, because she'd never had a conversation with a man's mother before. She didn't date. She didn't do family meetings. This was awkward, and she didn't know what to say. Marli had moved in but she and Dru weren't exactly in a relationship. She didn't know what to call it. She was having his baby, they lived together, and they had amazing sex. How did she say that to someone's mother? Especially when they already had a bad taste in their mouth about her.

“Ma, let me talk to you in the kitchen for a minute.” Dru came walking up out of nowhere again. Marli exhaled. He was right on time. Ms. Natalie stood to her feet and headed to the door.

“Sure.”

Dru leaned down and kissed Marli on the lips. It caught her off guard because they hadn't been physical around the boys.

“I'll be back, keep the boys busy,” he whispered before catching up with his mother. Marli touched her lips and nodded as she got up to move closer to the pool.

“Mama, you kissed Uncle Dru!” Deuce screamed. There was disgust and excitement in his voice.

“You love Uncle Dru?” Tres questioned. Marli didn't know how to respond. She did love him, but she couldn't admit that to her four-year-old sons. She couldn't even admit that to herself.

SEVENTEEN

Dru

“You two getting serious, mijo?”

“She lives here,” Dru replied as he and his mom walked into the kitchen. It was no point in beating around the bush. Marli, the boys, and the baby weren’t going anywhere anytime soon.

“Lives here? Whoa! That’s a big step, don’t you think, mijo?” Natalie moved to him. She took his face in her hands and stared at him intently.

“What’s wrong with you and your brother? He gets married. You move a woman and her sons into your home! Your home, mijo! Nobody consults me, their mother.” She pushed his face away playfully. Dru couldn’t help but laugh. He was expecting his mother’s dramatics. She wouldn’t be herself if she wasn’t being extra.

“I didn’t know I had to consult you, Ma. I’m grown.” He laughed as he moved to the refrigerator to grab a water. All that playing around with the boys had made him thirsty. Before he could take a sip, his mama had reached back and slapped him in the back of the head.

“Dang, Ma. What was that for?” He rubbed the back of his head as he turned around.

“Don’t play with me, boy. Grown my ass. You dated Janel for eight years and she didn’t move in. What makes you think you are ready to take on that girl and her kids?”

Dru swallowed his water. He understood her concerns, he still had some doubts himself, but he couldn't run from the feelings he had for Marli. It was never his intention to move her and the boys in, but somewhere on that flight back to St. Louis he got a feeling and went with it.

"Janel and I were never together, Ma."

"And you and Marli are?"

"Not exactly."

"What?"

Dru could tell she was confused. There was no clear way of telling his mom that he'd snatched Marli up and moved her into his house the same day. The shit sounded crazy in his head, so he knew it sounded crazy when spoken.

"Marli's pregnant, Ma." His mom stood there for a minute staring at him before moving to the barstool. She was mumbling about needing to sit down.

"A baby, mijo! Is it yours this time? Are you sure?"

"It's mine, DNA test confirmed it." He lied. He trusted Marli. She wouldn't go through all of this if there was a possibility that the baby wasn't his. He didn't need the DNA test anymore. He knew deep down this baby was his.

"What are you going to do, mijo? A baby with a woman like Marli." Ms. Natalie's eyes rolled. She didn't care for Marli after the whole paternity test thing. She didn't understand how someone could be careless enough to sleep with two men unprotected and get pregnant. Plus, Dru hadn't made it any better when he'd confided his hurt feelings to his mother. That was all in the past now and he only hoped his mama could get over it.

"Ma, I've already moved her in, and I hope to marry her one day. When we are both ready."

"This is a big jump, you just said y'all aren't even dating, mijo."

"I know, I'm kind of just going off a feeling here, Ma. I love her and her sons. I know you don't like her--"

"I never said I didn't like her, mijo," Natalie interrupted. "I just don't care for what she did. It hurt you."

"I get it, Ma, but I can't put all the blame on Marli. If I had stepped up long ago and made her my woman none of this would have happened. We were both playing games."

“And you won stupid prizes. I don’t know why you’ve been so content running around here with these women with no title, mijo.” Dru joined her at the counter. He sat on the stool across from her. He confided a lot of things in his mother but the hurt he held in his heart surrounding her and his dad he’d never told her about.

“Ma, seeing Dad cheat on you constantly kind of had me scared to commit to one woman. I never wanted to hurt someone the way you were hurt. I honestly don’t even know if I’ve forgiven him for hurting you. I’m terrified of fucking this up and hurting Marli and the boys, but I love that girl, those boys, and my unborn kid.” Dru dropped his head. It felt good to finally get that off his chest.

“Mijo, you have to forgive your father. You are not him. You are your own man. You were right for not getting serious until you were ready and I’m proud of you for that. If you love her, mijo, everything will be okay. I forgave your father and stayed in our marriage for you and your brother. The times were different then. Know this, mijo. If you cheat on that girl... She is not the type that’s gon’ stay around. I can already see that.”

“I know, Ma.” Dru smirked. Marli would make his chest hurt if he cheated on her. “To be honest, I don’t have any desire for anyone else. Marli is it for me.”

“Then go with that, mijo. I’m so proud of you. It takes a big person to raise someone else’s children.” Natalie stood from her stool and rounded the counter. She embraced Dru with open arms. Dru knew his mother understood. She’d been there and done that.

“Go get her and the boys so I can officially be introduced.” She shooed him. Dru smiled as he walked outside and called Marli and the boys. The boys appeared at the door first then Marli. Dru didn’t get to say anything before his mother wrapped Marli into a hug. The look on Marli’s face showed the affection caught her off guard at first, but she welcomed it. The two women whispered something to each other before Marli turned to the boys.

“Deuce and Tres this is your grandma Natalie,” Marli introduced. Now Dru was caught off guard. He smiled at the scene in front of him. The introduction was fitting. He had two sons now he just needed to get their mother on board, and they’d officially be a family. He had a feeling that he was finally wearing her down.

EIGHTEEN

Marli

The morning sun peeked through the curtains as Marli's eyes slowly popped open. She stretched her arms and legs in the warmth of Dru's soft bed. Everything was so bright and cheery at Dru's house, including the birds that seemed to live outside his bedroom window. It had only been a week since she'd moved in, but she didn't think she would ever get used to it. Blackout curtains and earplugs were on her list of things to buy for her new residence. She let out a sigh. She was grateful for Dru and all he'd done to make her and the boys comfortable in his home. She was crazy for moving in with a man she wasn't even in a relationship with, but it just felt right. She'd done worse things in her twenty-nine years of life. She rolled over to glance at the time. The brightness outside was telling her it was later than the boys normally let her sleep, but when she turned to her side, she saw something that made her heart skip a beat.

On her nightstand, there were several designer gift bags. On the floor, there lay multiple large beautifully wrapped white gift boxes. There was a note lying on top of one. Marli grabbed it. Her eyes scanned over the words.

Good morning babymama,

Happy Sneaky-link Anniversary! From sneaky link to baby mama. It's the classic ghetto love story. I got you some things to make your transition back to full-time content creator a bit easier.

PS: the boys are at Blue and Kay's.

-Dru

Confused and surprised, Marli's eyes widened as she realized that today was indeed the anniversary of the day, five years ago, that they'd upgraded from just fucking sometimes to being official sneaky links. She quickly sat up and grabbed the first gift. Gifts and acts of service were her love languages. She couldn't wait to unwrap them. Savagely, she tore through the paper, unwrapping it to reveal a blinged-out necklace with a heart-shaped pendant. Tears welled up in her eyes as she read the engraving on the back of the pendant. *A heart for my heart.*

Overwhelmed with emotions, Marli opened the rest of the gifts, finding a bouquet of forever roses, a box of chocolates, and a ton of filming equipment. Everything she needed to record her content was there. She couldn't believe how thoughtful and sweet Dru was. A few days ago, he'd asked her what she wanted to do now that she was no longer on *Hip Hop in Love*. Marli had responded with focus fully on being a content creator again. She'd made good money doing it full time before, so she had no problem continuing. The fact that Dru had listened and purchased her all this equipment was so thoughtful.

"Good morning, baby mama." Dru entered the room with a proud grin on his face. He neared where she was standing and pulled her into a warm embrace. Marli hugged him back tightly as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Thank you." She cried. She was feeling grateful for his love and affection, he was making her believe every day that she had nothing to fear when it came to loving him. She truly felt safe and at home with him.

"You deserve it. I told you, you're pregnant by a boss nigga now." He smiled at her, and Marli couldn't help but blush. She didn't know whether it was her pregnancy hormones or not, but her pussy was throbbing, and the need to pleasure Dru took over. She began to slowly ease to her knees to thank him but was stopped by his hands on her arms.

"Hold on, girl! Later." He kissed her forehead.

Her mouth poked out in a pout as her middle craved him. "Please?" she begged. Dru looked conflicted for a second but slowly pushed her away.

"Man, get dressed. Sue made breakfast." Dru smacked her on the ass while biting his lip before leaving the room. Marli was a little disappointed, but she headed to the bathroom to get ready for the day.

After taking care of her hygiene and dressing in a cute three-piece chill set, she joined Dru downstairs in the kitchen for breakfast. Dru's private

chef, Sue, had fixed them the works, complete with pancakes, sausage, and omelets. Marli sat at the candle-lit table, eyeing Dru. Everything was so beautiful, and for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why he'd done all this for her.

"This is so beautiful, Dru." She took a bite, but the first bite made her stomach instantly turn. Getting up from the table, she ran to the bathroom, releasing the eggs down the toilet. The soft gentle strokes of Dru's hand on her back as he held her hair out of her face was so comforting.

"Our baby doesn't like eggs, noted." Dru helped her up from in front of the toilet.

"I'm sorry." She moved around him to rinse her mouth.

"You good. My baby a picky eater; it's cool." He led her out of the bathroom and back to the table, pulling her chair out for her and making sure she was comfortable before taking his seat at the other end of the table. Marli was glad Sue had exchanged her first plate with a plate of fresh fruit. The rest of breakfast, they sat enjoying each other's company as they reminisced. Dru even admitted how not talking to her for four years was the hardest thing he'd ever done. Marli couldn't help but feel overwhelmed with love and gratitude as she looked across the table at him. This pregnancy was making her soft, because all she could think about was how amazing Dru was. Since he'd found out about the baby, he had never failed to surprise and pamper her. His support was making this pregnancy so smooth. She was thankful to be experiencing pregnancy without the possibility of two baby daddies. It was refreshing. As they finished breakfast, Dru handed Marli one last gift. It was a tiny box neatly wrapped with a gold bow. She was nervous to open it, scared of what it might be. The box was reminiscent of a ring box.

"Dru... I can't... you... um, you've already done enough." She attempted to pass the box back across the table. Dru stood from the table and made his way toward her. Her heart sped up. *Is this a proposal?* Dru lowered himself to the ground. Marli looked around the room. Sue was looking on, amused.

"Marli," Dru took her hand. "Will you move in with me officially and be my live-in baby mama?" Dru opened the box, revealing a gold key. Marli sighed in relief as she stared at the door key. Picking up the key, she read the engraving.

Live in pussy, eighteen to life.

The caption had her smirking hard. Sue ran over and swatted at Dru with a spatula.

“You play too damn much, boy. I thought I was witnessing a beautiful moment!” she fussed. Dru and Marli burst into laughter as they embraced.

“Let me know when you ready, baby mama. And I’ll upgrade yo’ title to wifey.” He kissed her lips just as both their phones rang. Dru sighed.

“I gotta take this. I’ll be at the studio today with Money. Pull up for lunch?”

Marli nodded as she took out her phone. It was Erica. She was happy to see her best friend calling. They hadn’t talked since she’d been on her way to the clinic to find out if she was pregnant. That was over a week ago. It wasn’t on purpose or anything, but she’d been busy with the many transitions her life was taking this week. As Dru exited the house, yelling at whoever was on the phone, Marli swiped to connect the call.

“I know damn well you didn’t move without telling me! ’Cause why am I standing in your half-empty condo.” Erica’s voice thundered through the phone. Marli couldn’t help the smirk that came across her face as her best friend’s beautiful chocolate face came across the screen. She was indeed standing in her empty condo. Marli hadn’t told anyone but her sister about the move yet, and Kay only knew because Marli had called to curse her ass out for snitching to Dru about her pregnancy.

“That’s what you get for popping up unannounced.” She giggled. Erica rolled her neck, causing her bob to swing in the camera.

“I was trying to surprise my bestie, but I guess the surprise was on me.” Erica paced back and forth through the empty apartment, the sound of her heels bouncing off the empty walls. It wasn’t strange that she had let herself in. Marli had given Erica a key when she’d first moved in, six years ago.

“My bad. It was a quick move.” Marli chuckled.

“Quick... huh.” She stared past her at her background. “Where are you? It looks nice.”

Marli didn’t answer her. She knew Erica would drag it. This news would have to be given in person. Exiting the call for a second, Marli texted her Dru’s address. Erica spent a lot of her time away for work, and she couldn’t wait to see her.

“I’ll send you the address,” Marli replied.

“Um huh. I’m gon’ downgrade yo’ secretive ass to associate. I find out more of your business on Hollywood Tearoom,” she mumbled as she

walked toward the door.

“Girl, just bring yo’ ass. I got a lot of tea.”

“Oh, let me hurry up. I’ll see you in... thirty.” She disconnected the call. Marli stood from the table and walked back to the bedroom. She wanted to move some of the equipment that Dru had brought her into the spare room where she would be making her office. Maybe she could have Erica help her set it up. A dinging on her phone caused her to stop and check it. Seeing it was an email from the DNA company, she quickly clicked it. She already knew the results, but she was still dying with anticipation. Clicking the link in the email, she signed into the online portal to view the results. She was surprised to see the results of the boys’ test also in the portal. They hadn’t had this fancy portal the first time. Plus, last time, Janel had handled everything. By passing the boys’ test, she clicked on the most recent one. A smile immediately crossed her face as she read that Dru was one hundred percent the father of the baby she was carrying. She screenshotted the results and then swiped out the screen. Just because, she scrolled up to the boys’ test and clicked the link.

Instantly, Marli stood frozen, her phone shaking in her hands. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Deuce and Tres weren’t related to Max. The man she thought was their father for the last four years wasn’t. As she stared down at the test, she marveled over Dru’s name. He was their father. How could this be possible? She had always suspected that something was off. Tres had gray eyes. She’d seen the results though... still had them saved on her phone. Pulling up her original results, she went back and forth, comparing the two tests. They said two completely different things. As the reality of the situation set in, Marli felt a wave of emotions wash over her. Shock, anger, betrayal, and confusion all mixed in her mind. She couldn’t even begin to process how this could have happened. Was this a mistake of the medical professionals? Tears streamed down her face as she thought about Dru and how heartbroken he’d been that the boys were not his. Now, she was staring at paperwork that said otherwise.

“Oh my God!” She gasped. Her heart ached for her children, but she knew she had to be strong for her boys. She would do whatever it took to make sure they were okay and to get to the bottom of this mix-up. The doorbell rang, and Marli was still frozen in place on the stairs. Sue opened the door, revealing Erica. Marli took a deep breath and wiped away her tears. She would find the answers she needed and make things right for her

family. And no matter what, she would always love and support Deuce and Tres, no matter who their biological father turned out to be.

“Dru’s house!” Erica yelled as she rounded the spiral staircase. Her voice was happy and cheerful before Marli came into view. She looked on, confused, moving up the remaining stairs, two at a time to get to Marli.

“What happened, bestie? Why are you crying?”

Marli didn’t say anything. She just turned her phone around and shoved it into Erica’s face. She watched as Erica read the boys’ paternity test results. Erica’s hand flew up to her mouth.

“Oh, bestie!” She squealed as she joined Marli on the floor, wrapping her arms around her.

“Dru’s their daddy... Dru is Tres and Deuce’s daddy!” Marli cried into Erica’s arms.

NINETEEN

Dru

“What the fuck?” Dru blurted, his eyebrows bunched up as he stared down at the DNA test that Marli had just sent him. Nothing could have prepared him for what he was looking at. There it was, in black and white, the very results that would change his entire life. He swiped in between Marli’s unborn child’s, Deuce’s, and Tres’s tests, all three saying the same thing.

The alleged father is not excluded as the biological father of the tested child. Based on the testing results obtained from analyses of the DNA loci listed, the probability of paternity is 99.9998%.

How could this be happening? Dru rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

“You good, boss man?” Money asked from across the boardroom table. Looking up from his phone, he noticed all eyes were on him as he held Money’s album cover art in one hand and his phone in the other. His heart was thumping loudly in his chest. *Deuce and Tres were his?* He was confused. Dru had been in the middle of a listening meeting for YFN Money’s tenth studio album when Marli had sent the pictures with no explanation.

“Boss man?” Money called again, but Dru ignored him. Quickly, he stood from the table and exited the conference room. He needed to confirm what he was seeing. He thought to call Marli but decided to call the number listed on the top of the DNA test results instead. He needed confirmation.

“Saint Louis Lab Services.” A man answered the phone.

“Yes, my name is Dru Willis. I am calling to verify the results of a DNA test.”

“Can I have your social security number?” the man requested. Dru rattled off his social as he paced back and forth in his office.

“Sir, it looks like we have three test results for you. Can you give me the year on which test you wish to verify?”

“If you don’t mind, I need all three.” He might as well kill three birds with one stone.

“OK, give me a second to pull them up.”

Dru made it to his office. He rounded his desk and had a seat in his black office chair. Four years ago, he’d been adamant that the boys were his. When the test results came back that they weren’t, he didn’t question it. He never asked to see the tests. He trusted that Marli wouldn’t lie about this type of thing.

“Sir, it looks like you are 99.9998 percent the father of all three children in question. Would you like me to send it to the email address on file?”

“Yes, please.” Dru couldn’t begin to process how this happened. Could there have been a mix-up in the lab? He didn’t know what to think.

“Umm, we have two emails on file for you, sir—a Druwillis824 and a Janelb713. Which one would you like me to send the results to?”

Dru was silent for a minute. Why would Janel’s email be on file? When he’d taken the test four years ago, he billed it through Eight24. Janel was still his secretary then, but that didn’t explain why her personal email was on the account.

“You can email it to Druwillis824; the other one is not valid,” he informed the man on the other end of the phone. “Aye, man, can I ask you something?” Dru pinched his nose.

“Yes, sir.”

“Are these the only results on file for me? There are no duplicate copies? You sure that these are one hundred percent accurate? They haven’t been changed?” Dru was trying to make sure he covered all his bases.

“No, sir. These are your original test results. I’m one hundred percent positive.”

Things were starting to add up in his head. Dru leaned back in his chair.

“One last thing... Can you tell me the date the original test was emailed, and which address was used?”

“Sure. Looks like it was sent February twenty fourth to the Janelb address.” The man confirmed what Dru had already suspected. Janel had switched the tests. He knew Janel wasn’t thrilled about him fathering Marli’s babies, but he never thought she’d do anything this drastic. Dru’s body stilled.

“Okay, thank you,” he replied.

“No problem, sir. I’m sending the email over now.”

“Have a good one.” Dru disconnected the call. He was still for a minute, a thousand emotions flooding him all at once. The weight of the world seemed to lift and be placed on his shoulders all at one time. His phone chimed with the email notification from the testing center. Dru clicked it. Sure enough, they were the same tests from before. Dru could barely think. He had two sons, two four-year-old boys who needed him. Exiting the office, he walked mechanically to the front of the building. He thought about driving, but his emotions were all over the place.

Dru had prided himself on being able to read people and judge their character. It was one of the things his dad and the streets had taught him. So how had he missed this? How was Janel able to switch the tests right under his nose and not be detected? Dru made it outside the building as the car pulled around. He didn’t usually put his hands on women, but he was going to fuck Janel up. Dru slid inside the back of the SUV, anger pouring from his pipes.

“Where to, boss?” his driver asked.

“Janel’s house.” He glanced down at his phone, staring at the DNA results once more. The boys were his. He still couldn’t wrap his head around it. He wanted to call Marli, but he wanted to get all the facts before he spoke with her. It didn’t take long for them to get to Janel’s house. She lived close to the office. The car couldn’t even get into park good before he hopped out and rushed to the front door. Before he could ring the doorbell, Janel swung the door open, wearing a huge smile. She was dressed in only a robe.

“I knew you would be bac—”

She couldn't finish her sentence because Dru had grabbed hold of her neck and pushed her inside her home. He shut the door behind him.

"Ooh! I missed you too," Janel sang as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Tell me you ain't swap the DNA test, J."

Janel's eyes bulged, and all the color drained from her skin.

"Dru, I... can explain."

"Explain how you changed the course of my fucking life, Janel! Marli's life, the boys' lives! What the fuck was you thinking?"

"I just wanted you to choose me... I just wanted you." Janel whimpered. Dru dropped her to the ground. The reality of what she'd said set in. Janel had done all of this so they could be together. He stared at her. He didn't know who she was. She didn't even look the same.

"I thought if you weren't the father, you'd move on. I had to give us a fair chance. Those boys being yours would have killed my chance... our chance." Janel was in tears, but she meant every word she spoke. She really believed that she'd done the right thing.

Dru couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had missed out on four years of his sons' most precious moments because Janel had caught feelings.

"Do you know how hard it is to be soul tied to someone who's not soul tied to you?" Janel approached him, but Dru pushed her away. He didn't want to hear that shit. There was nothing she could say or do that justified this. For the first time, he was seeing the monster he had created. Dru wasn't insensitive enough to think that he'd done nothing to cause this. He fully understood his role in all this madness. Dru had never led Janel on, but he had taken advantage of her. He knew that it was dangerous to lay down with the same woman for eight years and both get up without feelings. He knew many years ago that Janel was in love with him. He should have stopped seeing her. The more he stared at her, the worse he felt about the whole thing. It didn't negate what she'd done, but he understood her motivation.

"You left the door unlocked for a nigga, huh?" The sound of Max's voice and the front door swinging open caused Dru to snap his head in the direction of the door. *Max?* Dru thought to himself as his eyes bounced in between the two of them.

“What the fuck is he doing here, bae? I thought y’all was done for real this time, Janel!” Max shouted. Janel was speechless. Hearing him refer to her as ‘bae’ had Dru’s head spinning. He knew that Janel was fucking other people—he had encouraged it, but Max? That was a new development. It made sense, though, given Janel’s constant hate for Marli. As he stared at the two of them, a lightbulb went off in his head, and rage filled his eyes.

“Y’all muthafuckers planned this?” He started walking up to Max.

“Yeah, nigga, I fucked both yo’ bitches. They both chose me.” Max tapped his chest as if he was proud. Dru laughed as he approached him slowly, connecting his fist to his face.

“Bitch, I play about a lot of shit but my seeds!” Dru grabbed his gun from his pants and aimed it at Max.

“Fuck you and yo’ seeds, nigga. You better stay away from mine though.” Max pulled his gun in rebuttal. Dru wanted to blow his brains out for referring to his boys as his, but it dawned on him that either Max was delusional, or he wasn’t aware of what Janel had done.

“He knows? Did y’all plan this, Janel!” Dru’s voice thundered. Janel’s sobs deepened as she folded her arms around her body. She looked so innocent, so harmless, but Dru now knew otherwise.

“No, please don’t say anything. He is all I got left... since you don’t want me!” She cried. She was clearly out of her mind. Dru was starting to think that she may need a mental institution.

“What the fuck you talking about, planned?” Max questioned. Dru lowered his gun and turned to Janel. He wasn’t worried about Max shooting him. He was a bitch that had probably never shot a gun before. He could tell by how he was standing there holding it sideways.

“Tell him,” Dru demanded.

“What he talking about, Janel?” Max yelled.

Janel fell to the floor, sobbing. “I’m sorry... I... I...” She couldn’t form the words through her tears. Dru didn’t have time for this. Quickly, he took out his phone and showed the DNA test to Max. Max moved closer, squinting his eyes as he stared at the screen. Dru watched as anger, sadness, and confusion displayed across his face. His gun lowered.

“Move that fake shit out my face! How you get a test with yo’ name on it claiming my kids? What the fuck is going on?” Max was confused, but Dru was about to shed some light.

“I’m sorry.” Janel whimpered again. “I switched the test... The one Marli received was photoshopped, and it came from a fake email address.”

Dru shook his head at the lengths Janel had gone through to pass on this lie with hopes of them being together.

“You did what, bitch?” Max attempted to rush her, but Dru jumped in between them. Janel was wrong, but he didn’t condone violence against women.

“She switched the tests, man. The boys are my kids.” Dru patted him on the shoulder. Dru didn’t fuck with Max, but finding out two kids you’d believed was yours for four years weren’t, had to be hard. Dru’s heart went out to him.

“Man, fuck you, fuck her, and that bullshit ass test. Those my boys.” Max’s voice thundered as he turned and exited the house. Dru wanted to go after him. This was a lot for everybody, but he decided against it. Maybe alone time to sit and think would do Max some good. He turned to Janel. She had all but fallen apart on her living room floor.

“I hope you can sleep at night knowing you deprived two little boys of knowing their biological father. You changed the course of all our lives forever.” He stared down at her. His words were laced with hate and disgust. “You better hope that my sons don’t have permanent damage for this stupid shit.”

“I’m so sorry!” She cried, grabbing onto his legs and wrapping her arms around his ankles.

“Know that a nigga should and could wring yo’ fucking neck, but I... I had a hand in you losing yo’ damn mind. So I’ll let you breathe. Let this be a lesson to you, J. If a nigga make it clear that he doesn’t want you, no amount of scheming, sex, tears, or ultimatums will make him change his mind.” Dru kicked her off his legs.

“Don’t come around me, my place of business, or nothing. I won’t give your foul ass this same grace again. I hope you understand me.” He turned and walked away.

“Oh, and I hope you had a savings because the bank of Dru is closed.” He was glad that they’d never officially decided on a number for severance pay. Dru had planned to wire her a million dollars and fund her start, but that wasn’t happening now.

“I don’t have anything or anyone. All I want is you!” she pleaded. Dru blew out a deep breath. The love he had for Janel wouldn’t let him leave her

like this, even after all that had just been exposed.

“You need help, J. I’ll have someone here in the morning.” It was clear that she needed mental help. That was the least he could do, and some people would consider that too much after all she’d done. Dru exited Janel’s house without looking back. He had to get away from her. If he stayed in her presence any longer, there was no telling what he would have done. Sliding into the back of the car, Dru looked up at Janel’s house. He knew, this time, he wouldn’t be back. The chapter was officially closed.

“Where to, boss?”

“My brother’s house. I need to see my sons.”

“Sup, nigga? I thought you said that y’all was going to pick up the boys tomorrow?” Blue questioned as he opened the door. Dru responded by handing his brother his phone with the DNA results pulled up. He could hear Blue gasp and then call his name, but he had tunnel vision. He wanted to see his sons. He needed it more than anything else in the world. He moved briskly up the stairs to where he’d heard the kids playing. They must have been in Iman and Imani’s playroom. As he got closer, his thoughts ranged in topic, but the one he’d settled on was Tres’s gray eyes. He should have known. That should have been a dead giveaway that something wasn’t right. Marli’s eyes weren’t that color nor were Max’s. It was a trait that his father passed down. His grandfather had them, his dad, Blue, Imani, and now Tres. He felt stupid for not pushing the issue.

The closer he got to the playroom, the louder the sound of laughter became. His hands trembled, and his forehead began to sweat. Dru had never been so nervous in his life. He had seen and talked to Duce and Tres plenty of times, but this was different. They were his sons. They shared his blood. He didn’t remember reaching the door or swinging it open. It all happened so fast. The boys were playing with dinosaurs and running around the room with Iman and Imani; it all stopped the moment he entered.

“Uncle Dru!” They all yelled in unison, running to him. Dru hugged his niece and nephew first before dropping to his knees and embracing Deuce and Tres. As he held them, he couldn’t hold back the tears that poured from his eyes. Dru didn’t cry. He always had control. It was one of the things he

prided himself on, but he couldn't control this. Everything he'd missed in the boys' lives flooded his brain. He had missed their first steps, their first words. He didn't get to read to them at night. His heart swelled as he felt a wave of love wash over him. He was grateful for the relationship he had with them, but it was one of an uncle, not a father, and that had him holding on to them, sobbing silently. A soft hand touched him on the shoulder. When he looked up, he noticed it was Marli.

"I'm so... sorry!" Her voice was soft. Her eyes were puffy, and her cheeks were red from crying.

"It's not your fault," he replied as he waved her over. He had texted her in the car on the way over to meet him there. He knew that she had so many questions, but he wanted to tell her in person. Marli let go of her friend Erica's hand and moved to her knees. Marli wrapped her arms around Dru and the boys and allowed the tears to flow. The boys looked confused, but they just held onto him.

"It okay, Uncle Dru." Tres patted his back.

"It okay, Mama!" Deuce patted Marli's back. This was a lot. Dru didn't know how they would tell them he was their real dad. He and Marli would have to sit down and come up with the right place and time, and he only hoped they would accept him and understand.

"What is happening, mijó?" Dru heard his mother's question. Someone must have filled her in because before long, she had joined them, sobbing on the floor.

"My nietos! My grandbabies!" Natalie cried. Everyone around them—Blue, Kay, and Erica—looked on with tear-filled eyes. Nothing needed to be said; they all deserved this cry. It was a happy one, a dream come true. Dru couldn't wait to finally be a part of their lives. He had missed out on so much. He would make up for it, though. He was going to be the best father to them that he could be, and he would love them unconditionally. He already did.

TWENTY

Two Months Later
Marli

“Wow.” Marli spoke under her breath as she sat inside the crowded courtroom. The judge had just read Max’s verdict. He would spend five years in prison for Class B child endangerment. Marli wasn’t quite satisfied with the verdict because with good behavior, he only had to serve sixteen months in prison. A year and four months for nearly killing her baby boy. The judge had given him a deal for turning in the other person who was present at the time of the shooting, Janel. Marli couldn’t believe that Janel and Max had been fooling around. Honestly, she didn’t know Janel had it in her to fuck anybody but Dru. The fact she was fucking Max only showed her obsession with Marli. The night Tres was shot, she had been there that day. It had been exactly what Marli had said. Max and Janel were in the back room having sex and had left Deuce and Tres unattended around Max’s loaded gun. Janel had her day in court last week and was sentenced to only three years in prison. Again, Marli wasn’t pleased with the verdict, but there was nothing more that she could do. Her son was alive, and the people who were responsible for his accident were facing some sort of justice. For that, she was grateful.

At the beginning of the investigation, Max claimed that he was alone and that the boys had got into the closet where he kept his gun, put away. He was trying to protect Janel, but it seemed that after learning that she’d

switched the DNA tests, he changed his story. Max had been hurt by the discovery. The day he'd found out, he showed up to Marli's old condo. When he discovered it empty, he flipped out, calling her and blowing up her phone. It had taken him weeks and a lot of help from Dru and Blue to calm down. Dru had been talking to Max more than she was these days. He said it was men business, so she stayed out of it. Marli had only spoken to Max to dissolve paternity.

The trial had been a difficult experience for her, but she was lucky she didn't have to testify and that Dru had accompanied her both days. She hated having to relive the details of Tres's incident repeatedly in front of a courtroom full of people, but at least it had shed some clarity on the situation. It had been refreshing to see Max take responsibility and apologize. She didn't believe that Max was a bad person, but he was childish, and his judgment was off. Maybe this time in jail would do him some good. The judge's gavel sounded, and Marli took a deep breath before standing up. Her feet led her to where Max was being handcuffed and detained. She never let go of Dru's hand. As she approached him, she didn't know what to say. Everything had been so complicated over the last two months.

"I deserve this." Max spoke the first word.

"You do, even longer," Marli responded. Max's head dropped.

"I'll take that. I was careless." He looked between Dru and Marli.

"Check it. I still want to be in the boys' lives. They yo' sons, I get that, but I built a bond with them lil niggas. I love them. I can't even picture my life without them, for real."

Marli thought about what he was saying. She and Dru had been discussing the proper way to explain everything to the boys. They'd discussed Max's place in their lives, and they both decided that snatching him away abruptly would do more damage than good.

"We can arrange that. It'll make it easier for the boys," Marli replied.

Max looked up at her and smiled. "Thank you."

"I have something for you. I'll give it to your mom. It's exactly what we discussed." Dru held up a check for five hundred thousand dollars. It was all the money Max had paid Marli in child support, minus therapy for Tres. Marli didn't think it was necessary, but Dru insisted, talking about he didn't need another man to take care of his kids. Max nodded.

“Right on,” was all he got to say before Ms. Woodard pulled him into her arms. Marli and Dru didn’t stay around to watch their embrace.

“Let’s go home. I can’t wait to get yo’ fine ass out of that dress,” Dru whispered in her ear, causing Marli to giggle. She couldn’t wait to get out of the tight midi-dress either, but for different reasons. Their unborn child had her hot, and her feet were swelling in the expensive heels she had on, but Marli refused to miss an opportunity to give the cameras a look. Hollywood Tearoom was going to post her, and she wasn’t going to be caught slipping. Marli and Dru turned to walk out of the courtroom, the bright sunlight and press swarming them. She took a deep breath as Dru’s security surrounded them.

“No statements, no comments!” they shouted as they moved down the stairs.

“Marli!” Ms. Woodard called to them as they made it to the car. The security parted to let her through. Without words, she and Marli embraced in a hug. Marli felt for her. Watching her only son go to jail after finding out that her only grandchildren weren’t biologically hers had to be a lot.

“This is for you. Max wants you to hold it for him.” Dru handed her the check. Ms. Woodard looked on, confused, reluctant as to what Dru was handing her.

“It’s the refund of his child support for the twins.” Dru clarified. Ms. Woodard took the check, unfolding it to read the numbers. Her eyes bulged at the amount, and she quickly tucked it inside her bra.

“You got a good man here, Marli.” Ms. Woodard embraced Dru in a hug.

“He a little bossy, but he all right,” Marli joked, staring up at Dru. She didn’t know when it happened, but she seemed to have found herself in a relationship with Dru. They had never officially confirmed anything, but they both knew what it was.

“You like this bossy shi...” Dru replied as Marli hit him in the arm. Ms. Woodard laughed.

“Love looks good on you.”

Marli’s body stilled. She and Dru still hadn’t exchanged those words. She felt it, but she was still too scared to admit it. Marli moved closer to the car. They had been standing out here feeding the press long enough.

“Can I still expect the boys on Saturday?” Ms. Woodard asked. Marli nodded her head.

“Of course. They’ll be there around eleven o’clock,” she replied. She had told Ms. Woodard a thousand times that she was still the boys’ grandma. No DNA test would change that. The boys loved Ms. Woodard, and she loved them. Marli was glad, because her sons hadn’t lost anyone in all this craziness. They had only gained a better father in Dru and a loving grandmother in Ms. Natalie. It gave her hope that her boys would be all right.

“Hurry up and get in the car. Roll that dress up too,” Dru stated as they climbed into the back of the SUV. Marli did as she was told, revealing that she wasn’t wearing any panties.

“Bring yo’ hot ass over here and ride yo’ dick.” Dru slapped her on the ass. Marli threw her leg over Dru’s lap so that her back was facing him. It was the only way she could ride him with her growing baby bump.

“That’s right.” Dru entered her from the bottom. Her body filled with pleasure as her walls relaxed and adjusted to the size of him. Marli didn’t think that she would ever get use to the feeling of him inside her. Every time Dru’s massive dick felt like he was stretching her, Marli gripped the seat of the car as she collapsed her ass up and down on it.

“Fuck!” He growled, cuffing her ass cheeks in his hands. “I could barely contain myself in that damn courtroom.”

“Ooh!” Marli moaned. She loved it when Dru started talking to her while he dug out her guts.

“Looking this damn good!” He smacked her on the ass. “My baby finally poking out and shit.”

Marli bounced up and down on Dru’s dick as if they weren’t being driven down the freeway.

“Ooh, Dru. Fuck!” Marli could feel her orgasm being ripped from her insides. Everything inside her was screaming for her to finally admit to the one thing she had been fighting as long as she could remember. As Dru pounded inside of her, she couldn’t deny it anymore. She loved this man, had always loved him.

“I love you!” she shouted as her juices coated Dru’s shaft. As soon as she’d said it, she felt free. Pretending not to be in love with Dru had been tiresome. Dru wrapped his hands around her chest, bringing her into him.

“You love me, or you love this dick?” He pounded hard inside of her.

“I love you, baby! I love you!” she screamed as she circled her hips in his lap.

“I have been waiting for you to say it first.” Dru kissed her neck. “You wasn’t about to have me out here looking like a simp ass nigga!”

Marli’s eyes rolled to the back of her head from the pleasure. Every part of her body was tingling.

“I love you too, baby mama!” He grunted as he released inside of her. “In case you needed the confirmation, this dick you are riding, this heart,” he pumped up into her one last time, “it’s yours for as long as you want it.”

“I want it forever!” she sang. Marli’s heart swelled. She was in an official relationship filled with love, laughter, and good sex, and she loved every minute of it.

“Did we forget anything?” Marli questioned Ms. Natalie as she waddled around the kitchen. Her nerves were bad. She wanted everything to be perfect. They had been planning to surprise Dru with the boys’ new birth certificates ever since they had come in the mail a few weeks prior. Marli had enlisted the help of Ms. Natalie to cook all Dru’s favorite meals. The two ladies had been forming a great relationship ever since the day the correct DNA tests were revealed. Marli loved Ms. Natalie’s honesty. She’d been very helpful with Marli’s transition into being a live-in girlfriend. Plus, the relationship she had with the boys was beautiful.

“No, everything is perfect. He’s going to love it,” Ms. Natalie replied. Marli looked at the time. Dru had texted he was on the way twenty minutes ago. He should have been arriving any minute.

“Deuce! Tres!” Marli called the boys. They were also in on the surprise. The boys came running into the living room wearing the special shirts that Marli had made. The room was decorated with balloons and streamers, and they put up a sign that read “Congratulations, Daddy!”

“He’s here!” Deuce shouted as the doorknob began to turn. Marli ran into place, sliding her hands down the front of her dress.

“Surprise!” They all yelled as Dru entered the house. His face read of confusion as he glanced around at the decorations.

“What’s going on?” he questioned as he embraced his mom in a hug.

“Look!” Tres and Deuce pointed to their shirts. Marli teared up as Dru finally noticed the blown-up picture of the boy’s birth certificates. His name

now sat in the space that read father. Dru's face lit up, and tears brimmed in his eyes.

"Come here, you two." Dru let go of his mom and waved over the boys. Deuce and Tres ran toward him, and he engulfed them in his arms. He hugged and kissed them on the forehead before moving to Marli.

"Did you tell them?"

"I was waiting for you." Marli shook her head. Dru took her hand and led her to the boys.

"Deuce and Tres, we have something to tell you." They approached the boys.

"It's a surprise!" Deuce yelled, his voice filled with excitement.

"Kind of." Marli squinted her face.

"Where is it?"

"Where is it, Mama!" the boys shouted. Marli took a deep breath. She'd gone over this speech a thousand times, but she was still nervous.

"Mommy was surprised when she got pregnant because she wasn't sure who was going to be your daddy, but then Daddy Max stepped up to be your dad, and he loves you."

The boys looked on, confused.

"But someone else helped me make you, not Daddy Max." Marli's voice cracked. She wanted to make sure she used the right words.

"I helped your mom make you," Dru added. "I'm your real daddy."

Marli couldn't read the boys' facial expressions. She didn't think they understood what they were saying.

"And the baby in your belly is Dru Daddy?" Tres asked. Marli giggled at his bunched-up words, but she knew what they meant.

"Yes," both her and Dru replied. Deuce and Tres smiled.

"Okay!" They shrugged their shoulders as they took off running to their room. Dru had prepared her for that response, but it was still surprising to see. Dru embraced her.

"I love my surprise, baby mama." He kissed her lips. "And I love you and our family." Marli swooned in his arms.

"I love you, too!"

MARLI

FOUR MONTHS LATER

“Who is that from?” Erica shouted as Marli held up a cute pink onesie and matching pink sneakers. Marli read the card as she handed the gift off to Dru. The baby shower had been a lot of fun. It’d been filled with games and laughter. Marli couldn’t be more grateful for her sister and best friend throwing it for her. The first time around, she’d gone into labor too early to have one.

“A new little love to fill your heart, Love Nesha,” Marli read aloud. “Thank you, Nesha.” She waved at her in the crowd of all their family and friends, who had gathered to help them celebrate the upcoming arrival of their baby girl.

“You’re welcome!” Nesha shouted back. Marli smiled as Kay handed her another gift. Glancing at the once full table around them, she noticed it was the last one, a small pink box with a purple ribbon. Marli peered down at the small gift box in-front of her. As she unwrapped it, she noticed moving beside her, but she didn’t pay it any attention. Taking the top off the box, she marveled at the white gold diamond-studded pacifier. Marli’s mouth fell open at the expensive gift.

“What is it?” someone in the crowd called. Marli held it up.

“Who is this from?” Erica shouted to the crowd. Marli looked around for a card or note, but there wasn’t one.

“Me,” Dru spoke from beside her. Turning to look at him, her body immediately stilled. He was on one knee, holding the biggest ring she’d ever laid eyes on.

“Dru!” She gasped as tears filled her eyes.

“Baby mama, I sampled that good shit one time and have been hooked ever since. A link up turned into kids, which turned into love. You, baby Uno, Deuce, and Tres are my world. I told you a while back that when you were done playing, I would upgrade your title. You done playing with soul ties, baby?”

Marli was so overwhelmed with the love she felt for Dru. Nodding her head vigorously, she swiped the tears out of her eyes. Everything they’d been through had led them here. The girl that was afraid of love was the happiest she’d ever been and getting proposed to in front of all her family and friends. Dru was everything that her mother had preached to her about. He loved her and her boys unconditionally. Marli looked around the crowd. She was happy that she’d given the relationship a chance. She was happy and in love.

“I’m done playing with soul ties.” She cried. Dru slid the ring on her finger and wrapped her in his arms, connecting his lips to hers.

“I love you,” he whispered into her mouth.

“I love you,” Marli replied. She was excited to start this new chapter in her life as a wife and mother. She knew that it would be a lot of work, having three kids and a husband, but she knew with Dru, it would be the most rewarding experience of her life. As she stared up at her fiancé, she could feel the heat rising inside of her. She couldn’t wait to get him home and put her pregnant pussy on his forehead.

Dru

“Shit, come on, baby... chill.” Dru’s head fell back as he reached forward, attempting to push Marli away. They had just left their baby shower and were headed home. The boys were staying with Dru’s mom for a few days so that they could get the nursery ready for baby Uno. Dru had told her he could just pay somebody to do it, but she insisted on doing it herself.

“I been wanting to suck your dick all night... looking that fine, making me a fiancée.” Marli pushed his hand away. He was trying his best to resist her. He had already told her that she was too pregnant to be doing this right here and now, but his reasoning was in vain. If he’d known proposing would get her this horny, he would have done it months ago when he first bought the ring. Dru looked over at his fiancée. She was leaning over the console, trying not to apply any pressure to her belly. If his windows weren’t tinted, the other drivers on the freeway would be getting quite the show. Marli had Dru’s dick disappearing in and out of her juicy mouth. Dru could barely control the steering wheel as she sucked him in. The car almost swerved into the next lane.

“Damn, girl.” Dru growled as Marli opened her mouth and pushed him deeper into her throat. This was his life, and he loved every minute of it. The last four months with Marli had been perfect. After Max went to jail, everything had settled down. They’d settled into a comfortable rhythm. They allowed the boys to talk to him over the phone a couple of times but he’d eventually stopped calling. The boys didn’t seem to be affected by the

lack of Max's presence. They were their regular happy selves. They had even started calling Dru Daddy a few weeks ago.

"Mm, I love you," she moaned. She used both hands to stroke his manhood. The visual of her newly ringed finger sliding up and down his dick was sending him overboard. He was having a hard time controlling the steering wheel.

"Damn, baby, you trying to kill us." He moaned at the same time he pushed his hips forward in the seat to fuck her mouth. The car swerved; he was on the verge of exploding. Marli continued to suck.

"Damn! Girl!" Dru called as Marli opened her mouth and pushed him deeper into her throat.

"Marry me!" he yelled. His vision started to cloud. He was going to run them off the road because the pleasure was consuming him.

"You already asked that." Marli's voice vibrated around his penis just as he hit a pothole. Dru exploded into her mouth and Marli sat up quickly, clutching her stomach.

"I think I'm going into labor." Her voice was strained. Dru glanced over at her in shock.

"What you just say?" He wanted to panic, but he knew he needed to stay calm for the sake of Marli.

"My water just broke. I think my water just broke!" Marli yelled.

Dru stepped on the gas as fast as he could. He was happy it was late and there wasn't any traffic. Marli was breathing hard and holding her stomach.

"Breathe, baby!" Dru reached over and grabbed her hand.

Marli panted. "Call my sister and Mom!"

Dru pressed the buttons on the phone radio.

"Y'all made it?" Kay's voice sailed through the speakers.

"My water broke!" Marli shouted.

"We headed to the hospital," Dru confirmed. Commotion could be heard on the other end of the phone.

"We on the way," Kay confirmed as the line disconnected.

After what seemed like an eternity, Dru pulled his car into the front entrance of the emergency room. Rushing to the passenger's side, he helped Marli

out of the car.

“Can you walk, bae?”

Marli nodded. The two of them rushed inside the emergency room.

“My fiancée is in labor!” Dru shouted.

Everything from there was a blur. Marli was immediately taken to a delivery room. Kay, Blue, Ms. Loretta, Natalie, Erica, and Nesha arrived shortly after. Dru never left her side, even when she ordered him out. After eight hours of labor, their healthy baby girl, Uno Marie Willis, had arrived. As Dru held her in his arms, he smiled down at Marli. She was perfect. This was perfect. The doors to the hospital room slowly opened, and Deuce and Tres walked in.

“Come meet your sister.” Kay called them over, and the boys ran to her. Dru lowered her so they could see.

“Hi, Uno,” Tres whispered. His voice filled with excitement.

“Happy birthday, Uno!” Deuce touched her small hand. As Dru stared down at his family, he was so happy. Tears of joy rolled down his face. He couldn’t believe that after all the games and all the drama, he was a father of three. Leaning down, he kissed Marli’s forehead, and then he turned to his daughter.

“Welcome to our family, Uno. We are so glad you’re here.”

Dru stared at Deuce, Tres, Uno, and Marli. They were a family now, and they were ready to face anything that came their way.

“You want to get married today?” Dru questioned. Marli looked up at Dru. A smile as big as day came across her face.

“You serious?”

“Yes!”

Marli nodded her head as Dru brought his lips to hers.

“Let’s do it! No more playing around with soul ties.”

The END!.

AFTERWORD

Book number five! I've been wanting to write a story about Marli since I first came up with her character when I was twelve years old. I hope I did her justice. Dru and Marli surely gave me a headache with all their back-and-forth games. With each book comes a new challenge, and boy this book challenged me. I hope you enjoyed reading it. Oh, and did you catch the update on Kay and Blue? Please continue to look out for my books. As usual, if you've made it this far, we go together now. If you enjoyed this book, do me a favor and please leave me a five-star review. To keep up with me and look out for my future work:

Join my discussion group on Facebook by searching Blossom's Bunch.
You can also click the link below to join my Flower Power Gang!

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And follow me on everything!

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Oh, and if you haven't already, check out my other titles!

- Sex and Rescue
- Between a Soul Tie
- F**king or Loving: An Erotic Thriller
- Her Heart on Ice (BLP Fairytale book 8)

Love,
A. Blossom

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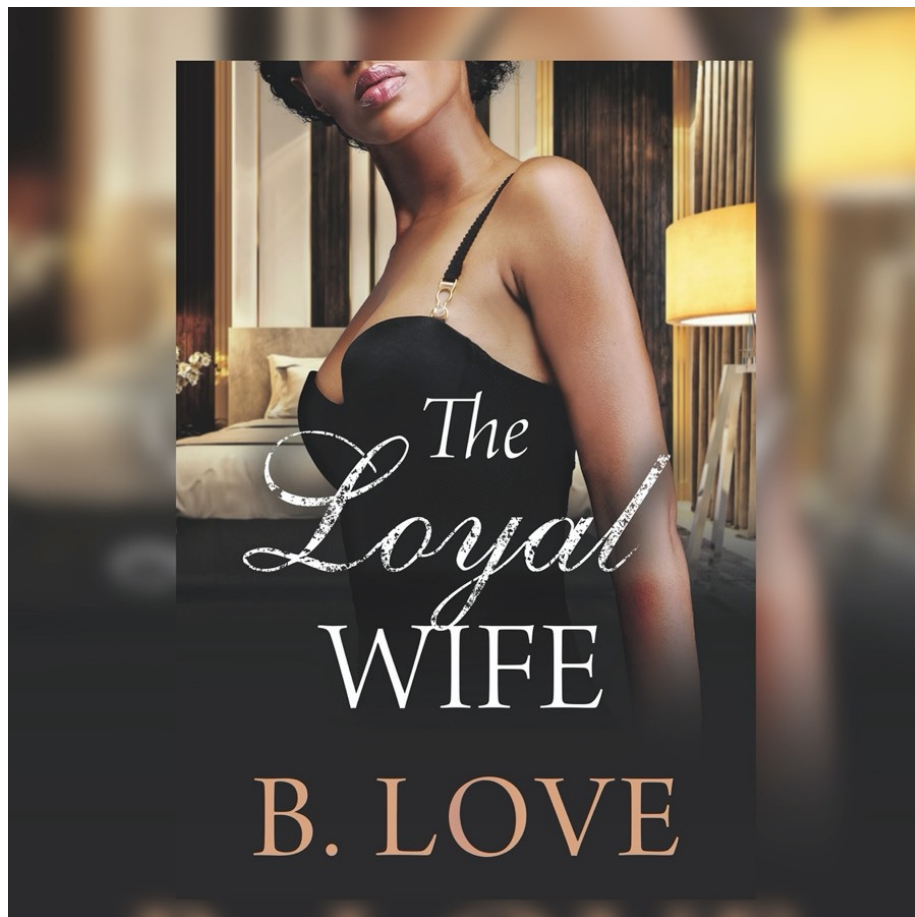
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An emotionally charged psychological thriller that will leave fans breathless as they bear witness to the lengths a wife will go to honor her

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The moment Dante Williams wakes up on the side of the road, unsure of where he is or who he is, his life changes for the worse. After a brief stay in the hospital, Dante is released to the care of his loving wife, Sade. Sade is beautiful, successful, and loyal. So loyal, she devotes herself to Dante indefinitely, hoping this will help him appreciate what he has—his life and his wife.

While seemingly having it all, their perfect marriage isn't enough to keep Dante from digging up the past in hopes of recovering his memory. It isn't long before he begins questioning Sade's behavior and intentions. Once secrets start to unravel, Dante is left more confused than the day following the accident.

When Dante discovers evidence of something more sinister at play, he prepares to end his marriage but learns quickly that Sade meant every word in her vows and plans to honor them, until *death*.

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Two decades ago, two strangers make a connection that bonds them for life. Perfect for fans of second chance romance, *This Time Around* is the love reunion hopeless romantics have been waiting for.

Dr. Tessa Howard is sick and tired of everything—her job, her nagging mother, and her boyfriend who wouldn't know commitment if it hit him in the face. The only thing that didn't work her last nerve was her soon-to-be twenty-year-old daughter, Cyrah. Watching her one and only child, her greatest accomplishment, live life out loud was her greatest joy. Tessa didn't know what she'd do if she didn't have Cyrah, whom she admittedly lived vicariously through. After an epiphany in the middle of the night, Tessa finds herself single and unemployed. With no job, no man, and no prospects for either, Tessa finally decides to let loose and learns that history does, in fact, repeat itself.

Dr. Cypress Boone recently ended a relationship after a two-year engagement. He'd given his all to Emery, but she played him for a fool. Although disappointed, he hasn't given up on love and is ready for a fresh start. Emery, however, isn't ready to let go and refuses to accept that they are over. In an effort to make a clean break, he accepts a job at the prestigious Black Elm University, over two thousand miles away from his current residence. With a new job in a new city, Cypress has high hopes that a new woman will soon be added to the equation. However, maybe this time around, someone new isn't what he needs.

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Pascha St. Claire has nothing to live for.

After five years, her once-loving husband, Raymond, decides to end their marriage. He's unable to deal with her mental health, significant weight gain, or the idea that she cannot seem to birth him a child. She returns home one night to find her belongings on the curb and the locks to her home changed. Her pleading falls on deaf ears as Raymond has made the decision to end their marriage. With no other option, Pascha is forced to leave and never look back.

When Callum Ellis accepted the reservation for his car service, the last thing he expected was to pick up a beautiful, weeping stranger. His heart goes out to her as he drops her off at a hotel. After discovering her credit cards have been canceled, Callum swoops in to pay for her stay. Though she wants to protest, Pascha realizes she is in no position to decline the stranger's generous offer.

Months roll by and Callum is still unable to get Pascha out of his head. A chance encounter finally lands him in her presence, and Callum is determined to make the most of it. Though she initially declines his interest, Pascha soon finds herself intrigued by the once-kind stranger. Fear has her recoiling at his advances, but men like Callum come to restore. Will Pascha continue to avoid the inevitable, or does she find the courage to love again?



Coming 2025!

“If loving you is wrong, I don’t want to be right.”

Talia Tate has been given the case of a lifetime. With the entire world tuned in to find out if the novice lawyer for Tate & Associates could get a not guilty verdict in the State V. Duncan trial, Talia is stressed and determined to prove to the world, her bosses, and herself that she is a brilliant lawyer worthy of respect. However, there is one person standing in her way of success.

Detective Maddox Reed doesn’t mind cutting corners when it comes to closing a case. Since his days in patrol, the locals knew to steer clear of “Speedy Reed-y.” When Donovan Duncan was brought into his squad room, he was ready to send him to prison without an interrogation. He thought the case was cut and dry... Until Talia comes to his office with fingers pointed ready to get Donovan the justice he deserved.

To be on opposite sides of the law, Talia and Maddox find themselves fighting two battles: justice and lust. How could they fall in love under circumstances so polarizing the whole world can feel the tension? While both of them are in a race to come out on top, surprising feelings make it difficult to separate business from pleasure. Will these two souls find solace with one another? Or will the burden of love be too hard to bear?

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