



ALWAYS  
EVERMORE.  
EVEN AFTER  
STILL

# STILL

KENNEDY RYAN

# Table of Contents

Part I  
Part II  
Epilogue  
GRIP Series  
Copyright  
Bristol  
Grip  
Grip & Bristol  
Author's Note  
My Soul to Keep Sample  
Also By Kennedy Ryan  
Connect With Kennedy!  
Acknowledgments  
About the Author

# STILL

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GRIP #2

KENNEDY RYAN

*Dedicated to the Innocent*

# CONTENTS

GRIP Series

Copyright

## Part I

1. Bristol
2. Grip
3. Bristol
4. Bristol
5. Bristol
6. Grip
7. Bristol
8. Bristol
9. Grip
10. Grip
11. Bristol
12. Grip
13. Bristol
14. Grip
15. Bristol
16. Grip
17. Grip
18. Bristol
19. Grip
20. Bristol
21. Grip
22. Grip
23. Bristol
24. Grip
25. Bristol
26. Grip
27. Bristol

## Part II

28. Grip
29. Bristol
30. Grip
31. Bristol

32. [Bristol](#)
33. [Grip](#)
34. [Bristol](#)
35. [Grip](#)
36. [Bristol](#)
37. [Grip](#)
38. [Grip & Bristol](#)
39. [Grip](#)
40. [Bristol](#)
41. [Grip](#)
42. [Bristol](#)
43. [Grip](#)
44. [Bristol](#)
45. [Grip](#)
46. [Bristol](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Note](#)

1. [My Soul to Keep Sample](#)

[Also By Kennedy Ryan](#)

[Connect With Kennedy!](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

## GRIP SERIES

*STILL (Grip #2)*  
*concludes Grip & Bristol's epic love story.*  
*You must read the FREE short prequel, FLOW,*  
*and GRIP #1 before starting STILL!*

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# PART I

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*“An artist’s duty, as far as I’m concerned,  
is to reflect the times.”*

– Nina Simone, Musician & Activist

## BRISTOL

“YOUR CLIENT APPEARS TO BE LATE.”

I glance from the pasty face across the table to my phone, noting the time. This guy could use some of our LA sun before he goes back to New York, though it is summer there, too. Maybe he just doesn't get out much.

“A little late,” I tell Kevin, the rep from Barrow Publishing. “But he'll be here.”

“Our team's excited about the possibility of working with Grip.” Kevin gestures with his fork wrapped in angel hair pasta. “He'll be great for our urban imprint.”

“Your urban imprint?” My own fork is halfway to my mouth, but I place it back down in the bowl of my half-eaten salad. “Why would you think that?”

“Well, he *is* a hip-hop artist.” Kevin shrugs and chews his pasta. “Seems like the reasonable placement.”

“He's also the guy whose debut album went double platinum and who sold out the largest venues across three continents while headlining his first world tour.” I challenge him with one lifted brow. “You don't get numbers like that reaching a niche demographic. Grip has proven global appeal and would be best placed with your flagship imprint.”

“We'll see.” Skepticism colors Kevin's otherwise pale face.

“Oh, I *know*, because I won't settle for anything less.” I spear a cucumber with my fork and him with a glance sharpened to a fine point. “Charisma knew that when she approached me with this offer.”

My friend Charisma and I went to high school together and were

roommates at Columbia. She's now a powerful editor at a huge publishing company. I would much prefer lunch with her instead of this junior editor, but her schedule didn't allow for that.

My phone dings with a text on the table.

"Excuse me." I grab the phone to check the incoming text.

**Grip:** Hey babe. Sorry. About to get on the road.

**Me:** ETA?

**Grip:** Huh? Is that dyslexic for eat? LOL

Despite my irritation that I have to spend more time alone with this sun-deprived dickhead, my lips twitch.

**Me:** Estimated time of arrival, smartass.

**Grip:** Like 10, but if you send me a tit pic, I might be able to shave a couple min off.

I shake my head and lose the battle with my lips, surrendering a wide grin. I try to ignore dickhead's eyes on the tits in question. This guy is a bit of a lecher; I'll have to ask Charisma what she was thinking sending him.

**Me:** Not funny. Get here so we can be done with this.

**Grip:** I'm coming, but you know I come faster when you show me your tits.

I walked right into that one. I don't bother responding, instead setting the phone down and turning my attention back to Kevin the lecher.

"That was Grip." I wait for his eyes to lift from nipple level. "He got held up at his previous appointment, but he's en route."

"It's fine." His slick smile lubricates the space between us, leaving a greasy film in the air. "Gives us a little more time alone."

"Do we need more time alone?" I take a sip of my mineral water. "For what?"

"So I can persuade you to have dinner with me."

Is this guy for real? I glance into the eyes behind his square glasses. Everything about him screams metrosexual, pretty much the polar opposite of Grip. I guess I'm self-absorbed enough to assume everyone knows Grip and I are together. We were outed in the worst possible way just after he and Qwest broke up—via a surveillance video leak and Black Twitter feud—but we've managed to keep a pretty low profile ever since. Apparently, Kevin missed that bit of juicy gossip.

"I think we should stick to business," I offer with a wry smile.

"But what about pleasure?" He reaches across the table to rub the back of

my hand.

“Pleasure?” I snatch my hand back. “Kevin, you wouldn’t know where to start pleasing me.”

He looks nonplussed, but it’s the truth. Some women have trouble admitting they love sex; I’m not one of them. I love it, but I’m a woman of discriminating tastes and hard-to-please nethers. Fortunately, my voracious appetite extends to exactly one man who’s figured it all out, and he’s probably . . . oh, less than ten minutes out.

Maybe I should have sent that tit pic after all.

“I just meant I’m only in LA for another day, and haven’t seen much of the city,” Kevin says. “I know you and Charisma are friends, so I thought maybe you could show me around before I go back to New York.”

Maybe I misjudged him.

Except his eyes are x-raying through my blouse again.

“Kevin, eyes up.”

“Sorry.” The lust in his eyes practically fogs up his glasses. “What?”

This is so not the way to get Grip on board with the book deal Charisma and I

have been brainstorming. I’m killing Charm next time I see her—not that I’ll see her any time soon. Barrow has her anchored to the East Coast, and Prodigy has me anchored to the West.

“Kevin, there’s something you should know. Grip and I—”

“Sorry I’m late.” The voice rolls over me like syrup, thick and sweet and sticking to my skin.

I glance over my shoulder, meeting the eyes I wake up to every morning, the color of chocolate flecked with caramel. Grip’s slow smile is that extravagant curve of full lips that has stuttered my breath since the day I met him. Even if he weren’t handsome, he would draw attention, reaching beyond sexuality, though sexual energy seeps from this man’s pores. It’s something more fundamental than sex appeal. Whatever it is, it’s raw and compelling and in his very bones. I’ve never been able to completely put my finger on it, but wouldn’t mind spending the next fifty years or so figuring it out.

“Grip, right?” Kevin stands and reaches past me to shake Grip’s hand. “Kevin.”

“Hey.” Grip glances from me to Kevin, accepting his outstretched hand. “Like I said, sorry I’m late.”

“Oh, no. It’s fine.” Kevin offers what is probably supposed to be a

roguish grin, but comes off slightly creepy. “Gave me a little alone time with your manager here.”

*Oh, please spare me this.*

Grip cocks his head and narrows his eyes a centimeter. “Alone time?”

“Grip, I was just about to tell Kevin that—”

“Ah ah ah.” Grip silences me with a gesture, his eyes still locked on Kevin. “Let the man talk, Bris. And what did you use all this time alone for, Kevin?”

“I was persuading this beautiful lady to have dinner with me.” Kevin seats himself, dipping his head toward the empty seat awaiting Grip at the table.

“Oh.” Grip sits, nodding and setting his motorcycle helmet on the floor. “And how was that working out for you?”

“Between you and me”—Kevin slants me a knowing grin—“I think I was getting somewhere.”

“Uh, Kevin, you really should—” I try again.

“Was he, Bris?” Grip cuts in over me, crossing his arms—vibrantly inked and roped with muscle—over his chest. His white shirt reads *HABITUAL LINE STEPPER*; no telling what that means. “Getting somewhere, I mean?”

Though well disguised, humor percolates behind his polite inquiry. Grip is possessive, but he knows this guy would never be anything but a joke.

“No, I told him we should keep things strictly business.” I turn my attention from Grip to Kevin. “And I was just about to say I have a boyfriend.”

“I’m sure he’d understand.” Kevin flashes a conspiratorial wink Grip’s way.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t.” A vein of steel runs through Grip’s good-natured response. “He doesn’t like her having dinner with other guys.”

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him, eh?” Kevin leans forward slightly to elbow Grip’s arm.

“Might get you hurt, though,” Grip says, elbowing Kevin back with a little more force. “Eh?”

“Ow.” Kevin rubs his arm, frowning at the spot Grip poked roughly.

This has gone on long enough. Every word out of Kevin’s mouth imperils this book deal.

“Kevin, Grip *is* my boyfriend,” I tell him, annoyed and tired of stretching this out.

Kevin's poor jaw nearly unhinges.

"*Grip* is your boyfriend?" Behind the designer spectacles, his eyes widen and dart between Grip and me.

Grip links our fingers on the table.

"As fuck would have it, yup." Grip raises our hands to his lips, kissing my fingers, but keeps his eyes trained on Kevin. "Is this your strategy for signing new authors? Hitting on their girlfriends? 'Cause I gotta tell ya, it's kinda brilliant."

I can't help it—I snort. My inelegant laugh draws Grip's dark eyes and wicked grin, fanning heat low in my belly that slides even farther south. I went years barely being intimate with anything that wasn't battery operated, and now I can't go two hours without wanting to be horizontally naked with this guy.

Though we *did* do it vertically in the shower this morning. I squirm in my seat remembering the slice of steamy heaven we had before the sun was all the way up. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can get back to the office and then home for more of that, whichever home we choose tonight. At some point, I guess I'll sell my place, or Grip will sell his? We'll live together, but will we get engaged first? Married? He did tell my mother he would marry me one day.

*Oh, Bristol, please don't become one of those women obsessed with getting a ring,* I self-admonish.

Because if you can't admonish yourself, who can?

We're in no hurry, and I actually appreciate our pace. The last few months have been . . . I don't even have language for how happy I am. It's contentment sheathed in passion, twisted around the deepest, most honest connection I've ever known. I wish everyone could taste this, could have this. That's when you know you're far gone—when you start wishing everyone else had what you have. I know what it's like to live without it, to live without *him*. It's lackluster, a pale parallel existence I have no intention of revisiting. We got just a taste of it this summer when he was on tour and I needed to stay behind in LA.

Miserable.

"Does that sound good, Bristol?"

Kevin's question snaps my attention back to the conversation at the table. Now I'm *daydreaming*? In the middle of a meeting? About proposals and engagement rings and fairy-tale endings?



“Uh, sorry.” I split an apologetic glance between Grip and Kevin. “I got distracted. Does what sound good?”

“Grip wanted to reschedule the meeting.” Kevin considers the calendar on his phone. “He has a session to get to at the studio, so maybe we can talk about the deal when he has more time.”

Does Grip really have a session? Or is he just writing Kevin and this deal off? I try to read between the impassive lines of his face. I want him to give this a chance, despite the awful first impression Kevin made.

“You have a session?” I probe to see what he’ll reveal.

His mouth kicks to the left, which usually indicates he’s privately laughing at someone.

“Yeah, and don’t you have that thing to get to?” He stands, grabbing his helmet and me, gently pulling me up by the elbow. “We both probably need to get out of here. Nice meeting you, Kev.”

*So that’s a no on the session.*

“You go to the studio.” I pull away, narrowing my eyes at him so he knows I have his number. “I’ll close things out with Kevin.”

A quick frown clouds his expression. Joke or no joke, he doesn’t want to leave me with some guy who was hitting on me just a few minutes ago.

“I can probably skip it.” Grip’s smile settles into an unyielding line.

“No need.” I turn to Kevin. “I’m just gonna walk Grip out. I’ll be back to discuss alternate dates.”

“Sounds good. Great meeting you, Grip.” Kevin picks up the menu and offers a quick smile. “I’ll look at dessert.”

Grip doesn’t move, just keeps staring at Kevin, so I hook my arm through his and lead him out of the restaurant and to the parking lot. Once we reach the spot where his motorcycle is parked, Grip’s hands settle on my hips and he pulls me into his chest, locking us together.

“What’s up, little shawty?” he teases, running his nose along my neck. “What’s your name? You got a man?”

“I do,” I answer huskily. “But I could be persuaded. He’ll never know.”

“The hell.” Grip chuckles, nipping my ear and sliding his hand to the small of my back.

“You don’t really have a session, do you?” I ask abruptly, breaking the spell he’s trying to weave.

“I’m not dealing with this guy, Bris.” He pulls back to peer down at my face. “And neither are you. He’s trying to have dinner with you? I’m not

doing business with that—”

“In his defense,” I cut in before he works himself into a lather. “He didn’t know I’m taken.”

Something flares behind his eyes when I use the word that says I’m his. I knew he’d like that; I’m nothing if not deliberate.

He leans down the few inches separating us until his lips are at my ear. His hands inch up to span my waist, his thumbs subtly, secretively brushing the underside of my breast. My breath hovers in my throat, suspended, and my mouth waters as I remember the taste of him this morning. Me on my knees in the shower, water beating on my shoulders, the long, rigid length of him hitting the back of my throat. His fingers screwed into my hair, holding my head still while he pumped over my tongue, scraped against my lips.

“So you’re taken, huh?” He breathes against my neck. As calm as he looks from the outside, I hear the hitch in his breath, feel him hard and pressed into my belly. “I don’t see a ring.”

I shoot him a sharp glance. We haven’t talked about rings and proposals in a while—it hasn’t mattered. We practically live together, though we both still have our own places. Anything other than together isn’t an option, but his teasing statement makes me wonder if he’s started to think about it the way I have. I find myself holding out my hand a few times a day, studying my ring finger, wondering what he would choose for it . . . wondering when he’ll ask.

Wondering when it started to matter so much to me. The last thing I want is to make him feel pressured. We’ve loved each other for years, true, but we haven’t been official for long at all.

“Grip, I’m not—”

He palms my throat, thumb on one side of my face, fingers on the other, commanding me, coaxing my mouth open. His tongue sweeps the sensitive lining inside my jaw, over my teeth, around my lips. The sun is high in the sky. Patrons walk past us, coming to and leaving the restaurant. A few gawk. I’m not sure if they recognize Grip or if our PDA *al fresco* just disconcerts them. The kiss slows to mere brushes of our mouths, my lips pulled between his with tiny tugs and hungry bites. The firm hold he has on my chin softens, and his fingers slide into the hair falling around my neck.

“I had to shut you up because every time I mention rings you start stuttering and saying stupid shit.” His eyes smile down at me. “And your mouth kind of hangs open. It’s not a good look for you.”

A laugh breaks free from me. It's a happy sound, like a caged bird free and singing. That's how I feel sometimes, like for years I walked around locked up, guarding my heart against this man, and now I've been let loose, liberated, kissing in broad daylight on the street and spilling laughter that sounds like a bird's song.

And not giving a damn what anyone thinks about it.

"Oh really?" My smile widens an inch. "I seem to remember you liked my mouth open this morning in the shower."

His chuckle rumbles in the small space separating our bodies.

"Damn, Bris. What am I gonna do with you?"

"You'll figure something out." I prop my forearms on his shoulders, caressing his neck. "You always do."

He studies me for a few long seconds, something changing in his eyes. They sober, the cocky grin falling into a straight line.

"What's wrong?" I cup one side of his face, the slight scruff tickling my palm. One minute we're flirting and teasing, verging on horny, and the next we're . . . not.

"Nothing." He sets his hand over mine against his jaw. "I just missed you today. I miss you when we're apart."

His words settle over my heart, refreshing like rain falling on dry, thirsty ground. I feel it, too. I'm not sure how I kept him at bay for eight years when eight *hours* away from him makes my chest ache. The look in his eyes . . . there's more to it than what's on the surface, but I'm not sure what. He traces the corner of my mouth.

"You're just trying to distract me," I turn my mouth to kiss the hand touching my face, "from getting back to Kevin."

Grip rolls his eyes, some of the humor returning.

"You seriously think I'm dealing with that dude?" He scoffs a quick rush of air.

"Don't judge the deal by Kevin. I wish you could meet my friend Charisma. She'd be your editor, but she's tied up in New York, and Kevin just happened to be here in LA."

"Maybe we could meet her in New York." Grip's tone is careful and his glance is searching, but I'm not sure what he's looking for. Am I missing something?

"Not any time soon." I sigh, running my thumb over the dark arch of his brows. "Charm's stuck there, and things are way too hectic for me to get

away right now.”

“Yeah?” Grip twists his lips into a grimace.

“Yeah. Kai’s finally about to drop her debut album, and Rhyson’s in the studio working on his next project.” A sudden smile takes over my face. “I forgot to tell you I got Luke that reality show about the making of his next album.”

“Wow.” Grip’s eyes drop to the ground before he looks back to me. “Yeah, you’ve got a lot going on here.”

“The show’s filming in LA for the most part. I need to be on set at least for the initial footage, and don’t get me started on everything happening for Jimmi. I may have to hand her off to Sarah, though she’d kill me.”

“I get it,” Grip says with a small smile. “You’re too busy to go to New York.”

There it is again. What’s that look? Am I talking about work too much? I do that. I get caught up in my career, but I’m lucky enough to make dreams come true for the people I love the most. I never knew how fulfilling it would be, how damn good at it I would be. With every accomplishment, the opportunities double and my ambitions multiply. It’s never bothered Grip before, but maybe now that things are busier than they’ve ever been, he’s tired of hearing about my work and how much I love it.

“I’m sorry, baby,” I say. “Here I am going on and on about Prodigy and all my stuff, and I didn’t even ask about school. You registered for classes today, right?”

He goes still for a second, his expression becoming unreadable.

“I’m still looking at classes. There’s a little time before I finalize things for next semester.”

“Well I want to hear all about it tonight.” I tip up to leave a kiss on his lips. “But now I need to get back to Kevin.”

Grip’s face loosens into a grin.

“Tell his goofy ass you already have dinner plans, and to back off my girl.”

“Oh, I have dinner plans?” I take a few steps backward toward the restaurant entrance, my eyes never leaving the handsome face with its stark planes and bold bones. “And what are these plans?”

“Dinner at my place.”

“Am I bringing dinner?”

That’s usually what happens—neither of us is exactly gourmet chef

material.

“No, I’ll grill up on the roof.”

Ah, the roof, one of my favorite places in the world. Overlooking everything but isolated from it all, just my love and me. Add medium rare red meat, and it’s my own private utopia.

“Then I’ll see you after work.” I smile and turn to go.

“Hey Bris,” he calls.

I look over my shoulder to find that sober look back in his eyes, tightening the skin over his high cheekbones, making me nervous.

“I love you.”

He says it to me every day, several times a day, and it never gets old, never frays around the edges or fails to palpitate my susceptible heart.

“I love you, too.”

I don’t try to lighten the moment with an easy smile or a flippant comment. Whatever is bothering him, he’ll tell me, probably tonight. I’ll let him come to it on his own.

In the meantime, Kevin.

**GRIP**

I HAVE to tell her tonight.

I've been putting it off, but I need to register for next semester. Getting my degree online has always worked for the busy pace of my life, but Dr. Israel Hammond, renowned criminal justice activist, will be a guest professor at NYU, and I need to be on campus. His book about racism in America completely rocked my world, and I need to take that class.

Rationally, I know it won't wreck us if I spend a semester in New York and Bristol stays here in LA. We survived eight years of games—chase, hide and seek, pin the tail on the donkey, with each of us playing the role of jackass from time to time. You name it, we played it. We survived Parker's sick attempts to destroy us, and he's stewing in a minimum-security resort-like prison suite because we figured out how to shut him down. We survived contempt and condemnation from people as distant as Black Twitter trolls and as close as members of my family who didn't want to see us together. They are slowly, surely, one by one, coming around. Jade will be the hold out; I know this, but eventually she'll see the light, too.

We win. Love prevails. I get it.

But that doesn't make the reality of me being on one coast while Bris lives on the other any easier to accept, even for a few months—not with the way I need her.

I flip our steaks, losing myself in thought and the smoke rising from the grill. Do I *have* to go? I'm a rapper, an entertainer . . . do I really want to uproot my life for five months just to sit at the feet of some professor I don't even know?

*Hell yeah I do.*

When I'm forty years old, I don't want to still be just rapping. Jay Z is a hip-hop unicorn. Who else is out there rapping and relevant at almost fifty?

I'll wait . . .

Yeah. Like I said. Dude's a unicorn.

I'm passionate about the causes affecting my community, and I'm educating myself now, equipping myself now so I don't squander this platform I've been given, but use it to do some kind of good. We have problems, and Dr. Hammond may have solutions. He's a brilliant man who, even as he rails against the system, is smart enough to work within it, who cares enough to reform it.

"Mmmmm, that looks good."

The comment grabs my attention, and I find myself smiling for the first time since I left Bristol. As she walks toward me, the approaching sunset paints the roof in shadows, but I see her clearly. Dark hair, burnished in places, falls around her shoulders. She has already discarded the dress she wore at lunch today in favor of a T-shirt and nothing else; it's the one I just tossed into the hamper.

She tugs at my *HABITUAL LINE STEPPER* T-shirt, the hem landing at the top of her thighs. Where the T-shirt stops, my eyes keep going, past the lean muscles of her legs and the cut of her calves, the delicate bones of her ankles and to her bare feet. I love this girl, head to toe. Beyond this gorgeous packaging, it's everything beneath that makes me beyond grateful she's mine. The loyalty, the bottomless pit that is her heart, her sense of humor. The toughest girl I know is also the most tender, and I'm so honored I get to see both sides, all her sides.

"You out of clean clothes?" I nod to my T-shirt. "You gotta wear my dirty stuff now?"

An impish smile tugs at her bare lips. She's washed away her makeup, and with it, all the sophistication she wraps around herself for her job. Up on this roof in my T-shirt, she's just my girl. I love her in every iteration, but this is the one only I get to see, so it's probably my favorite.

"I have clean clothes." She steps close enough for me to smell her scent and mine mingling in the fabric. "I like the way this shirt smells."

I drop a look over her, my eyes resting on the curves of her breasts in the soft cotton, where her nipples have gone taut under my stare.

"How does the shirt smell?" I ask, my voice as smoky as the steaks I

should be paying attention to.

“Like you.” She leans forward until her breasts press into my chest. “It smells like you.”

My hands are twitching to touch her, and I finally surrender, slipping under the shirt to grasp her waist, pulling her up the few inches until our lips meet. I’ve been thinking about these steaks all day, and before Bristol arrived, I thought I was starving—but this, what I feel having her in my arms after hours apart, *this* is starving. It starts in my balls and tunnels up through my chest, infiltrates my heart, and presses its way to my mouth, which is open and devouring in a lips-searching, tongues-dueling kiss. I grip her by the ass, grinding our bodies together until the texture of her skin and mine, the scents of her skin and mine meld into this one panting, voracious thing that never seems to get enough.

“You better not burn my steak,” Bristol pants in between kisses.

I angle my head to send my tongue deeper into her mouth, holding her still, teasing her until she’s straining up, open and begging when I pull back.

“Grip.” My name is a whimpering complaint. She cups my neck and tugs my head back down.

“Oh, no.” I resist, laugh, and turn to the grill. “You were so concerned about me burning these steaks, Ms. Medium Rare.”

“I am.” She slides her arms around me from behind and I feel a sweet sting, her teeth gently biting my shoulder through my T-shirt. I love it when she bites me, but I’m not giving her that satisfaction yet. “But that doesn’t mean you get to stop kissing me. You have to multitask.”

One slim hand slides over my abs and past my belt to cup me through my jeans.

*Damn.* Not sure how long I can keep up this charade that I don’t want to screw her into the wall on the roof where anyone with half a telescope could see.

“Wow,” I say, keeping my tone unaffected, though she’s gotta feel me getting longer and harder in her hand. “Somebody’s horny as hell.”

She makes a sound that’s half outraged laughter, half indignant grunt before stepping around to stand in front of me by the grill.

“I will not be slut-shamed by my own boyfriend.” Amusement lights her eyes, turning them to quicksilver.

“Shamed?” I put down the grilling fork I’m using for the steaks and reach for her again. “No shame in being horny for me, baby. I wanna give you a



gold star.”

Her eyes slide down to the erection poking her in the stomach. “Is that what we’re calling it now? Should we name it?”

“Guys who have to name their dicks probably aren’t using ’em right.”

“So I ask again . . . should we name it?”

I cock a brow and press our hips together.

“Are you implying that I don’t know how to use mine? Because that’s not the impression I got this morning when you came so hard you were singing like a bird.”

She tilts her head, her eyes wide and considering. “Did you say like a bird?” A small smile plays around her lips. “What made you say that?”

“I don’t know.” I give a careless shrug. “Why?”

“It’s silly,” she says, rolling her eyes in self-derision. “I was thinking today when I laughed it sounded like . . .”

Bristol blushes about once every Halley’s Comet, so the color washing across her cheeks makes me wonder.

“What?” I probe. “Your laugh sounded like what?”

“Like a happy bird,” she mumbles, peering up at me like I’m going to laugh in her face.

Which I do.

“Stop laughing at me.” She narrows her eyes in mock warning.

“Right.” I dip my head to catch her eyes and tease her. “Because when you tell me you laugh like a happy bird I’m just supposed let you get away with that.”

“I’m not telling you things anymore.” She narrows her eyes and folds her arms over her chest.

“Yeah, right. I’m your best friend.” I pull her back into me. “You’ll tell me everything like you always do.”

“You are, you know.” Her voice softens. “My best friend, I mean.”

When she looks at me like this, her eyes stripped of every defense, no guard in sight, completely honest and open and vulnerable, I feel slightly invincible. It’s a trick of the heart, I know, but I can’t help but think that as long as she looks at me like this, there isn’t anything I couldn’t survive, that our love is the stuff of legends, rolled in Teflon, disaster-proof. I’m as fanciful as Bristol, my laughing bird.

“You’re mine, too,” I echo her sentiment. “My best friend.”

“I won’t tell Rhyson,” she promises with a grin.

“I’m pretty sure he spits the same line to Kai.” I keep a straight face. “We have to say that shit to get laid.”

“I hate you.”

“Orrrrrrrr do you love me and want to blow me after dinner?” I shrug and lift my hands, my palms up. “Just saying. Listen to your heart, Bristol. Listen to your heart.”

“I’m listening to my belly right now, smartass, and it’s growling. Feed me.”

“Like my mama used to say, ain’t no freeloaders in this house. What’ll you give me for feeding you?”

“Um . . .”

“I do have a suggestion, if you’re searching.”

“Let me guess—you have a ‘Will fuck for food’ sign up here somewhere?”

“I used bubble letters.” I laugh and give her ass a light smack. “You can barter that booty.”

It’s so damn easy with Bristol—our banter, the chemistry, the perfect rhythm of our conversation. It was one of the first things I noticed when we met all those years ago. We didn’t read each other’s minds or finish each other’s sentences. It wasn’t cosmic, but it was a connection that seized me by the brain and grabbed me by the balls. She was as smart as she was sexy, as curious as she was forthcoming. There were years in between when we made things complicated, when things were strained, but now with our hearts settled on each other for good, it’s simple.

This.

Her.

Us.

I’m as sure of her as I am that every night the moon will show up, the stars will shine down, and hours later, the sun will rise again.

This is my favorite part of every day. The sun is down, and we eat by fairy lights strung overhead. We both devour the steak and salad I prepared. When our plates are scraped clean, I’m on my second beer and Bristol has gone through half a bottle of red wine. We’re cracking each other up and just sharing what happened during our day, which leads her back to lunch with Kevin.

“Your fans would eat up a poetry book from you.” Bristol pours another glass of red. “And it would showcase the breadth of your talent beyond hip-

hop.”

I stand and gather our plates. Bristol, bottle in one hand and wine glass in the other, follows me to the door that leads back to the loft.

“I’ll think about it.” I gesture for her to walk ahead of me down the steps, mostly so I can catch glimpses of her ass under my shirt.

“Don’t just say you’ll think about it.” She looks over her shoulder, rolling her eyes when she catches me checking her out. “Really? You see me naked every day. Don’t guys ever mature beyond tenth grade?”

“Chronologically, yes.” I drop a kiss in her hair as I pass her propping the door open for me. “In dick years, no.”

Her phone dings from the coffee table in the living room. I hate that phone sometimes. Managing entertainers, her work is around the clock and all over the globe. Bristol’s clients are usually spread across a few different time zones and never take into account the one she’s in.

“Hmmm.” She takes another sip of her wine without glancing up from her phone. “You still interested in that panel in New York? The Artist As Activist thing?”

As soon as she says ‘New York,’ I’m reminded of my quandary. I have to talk to her about next semester before the night is over.

“Uh, yeah.” I load our plates and utensils into the dishwasher, watching her across the open space. “Definitely.”

“Hmmm.” Bristol continues scanning whatever she’s reading, a slight dip between her brows.

“What’s up?” I ask. “Something wrong?”

I cross the room to read over her shoulder. It’s an email from the organizer, a popular New York-based radio personality named Angie Black with an army of loyal followers. I’m pretty sure Black isn’t her real last name, but she’s a titan on Black Twitter, #BlackGirlMagic at its best. I study the details, trying to figure out what has Bristol grunting and scowling, and then one name leaps from the list of panelists Angie provided.

*Qwest.*

“I didn’t know Qwest was invited.” I keep my voice casual, pull Bristol’s hair back, and tuck my chin into the crook of her neck and shoulder.

“Hmmm,” she non-comments again, stepping away to set her wine glass on the counter, her monosyllable speaking volumes.

“You okay with that?” I grab her wrist, forcing her to face me. I cup the smooth line of her neck and lift her chin so I can see her expression. “I don’t

have to do the panel.”

She squints in consideration for a few seconds, her lip between her teeth.

“No, it’s fine,” she finally says. “Qwest performed on tour with you this summer for a few shows and everything was okay, right?”

Qwest joined me on tour for two shows and everything seemed fine, but then I did avoid her like syphilis when we weren’t on stage together.

“Yeah.” I nod, keeping the syphilis qualifier to myself.

“And you have to work on her next album, right?”

We struck a deal from the beginning—Qwest featured on my album, and I’d feature on hers. I also agreed to produce two of the other songs on her project.

“Those are all things I’m legally committed to do, though.” I kiss the corner of Bristol’s mouth. “If you don’t want me to do the panel, I won’t.”

“But you really *want* to do the panel.”

It’s a statement, not a question. She knows I’m taking every opportunity I can to talk about criminal justice reform and improving relations with law enforcement . . . so yeah, I really want to do the panel, but I don’t want Bristol feeling some type of way about Qwest and me doing this event together.

“I want to, yeah. It’s important.” I link our fingers and dip my head so we’re looking into each other’s eyes. “But not more important than you.” I settle our linked fingers over my heart. “Not as important as us, Bris.”

After a moment, she yields a smile.

“I’m fine with you doing the panel—on one condition.”

“Name it.”

“Piggyback ride.”

I fake exasperation, allowing her to shift the subject and lighten the air around us.

“Carry you up them steps?”

“Yes, up *them* steps.”

She turns me around and presses on my shoulder until I’m squatting. When she jumps on my back, my hands hook under her long, smooth legs. I pretend to struggle under her weight and she laughs. She sounds so happy I can’t help but grin thinking of my driven, sarcastic girl describing herself as a bird.

“If I give you a piggyback ride,” I tell her at the bottom of the staircase, “you give me a blow job. We’ll call it even.”

“What’s so special about a blow job?” She tightens her arms around my neck when I start up the stairs. “I give you one like every other day.”

“First of all, I can’t believe you actually just asked me what’s so special about a blow job. You may as well ask what’s so special about the Taj Majal. A blow job is practically an eighth wonder.” I press on as she laughs into my neck. “Second, the operative words there are *every other day*, so obviously, there’s room for improvement.”

“No, the operative word is blow *job*.” She lightly smacks the side of my head. “Sounds like work for me.”

“Well you’re employee of the month.”

“I better be the *only* employee.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about me cheating.” I squeeze her thighs. “I like my balls *attached*.”

Her husky laugh draws an answering chuckle from me. We’ve reached the bedroom and she slides off my back, walks around me to stand at the foot of the bed, mischief in her eyes, and smiles.

“What’s a habitual line stepper?” She tugs at the hem of my shirt, emblazoned with the tagline, flashing black silk panties at the apex of her thighs. My eyes are glued there in case she lifts the shirt again—wouldn’t want to miss that.

“Huh?” I burn a look over her breasts taunting me through the white cotton. “What was the question?”

“Habitual line stepper?” she asks patiently, pointing to the front of the T-shirt.

“Oh, uh . . . it’s from a Dave Chappelle sketch, the one where Prince slaps Charlie Murphy.”

“Prince slaps who?” She shakes her head. “I don’t get it. I watched an episode and wasn’t that impressed. He just makes a bunch of racial jokes.”

“At least he makes fun of all races equally, and religion and politics and everything in between. Nothing and no one is safe. He’s a master of satire and social commentary, and funny as hell. You must have seen a weak episode.”

I take a step closer, lifting the hem to expose the smooth skin of her waist. I pull the shirt over her head and toss it into a corner. Her hair settles back around her shoulders, falling forward so her naked breasts poke through the dark strands.

“Forget Dave Chappelle,” I say huskily.

I could write a sonnet to Bristol's nipples, the way they tip her breasts, the blend of pink and brown, roses and chocolate, shading her areola. I lean down to hover over them, my eyes snaring hers. Anticipation thickens the air.

"I'm wanna do to you what spring does to the cherry trees," I whisper, paraphrasing the Neruda poem before taking one nipple in my mouth and laving it with my tongue. Like a flower waiting for spring, she blossoms. She blooms like sweet fruit ripening between my lips. I pull away, but her hands urge me back to her breast, pleasure tightening her pretty features.

I ghost my lips over the other neglected nipple. Where at first I was sweet, now I'm all teeth and rough suction, stretching my mouth, wide and hungry, over the other breast. Where I laved the other nipple, this one I lash with my tongue. Her nails sink into my shoulders and she fills the room with whimpers. I release her nipple, satisfied by the vivid red marks slashing the delicate skin. Breath fights to free itself from her lungs, laboring past her lips, heaving her breasts. I gently turn her around by the hip to face the bed and almost bite my fist at the sight of her.

*Thong.*

Teeny, tiny thong. Ass out.

I coax her panties down her legs, inch by torturous inch. When she's a naked, lithe stretch of lines and curves, I reach around to cup her breasts, tugging on those nipples until they peek between my fingers. Bristol's breathing grows more ragged and she presses her back into my chest, circling her ass into my crotch.

I really wanted that blow job, but I'm not sure there will be time for that tonight. One hand stays right where it is, toying with her nipple as the other hand dips between her legs.

"Can you open for me?" I dust kisses across the elegant slope of her shoulders. She widens her stance no more than an inch, but I'll take a mile. I press the flat of my hand between her legs and the thick, wet lips of her pussy press into my palm. I vary the cadence of strokes over her clit until she's pumping into my hand, her hips chasing every thrust and her cries dying in her throat before they hit the air.

"Oh, God, Grip." Her voice verges on a sob. Even when she vices around my fingers, I don't let up the passionate pace between her thighs.

"That's it, baby." I drop to my knees, dragging my tongue down the smooth center of her back and over her ass. I clip the sweet flesh of each cheek between my teeth, relishing her startled gasp. Slowly, I press my hand

to her back, bending her at the waist until she bows on the bed, on her knees. I scoot her forward, tilting her chest down and her ass in the air. With a rear view of her spread wide for me, I swipe my tongue down the inside of her thighs, drinking from the silky skin, wet with her juices.

“I’m getting drunk on you,” I mutter.

“Grip.” My name shatters on her lips, but it’s not enough. I want her unintelligible. I suckle her clit and slip two fingers in, smiling against her pussy when she pants into the duvet. I stand and strip then run my cock up and down her divide, soaking in her wetness as she presses back into me, offering me more.

“You have to fuck me now.” Her plea is breathless and urgent. She looks over her shoulder, her eyes glassy. “Please, right now.”

Her eyes beg me. Her pussy weeps for me. The complete surrender in every line of her body undoes me, the last strands of control snapping and popping as they give. The wild, loose parts of me grab her hips and flip her onto her back. I push her legs wide until her knees almost touch her shoulders and run my finger over the hot, wet pleat of flesh between her thighs. Her eyes flutter closed.

“Open your eyes, Bristol,” I say huskily. “Look at me when I fuck you.”

When she looks at me, her hair like a dark river twisting behind her on my bed, my damn knees feel weak. That’s what Bristol does to me with one look. That’s how weak she renders me without even trying. Her eyes are the color of moonlight and her love glows like stars. My whole universe is right here, and I don’t want to leave her and go to New York when the time comes.

Restless arousal shudders through her while she waits, while I stare. I shake off worry and uncertainty, dropping to my knees on the bed and lifting her by the hips. The sound of her breath hitching when I push in, when I invade that sacred space, tightens my balls. She’s a tight, slippery tunnel, and after one stroke, I lose my mind. Body overtakes brain, a coup of instinct usurping reason. I push her knee farther back so I can go deeper. I twist our fingers together, pressed into the pillow by her head. I’m vaguely aware of Bristol moaning, of her tightening around me, of her coming again, the evidence of her pleasure spilling all over me, and then it’s building in me, drawing my balls tight, flexing the muscles of my abs.

My love erupts. It blows.

I’m a geyser, a constant flow until the unrelenting rhythm of my body slows into something gentler, something tender. We press together, and

beneath me she is crushed silk. My hot flesh and hers are slickened with the rigor of our passion, the sweat that bathes our skin. I don't know if it's mine or if it's hers, but this moment, this perfect glass-blown moment where our bodies unite and our souls intersect, this moment belongs to us.



**BRISTOL**

I'VE SURVIVED A STORM.

That's how I feel every time Grip makes love to me, like a hurricane swept through and instead of taking shelter, I stood in the eye of it, the powerful wind whipping over me. I begged it to lift me. I let it love me. And this, the moments after, when the city lights shine through Grip's wide windows and play over our naked, sweat-slicked bodies, when Grip's fingers trace my back, playing over the vertebrae like keys on a piano, this is the quiet after the storm.

"I pulled your hair." Grip's voice comes quiet, still slightly hoarse. I screamed his name. He shouted mine. Our throats are raw from passion. My scalp still prickles from his forceful tugs of my hair. It's not quite pain, and in the moment, it felt good enough to make it worth it.

Grip works his fingers through the hair spilling onto his pillow until he reaches my scalp to soothe and massage.

"Did it hurt?" He leaves an offering of kisses between my shoulder blades.

"No." I lean back into his affection. "You know I love a rough fuck."

He chuckles at my neck, his warm breath caressing the sensitive skin.

"Just making sure."

He goes quiet again. We both do, for several long moments, where the only sound in the room is our breathing, and I swear I can hear his heartbeat . . . or maybe it's mine. Maybe they're the same, one not beating until the other does.

"I love sleeping you with you." I don't say it to fill the quiet—we don't

need that. I just want him to know.

“Me, too. Every night. Every morning.” I hear him swallow, feel his fingers go still in my hair. “Bris, there’s something we need to talk about.”

*Finally.*

“I know.” I roll onto my back and turn my head to catch whatever the city lights and the moon can show me on his face.

“You know?” He searches my eyes the way I’m searching his. “What do you know?”

“Not what you need to talk to me about.” I pull the sheet up from my waist and tuck it under my arm. It’s not cold at all, but as our bodies cool, I shiver. “I could just tell something was bothering you today in the parking lot.”

He nods, inching close enough to drop a kiss between my eyebrows, then in the hair at my temple.

“Do you remember me talking about a book I read while I was on tour called *Virus*?”

“Are you kidding?” A smile turns up the corners of my mouth. “You read it like three times and said it changed your life. It’s about criminal justice reform, right? Dr. Hammond?”

“Right.” Even in the dim light, I see that Grip is pleased. “You remembered.”

“Of course. I’m sorry I haven’t read it yet. It’s on my Kindle, I’ve just been so busy lately. I’ll get to it.”

“Hey.” A frown pinches his brows the tiniest bit. “You don’t have to read it because I did. I don’t want you trying to be something you’re not. Who you already are is exactly who I need you to be.”

“I know.” But it still feels good to hear it. Grip remains the good guy his mother raised to be a great man, the one who never forgets where he came from, but he’s evolving. Maybe there’s this little corner of my heart afraid I’ll somehow get left behind, and his words go a long way to assure me I won’t.

“Good.” He looks at me for an extra few seconds, like he’s checking to make sure I believe him. “Anyway, Dr. Hammond is a guest professor at NYU this semester.”

I sit straight up in bed, grinning down at him lying on his side, propped on his elbow with his head resting in his hand.

“Grip, that’s amazing.”

“Yeah.” He grins back at me, his eyes carrying answering excitement.

“It’s pretty dope. Reading his book opened my eyes and shifted my priorities in a lot of ways. It provoked me to not only do more, but to figure out what I want to do.”

“So, with you enrolled online, how does that work?” I ask. “I mean, do you like audit the class by video? Or teleconference?”

Grip’s smile falls away and he licks his lips, dropping his eyes to the sheets between us.

“It’s not set up like that.” He looks back at me, emotions wrestling in his eyes. “I think I’ll have to move to New York for the semester.”

Air rushes past my lips. How did that not occur to me? It makes sense that he would move to New York. I know Grip’s ambitions go far beyond the stage, beyond music. He wants to have an impact, and the more involved he becomes, the more he requires of himself.

“Wow.” Even knowing that, the thought of him living in New York for months shipwrecks me. For a moment I’m flotsam, inwardly adrift, flailing. I’m really excited for him, but I know my voice is dull when I speak.

“You should do that.” I nod, convincing myself as much as him. “I think that’s awesome.”

“The class is three days a week.” Even though I’m staring at the anxious tangle of fingers in my lap, I know Grip’s eyes don’t leave my face. “But it’s Monday, Wednesday, Friday, so just the weekend between.”

Not much time to fly back and forth between coasts.

“I’ll come back to LA, of course,” Grip continues. “And you can visit me in New York. I figure we’ll see each other four, five times a month or so, sometimes more.”

I’m a punctured tire, all the air hissing from me. The excitement I felt, I can’t sustain at the prospect of so little time with him for the next several months.

“Hey, I know it’s not great.” Grip props his chin in my lap and wraps a wide palm around my hip, warming me through the sheet. “I don’t have to go. Maybe I should reconsider and—”

“No.” I shake myself out of self-pity and lean down to frame his strong jaw and high cheekbones, the face of a king, between my hands. “It’s right. It’s good. You need to do this, and I want it for you. We’ll figure it out.”

Grip tucks his head into my waist, kissing my stomach through the sheet and running his hand over the bare skin of my back.

“I know things are crazy at Prodigy right now, and that means more

responsibility,” he says. “Rhyson’s trusting you with so much. It’s everything you’ve worked for, and I’m happy for you.”

I angle my head, studying him. If there’s one thing I know, it’s when Grip wants something. He’s never held back from me, never left me wondering what he wanted from me, but now, I sense that he’s withholding something.

“What do you want?” I slide back down the headboard until we’re both lying down, facing one another. “From me? Grip, tell me what you want.”

Hesitation clouds his expression, and then he shuts his face altogether.

“Like you said.” He pushes the wild tumble of hair back from my face. “We’ll figure it out.”

“*Tell me what you want.*” I brush my thumb over the dark slash of his brows. “Can you do that for me?”

“Bris.” He drops his lashes, covering whatever is hiding in his eyes. “I don’t think—”

“Right—don’t think, just tell me.”

He scans my face. I know my expression is a blank check, offering him whatever he wants, but I don’t care. All hesitation falls away. Staring back at me is the persistent man who pursued me shamelessly for eight years, who wore my resistance down to nothing.

“I want you to come with me.” A muscle clenches in his jaw. “I know it’s selfish and might seem like I’m asking you to follow me across the country, but—”

“Yes.”

“I’m still asking,” he goes on, like I didn’t speak, like he didn’t hear me. “I don’t know how we make it work. We’ll figure that out together, but the thought of seeing you only a few times a month . . . I know we *can* do it, I just don’t want to.”

“Grip.”

“And maybe I *am* a caveman. Maybe it *is* sexist to ask you to be the one who moves. It’s just, with classes three times a week, I don’t see how I can—”

“Grip.” I press my fingers over the soft lips that were making love to my nipples not even an hour ago. “Baby, I said yes.”

“You did?” he mumbles into my fingers, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

“I did.” I laugh, not exactly sure how I’ll make it work, but knowing that I will. For him, I will. “I mean, I’ll have to come back and forth some, but I

have to try. I don't want a long-distance relationship. That sounds like torture."

Grip's smile dims and his brows draw together.

"But Rhyson needs you here now more than ever. He won't be happy to hear you're moving to New York at such a crucial time."

"Rhys will understand. He's got Kai."

"What does that mean?"

"That he knows how it feels to have someone who means more than everything else."

Grip's expression softens. His eyes are intent, like he's memorizing the way the light strikes my face the same way I'm memorizing him. He slowly, painstakingly peels the sheet back from my breasts, the cool air raising goose bumps on my naked skin . . . or maybe that's just Grip.

"I know you said you like a rough fuck." Grip shifts until he's leaning over me, his weight supported by the muscles flexing in his arms. He slots his lean hips between my thighs, and I feel him eager and ready again through the sheet covering my legs. "But how do you feel about long, slow, grateful ones?"

I widen my thighs so he sinks deeper into me.

"The longer," I say, reaching between us to grab his growing erection, my hand fisting him, lengthening him. "The better."

**BRISTOL**

**ME:** Hey! I know it's Sunday morning, but I need to talk to you about something.

**Rhyson:** Sure. You wanna call?

**Me:** I was actually thinking about coming over.

**Rhyson:** See you when you get here.

**Me:** I'm kind of already here.

No message bubbles appear, and a few seconds later the front door to Rhyson's stately home flings open. My twin brother stands in the entrance, grinning at me as I lean against my baby girl, the Audi convertible I bought a few years ago.

"Aren't you polite this morning?" He steps back, gesturing for me to walk past him into the house. "You usually just barge in."

He's right. I have all his codes and keys, full access to his life.

"That was before Kai moved in." I pause in the doorway to give him a quick hug before walking through to the foyer. "If you didn't like to screw your little wife all over this place at all times of the day, maybe I would risk showing up unannounced."

He offers no apologies, only that cocky grin that used to strip women of their panties. Now he just uses it to tell me he's a happily married man with one set of panties to worry about.

"Probably a good idea." He tips his head toward the kitchen. "Come on. I'm eating breakfast."

Sunshine brightens the room, the marble counters and modern state-of-the-art appliances—which Rhyson's probably never touched—gleaming. His

housekeeper has always taken good care of him, and now Kai cooks any time her schedule allows.

“Hungry? Coffee?” Rhyson glances at me, his eyes silvery under a sweep of dark hair. He’s my brother, but even I can appreciate that he’s a beautiful man.

Of course he is—we’re twins.

He and I tell Grip that all the time to make him roll his eyes and laugh. Speaking of Grip . . . I’m here for a reason, and I hope this goes well.

“No, I’m good.” I cast a disparaging look at the orange mash in the food processor on the counter. “Especially if that is breakfast.”

“That’s Aria’s baby food. Kai makes it herself.” Rhyson laughs and settles onto a bar stool at the counter, a croissant on the plate in front of him. “Today was sweet potato.”

I find myself smiling too as I take the stool beside him.

“Where is my adorable niece?”

“You’re not gonna believe this.” Rhyson slants me a wry grin. “Don’t laugh.”

“I won’t.” Though I’m laughing a little inside already because he told me not to. I’m perverse that way.

“Kai took her to church.” He gives me a *don’t say a word* look.

Rhyson would be an atheist if he cared enough to actually declare himself something, and the irony of him marrying the daughter of a Southern Baptist preacher is not lost on any of us.

“Kai took Aria to church?” A half laugh, half breath leaves my lips. “Did she go with Aunt Ruthie?”

Kai’s Aunt Ruthie lives with them and helps out with Aria since Kai’s schedule can get crazy. One of the first things Aunt Ruthie did when she relocated from Glory Falls, Georgia, was find a church here in LA. I can’t pretend to understand why this is urgent for anyone, but apparently it’s a thing for church people.

“No, that’s just it.” Rhyson takes a sip of coffee and shrugs. “She doesn’t like Aunt Ruthie’s church, so she’s looking for the ‘right’ one. She wants Aria to grow up in a progressive church, an oxymoron if I ever heard one.”

“So Aria will grow up believing in arcs and angels?” The smile I give him holds genuine curiosity. “Are you okay with that?”

Rhyson tips his head to the left, actually considering it.

“I trust Kai. She won’t go overboard or get Aria into anything crazy.” He

shrugs and goes back to his croissant. “Besides, that’s how Kai was raised, and it didn’t screw her up too badly.”

“That’s definitely true. You married up, brother.”

As I knew he would, Rhyson almost spits out the coffee mid-sip, his expression incredulous.

“Oh, now I married up, but not too long ago you swore Kai was a conniving gold digger.” Rhyson narrows teasing eyes at me. “Excellent judge of character, by the way.”

“In my defense, I was looking out for you.” I smile brightly, ignoring just how wrong I was about my now sister-in-law. “It all worked out beautifully.”

“Can’t argue with that.” Rhyson offers a quick smile before turning eyes the exact shape and color of mine in my direction. “But you didn’t drag your ass over here on a Sunday morning to celebrate my marriage.”

I hadn’t realized how much I was dreading this conversation until I was right in front of it.

“I think I will have some coffee after all.” I walk over to the counter, to the coffee machine that looks like it came with launch codes. Rhyson waits patiently, but his curiosity crackles in the kitchen while he takes the occasional bite. Once I’m settled beside him again with a cup of coffee I don’t want or need, I turn to face him.

“Do you remember the book Grip couldn’t stop talking about this summer?”

Rhyson snorts and cocks one dark brow.

“It was unavoidable.” He leans back and crosses his arms over his chest. “*Viper* or *Sickness* or—”

“*Virus*, by a guy named Israel Hammond.”

“Right.” Rhyson’s face animates. “When I went to Marlon’s show in Paris, he quoted like half a chapter to me back at the hotel.”

“That sounds right.” I smile, my heart swelling a little with pride in Grip’s passion, his convictions. “He says it was life-changing.”

“That’s our boy.” Rhyson chuckles, affection for Grip coloring his smile. “Somebody’s gotta change the world.”

“Yeah, well . . .” I bite my lip, training my eyes on the swirling pattern in the marble countertop. “Dr. Hammond is guest lecturing at NYU this semester.”

It gets quiet enough for me to hear the hum of the shiny appliances in the kitchen.



“He’s going to New York then?” I feel Rhyson’s eyes on my face but don’t look up to meet them quite yet.

“Yeah,” I answer before biting the bullet and looking up to meet his gaze. “And I’m going with him.”

Rhyson nods slowly, turning his mouth down at the corners.

“Never thought I’d see my little sister dropping everything to follow some man across the country.”

I’m too on edge to detect the teasing in his voice, so I’m already poised for battle, mouth locked and loaded with ammo, only to find him laughing at me.

“Bastard,” I mutter, fighting a smile.

“I’m not sure our mother would appreciate that.”

Rhyson’s smile holds, but his face ices over the way it always does when my mother comes up. My relationship with her isn’t nearly as complex and convoluted as his, and overall, on a scale of one to fucked up, my relationship with her has always been pretty fucked up. That said, I’ll never forget how she intervened to get me out of the mess with Parker. I’ll always remember those moments of naked vulnerability she and I shared that day we took him down. Things have continued to slowly thaw between us, even though we’re still not besties. It takes effort and patience and forgiveness—three things Rhyson has never had for our mother.

“You cut Dad some slack, Rhys,” I say, reminding him of the progress he and our father have made over the last few years. “Maybe you could cut her some, too.”

“Maybe you could mind your own damn business.” He shifts his cool stare over my shoulder.

I just keep looking at him because he knows that I, unlike half the people in this town, am not scared of him and can give as good as I get. He also realizes that I know how deeply our mother injured him. She injured me, too. They all did, but I kept on fighting to have them in my life. As hard as it’s been, it’s also been worth it.

“Bris, I’m sorry.” Rhyson runs an agitated hand through his already rumpled hair. “I . . . can we just talk about what you came here to talk about and leave her out of it?”

“Sure.” I lick my lips and set aside my fix-it reflex, that part of me that wants to get to the bottom of everything and make it work properly. Our family has never worked properly, so why I—who spent half my life on a

therapist's couch—think I can fix us, I have no idea, but I never stop trying.

“So you want to go with Marlon to New York, huh?” Rhyson forces a smile, deliberately shifting us to safer ground.

“Yeah.” My smile comes more naturally just because he said Grip's name. There are two things absolutely right in my life: my career and my man. I would prefer not to ruin one for the other, but if Rhyson forces me to choose, I have every confidence I can find another way to make a living—though I know it won't come to that.

First of all, I'm his sister.

Second of all, he needs me too badly. I've become indispensable. That, even beyond the blood and DNA we share, is my insurance policy.

“Look, I know there's a lot going on with Prodigy,” I begin, prepared to build my case for why I could work from the moon as long as I have Wi-Fi.

“But nothing you can't handle from New York,” Rhyson says before I can mount my defense.

“Right.” I sketch a quick frown before continuing. “And I know I need to be on site for certain things.”

“But you can just fly here for those and then go back to New York when you're done.” Rhyson sips his coffee, regarding me steadily over the rim. “Between video conference, Wi-Fi, and every other technological advance at our disposal, shouldn't be a problem.”

“I was hoping you'd see that.” Though I thought I would have to be the one to make him see it.

“And it's just for the semester, right? Next semester you guys would be back in LA?”

“Yeah.” Out of habit I rub at my neck to ease the tension, but there's no tension there. This conversation is going much better than I had hoped. “We'll be back in December after finals.”

Rhyson kind of stole my thunder, took some of the wind from my sails. I was fully prepared to persuade, convince, and cajole him to my point of view, but he anticipated everything I had lined up. I do at least have one thing he probably didn't see coming.

“I was thinking while I'm in New York, I could feel out some Broadway possibilities,” I say nonchalantly.

“Broadway?” Curiosity lights up his eyes. “For who?”

“Well, I know Kai wants to get into acting, and after her album drops, we've been talking about movie roles.”

“No nudity,” he cuts in, wearing his *I mean it* face. “I told you, Bris. Don’t even bring us a script that calls for her to do some fifty shades of fucked up shit with some dickhead actor. If I haven’t been clear—”

“The last time we discussed Kai’s movie career, you asked me to look for nun roles.” I layer my look and my words with sarcasm. “I think you were pretty clear.”

“Good,” Rhyson mutters, either not seeing or not caring how ridiculous he sounds. My sister-in-law will thank me later for saving her from wearing a habit onscreen.

“Kai’s one of those rare talents who can do it all,” I continue. “She sings, dances, acts, and is gorgeous.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty amazing.” Pride and love fill his eyes, and I’m so happy my brother didn’t listen to me when I questioned Kai’s motives, so happy neither of us settled for the matrimonial farce our parents showed us all those years.

“There aren’t many Broadway roles that require nudity.” I shrug and widen my eyes innocently. “Maybe my time in New York could open up a whole new avenue for Kai.”

The cogs are turning so hard in my brother’s head, I think I smell smoke.

“I love that idea, Bris.” He leans over to hook his arm around my neck and pull me closer. “And I think it’s great that you’re putting your relationship with Marlon first.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, and I know it’s your choice. He’s not that guy who would drag you across the country by your hair.”

“I had to force him to tell me he wanted me to go with him.” I smile at the memory. “He’s so concerned with me being happy and doing what I love.”

“Unlike me who would just say Kai, pack your shit, you’re coming with me to New York?” Rhyson laughs, but his voice rings with truth.

“Your words,” I say with a grin. “Not mine.”

He almost destroyed their relationship trying to control Kai. Our parents set that pattern managing his career as a piano prodigy, using love as control, and it’s taken him twenty years to break out of it.

“I’ve gotten a lot better, too,” Rhyson asserts. “Just ask Kai.”

“Ask me what?”

Kai stands in the kitchen doorway, Aria perched on her hip. Her petite frame is perfectly lit by the sun shining through the windows, and for a

moment, my brother looks dazzled by the dark hair hanging almost to her waist and the tilted eyes that are even more beautiful because they are kind. My niece is such a perfectly adorable blend of Rhys and Kai, I can't resist going over and snatching her up immediately.

While I'm cooing to Aria, Rhyson is thoroughly kissing his wife, pulling her much shorter frame up and into his.

For a long damn time.

"Ahem." I clear my throat meaningfully. "You think you two could wrap this up before Aria graduates?"

Kai turns dreamy, love-dazed eyes my way, a bashful smile on her pretty face. You'd never know this unassuming girl in her simple jeans and T-shirt is about to blow the music industry wide open. Her sweetness cloaks a driving ambition that is backed up by immense talent. She's going to be the biggest thing since . . . well, Grip, and it's my job to make sure that happens. No one deserves it more than Kai; she's lost so much over the course of her life, and it's good to see her happy, especially with my brother.

"Sorry." A faint blush colors her cheekbones. "Rhys, what were you saying Bristol should ask me when I came in?"

He winks at me conspiratorially over her shoulder.

"We were just wondering how you feel about Broadway."

**BRISTOL**

“THIS COULD BE THE ONE, BRIS.”

I glance from the clean modern lines of the beautifully decorated Tribeca apartment to Charisma Simmons, my friend since high school. Her mother, Bridget, one of New York’s most elite realtors, has shown me several properties this week, and none of them made me feel like this one does. There’s something special here. Even though Grip and I will only be leasing it for the semester, it has its own permanence, like it has only ever been someone’s home. There’s a warmth that wraps around me; it feels personal. It could be that this one comes fully furnished while the others were cold, stark, empty boxes—albeit expensive empty boxes. You have to mortgage your soul to live in New York. I shouldn’t be surprised; I grew up here, and LA isn’t much better. We had an apartment on the Upper East Side, where I lived during the school year, close to the private school I attended. When I wasn’t there, I was at our estate a few hours outside the city. My parents and Rhyson were rarely at either since they were usually on the road, and those places never felt like home—but this, this was someone’s home. I can feel it.

“It is beautiful.” My gaze drifts over the sprawling space, the exposed rafters, the red brick wall fitted with wide windows overlooking the city, and the slatted staircase leading to the upper floor. “Your mom said the owner wants to meet us, right? How close are they?”

“Oh! Let me check.”

Charisma, or Charm as we chopped her down to growing up, pulls her phone from the latest Birkin bag. She looks every inch the New Yorker, shaded in black and gray, swathed in leather, accessorized and name-branded

from head to toe. The knife-sharp points of her precisely bobbed hair slice into her skinny shoulders. The Gucci eyeglasses framed by her perfectly arched brows say more about how smart she likes to look than they do about her nearsightedness. I know her secret. In the cutthroat publishing industry, a woman as delicate and lovely as Charm does whatever necessary to be taken seriously by the intelligentsia, including wearing glasses she doesn't actually need.

My wardrobe has adapted to New York, some, too. There's always an edge I don and doff depending on the coast. Today I've paired my black tulle-ruffled mini skirt with a tight black leather jacket and ankle boots. If we're spending the fall here, I need to shore up my sweater-weather game.

"My mom's fifteen minutes out. She got stuck uptown," Charm says, slipping her phone back into her bag and flashing the impish grin that landed us in the principal's office more than once. "But that gives us a few minutes to catch up before she arrives. How is it that you've been here all week and we haven't even had dinner?"

"Your author released a book." I run a finger over the mantle topping the glass-encased fireplace, noting its dustless-ness. "And it was a huge week for several of my clients. Me being here instead of LA, managing the time difference, trying to see properties . . ."

I shrug carelessly, used to our dynamic by now. Charm and I have kept in touch some, but we have demanding careers we've been completely dedicated to since graduating. It's paid off. Both of us hold pole position in our respective industries, but there's been little time for long-distance friendships, and missing each other has become a habit over the years. The two girls who grew up together and knew each other's secrets are now women who have a lot to learn about who the other has become.

"Well we have a few minutes now." Charm pats the cushion of the slate-colored suede sectional. "Come talk to mama."

I sit beside her and smile involuntarily. My affection for Charm has stubbornly hung around since we searched for ways to make our modest school uniforms sexier.

"Tell me about this man of yours, the one you're dropping everything to follow." Charm purses her lips and wiggles her brows with salacious speculation. "I must admit, I was surprised to see you with a black guy."

Charm's eyes stretch and she gasps, covering her mouth with one perfectly manicured hand.

“Oh, God. Did that sound bad? You know I’m a progressive.”

“Of course you are, Charm.” I pat her hand while holding on to my humor and patience. “Grade A liberal.”

“I just meant . . . well, you never dated black guys in college.”

My shrug is easy, my laugh less so. This feels weird.

“I never really thought about it. It didn’t matter—it *doesn’t* matter.”

“No, it doesn’t.” She puckers her perfectly plucked brows. “I sound like those people assuring you that they really do have black friends.”

I don’t answer, just lift both brows. Sometimes when you’re quiet, people hear themselves.

“I really do have lots of black friends.” Her tinkling laugh pokes fun at herself.

“I’m sure you do.” I grin and decide to let her off the hook for now.

“I’ve seen pictures, of course. He’s . . . wow.” Charm licks her lips, anticipation all over her face. This is more her speed—talking about how hot a man is rather than the sticky issues of race.

“You have to tell me everything,” she says, practically flushing. “Don’t hold back. Remember the Dick Diaries?”

How could I forget our regular debriefs after sexual encounters and misadventures?

“I’m not talking about this with you, Charm,” I say with neutral determination. “It’s not appropriate.”

“Oh, Bris, come on.” Charm levels a knowing look at me because in a past life, she *did* know all my dirt. “Remember we had a threesome with that guy from Penn? The one with the bumpy dick? I know how you sound when you come. I’m pretty sure telling me if your boyfriend is well hung doesn’t cross any lines we didn’t cross a long time ago.”

I groan because I try to forget that night with Crooked Dick.

“Please don’t mention that when Grip gets here.”

I haven’t seen him in two weeks, and he’s coming straight from the airport. He did a few shows in Europe and recorded with some Danish producer Rhyson has been raving about. Needless to say, after not seeing him for thirteen days, under Charm’s watchful eyes, I’ll have to restrain myself from dry-humping him.

“Also,” I tell Charm, “I faked that orgasm, so don’t presume you know how I sound when I come.”

“You faked that?” Charm looks aghast then impressed. “Damn, you’re

good.”

“Lots of practice.” I glance at my phone one more time to make sure I haven’t missed a text from Grip. “I’m serious, no talk of threesomes in front of Grip. His plane landed thirty minutes ago. I sent him the address and he should be here any minute.”

“He doesn’t know you did threes?”

“He doesn’t *like* that I did. Believe me, I do *not* want to hear about his either. We’re both pretty possessive, but I know he’s had his share.” I give her a flinty look. “Speaking of sharing, I don’t anymore, not him, so don’t even think about it.”

“Okay, okay.” Charm throws up her hands in defense. “I get it.”

“What do you get?” Charm often thinks she “gets” things about which she’s actually clueless, and I’m guessing my relationship with Grip qualifies as one of them.

“You’re exploring your options.” Charm’s smile is as dirty as a smudge on pristine paper. “Trying something different.”

“He’s not some exotic experiment.” I wince at the picture I think she’s forming in her head.

“You’re not . . .” Charm’s eyes narrow, speculate, and then widen. “You don’t think he’s, like, *the one*, do you?”

Before I can assure her he most definitely is the one, she goes on.

“I assumed you’d land with someone like Parker.” She pours scandal and conjecture into her glance and shakes vigorously. “I mean, before he went to prison, of course, but anyone with that much money can always be redeemed.”

“Parker?” Revulsion is on spin cycle in my stomach. “Parker is a miscreant who cares only about himself. He’s cruel and perverted.”

I sit up straighter and tell her what used to be the unpardonable sin in her book.

“And he fucks like a boy. I practically had to hold his hand when we had sex.” I look at her meaningfully. “I mean that quite literally. I got myself off more often than not.”

“Through the years, my standards have lowered by necessity. I could live with DIY if I had all his millions.” Charm laughs at the disgust I know is evident on my face. “I’m just saying, men like Parker, that’s who we marry. We know what it is. We’re UES, Bris.”

“I may have grown up on the Upper East Side, but you know it’s not all



it's cracked up to be."

"Actually, it was every bit that it was cracked up to be for me." Charm laughs in that way that always made me want to join in. She is outrageous, and what Grip would call "siditty," but underneath all the posturing, she's a good friend.

"But that was never enough for me," I remind her quietly with a sad smile for the holiday breaks I spent at her house when my family was on the road. Our eyes exchange those memories before she goes on.

"And he's enough?" she asks. "Grip is enough?"

"Oh, he's more than enough." I chuckle, a rich, satisfied sound even to my own ears.

"Is that your subtle way of telling me he has a big dick?" Her eyes light up with humor and curiosity.

"Believe me, there's nothing subtle about it." We share the kind of secret grin I only have with Charm and Jimmi, my two wildest friends.

"Now *that* I understand." Charm's glance turns contrite. "I didn't mean to sound . . . like I sounded before, but you must admit, he's a bit of a departure from the guys we've dated, the guys *you've* dated in the past."

"I know that, but you have these labels for us. Everyone does. I'm Upper East Side, Hamptons, debutante, Ivy league. I'm Angela Gray's daughter." I lift my brows in expectation. "And he's a rapper from Compton, right?"

"Well, that's oversimplified, but from the outside looking in, yeah."

"But what you don't know is that he's an incredible son. Seeing him take care of his mother showed me how he'll take care of me."

I press my hand to my heart, touching the place where the truth about him glows like a filament.

"He's a loyal friend, and he has a conscience even when it's not convenient," I say. "You don't know that when we make love, he whispers poetry. He makes me feel treasured. He'd die for me, and without thinking twice, I would die for him, too."

My words dangle in the air, defying gravity, and Charm is looking at me like she's never seen me before, like I'm a stranger. Compared to the self-absorbed, vapid girl she knew years ago, I probably am. I'm a new creature, and Grip has undoubtedly had a hand in refashioning me. I'm a little embarrassed when I replay my words. Charm and I haven't really talked like this in a long time, and I just poured my heart down her throat like a vodka tonic.

“I get why you’re tempted to define him with easy labels, but he . . . well, Grip defies defining.” I shrug and offer a self-conscious laugh. “You’ll get it when you meet him.”

“Then I’m about to get it.” Charm’s eyes lock onto something over my shoulder and light up like a kid sniffing cotton candy. “Hello there. Grip, I presume?”

I glance over my shoulder to the apartment entrance. Grip stands there, a huge suitcase on wheels trailing him.

How long has he been there? Did he hear me gushing about him like a lovesick teenager?

Lines of fatigue bracket the decadent spread of his lips, like he hasn’t had much sleep. A thin layer of stubble hugs the jut of his jaw, like he hasn’t had a shave, and his dark eyes rove over my breasts, my legs, and my face, like he hasn’t had *me* in thirteen days. From ten feet away, he’s eating me alive, and the memory of our last morning together crowds out the present. The phantom strokes of his hands over me, how he licked greedily at my body’s secrets—it all rushes back. If Charm weren’t here, I’d already be wrapped around him like a koala in heat.

“Guess I’m in the right place.” He spares Charm a quick glance and a polite smile before looking back to me, his eyes going gentler and hotter. “Hey babe.”

The hell if I care what Charm thinks. I’m up and across the few feet separating us. My arms slink up behind his neck and I press into him, so solid, so *here* after two weeks of absence. He drops the handle of the suitcase to lock his hands low on my hips, barely a decent distance from my ass, and lowers his head to kiss me. It should be quick. I’m aware of Charm watching us and of her mother and the owner of this lovely apartment mere minutes away, but as soon as I taste him, there’s no stopping. He persuades my lips open, his groan vibrating on my tongue and sliding into my chest. He creeps one hand up and into my hair, bunching it in his fist. My hands venture under the leather jacket he’s wearing and I dig my fingers through the soft cotton of his shirt into the dense muscles of his back.

He slows the kiss when we’re temporarily sated, but sexual energy still powers the connection between us. He pulls back, glancing over my shoulder at Charm, and quirks love-bitten lips into a rueful grin.

“Sorry, we haven’t seen each other in a while.” He pulls me into his side, one arm draped over my shoulder. “You must be Charm. Nice to meet you.”

Charm's cheeks are positively pink, and I'd know that flush anywhere. In college, the girl didn't have a spank bank so much as a vibrator vault. I know how many batteries she used to go through.

"Charm, you don't get to think about this tonight when you're alone." My voice is light, but I narrow my eyes so she knows I'm dead serious. Grip will not feature in her fantasies—I forbid it.

"Ahem." Charm practically floats to her feet and glides over, hand extended. If she curtsies, I'm kneeling her in the vagina. "I've heard so much about you, and none of it did you justice."

Grip's mouth tightens against what I suspect is laughter.

"I've heard a lot about you, too."

"Have you heard that I really want to do a book deal with you?" Charm shifts from slut muffin to shrewd businesswoman-editor-person with whiplash swiftness. "I suspect come December your Grammy nom will be announced. May as well start on *New York Times* bestseller, too."

"Charm, we're here to look at the apartment," I remind her. "Not ink a deal."

Who can think about business at a time like this, when I'm snuggled into my boyfriend's hard body and surrounded by his addictive scent?

"Knock, knock." A living, breathing prediction of Charm in twenty years pokes her head into the apartment entrance. "Anybody home?"

"Mother." Charm teeters on her Manolos, making her way over to Bridget Simmons, offering air kisses that come close to actually landing on her cheeks. "You look amazing."

"Oh, thank you, dear," Bridget practically purrs. "I've been doing Pure Barre."

"It shows," Charm says admiringly. "Where's Mrs. O'Malley?"

"Not far behind me, I'm sure." She smiles over at Grip and me. "Hullo, darlings. You must be Grip. Nice to meet you. Bristol, come, come."

Her hands bid me, flashing diamonds and drawing me into her Chanel-scented bosom.

"Hello, Mrs. Simmons." I do the perfunctory air kisses we were trained to perfectly execute in finishing school. "Thank you for helping me this week. This property is gorgeous."

"Isn't it just?" Bridget takes in the spacious living room and the glimpses of the city skyline it affords. "The owner wants to leave it furnished, if that's not a problem."

“Grip arrived just before you did, so we haven’t had a chance to look around yet.” I reclaim my spot beside him, tucking into his side, a wave of want and need slamming into me like a blow. The tension of his body tells me he’s suffering from the same deprivation I am.

“Mrs. O’Malley got stuck in some traffic, but should be here soon.” Bridget stops abruptly when her phone rings. “Oh, this is her now. Let me take it.”

She steps out into the hall and starts a rapid-fire one-sided conversation.

“I’ll be right back, too.” Charm holds up her phone. “I should check in with the office. I hadn’t planned to be gone this long.”

As soon as she steps into the hall, Grip drags me by the wrist into the small powder room just off the entrance. I don’t get the chance to ask him what he’s doing before he shows me, lifting me onto the sink and slotting his lean hips between my thighs. One hand shoves into my hair and the other wraps around the side of my neck. His tongue goes deep sea diving down my throat, and who cares about breathing? Endless days and interminable nights missing him make me desperate, make my hands shake when I touch him. I scoot forward to feel him through my wet panties, my tulle skirt rasping over my thighs as he pushes it up. I roll my hips into him, seeking friction in my neediest place.

“I heard the things you said about me,” he mutters against my jaw.

“Oh, God.” I squeeze my eyes shut, embarrassed not because he didn’t know I felt those things, but because I got caught gushing.

“Did you mean them?” His whisper over my lips makes them throb.

Forget embarrassment—he’s hard between my legs, and I realize my declaration turned him on. I’ve been too long without him to be reticent.

“Every fucking word.” I reach between us to rub him through his jeans.

His breath rushes out against the skin of my neck, where his head is buried.

“Baby, I missed you.” He sucks my earlobe and runs his tongue along my neck. “God, so much.”

He drops to his knees, his wide palms on the sensitive skin inside my thighs, spreading me open. He tugs my panties aside and presses his nose to me, inhaling sharply.

“Grip, stop.” I halfheartedly try to bring my legs back together. “We can’t.”

“I woke up like eighteen hours ago in Paris and couldn’t remember how

your pussy smelled.” Lava-level heat darkens his eyes. “That’s been driving me crazy.”

*Holy shit.* We may not make it out of this bathroom alive.

Before I can even voice that fear, he’s tugging my panties down my legs and lapping at me like he’s parched and I’m the last glass of water for miles. He’s French kissing my pussy, tunneling his tongue into my depths. I want to be discreet, want to do the decent thing and drag him up and back out into the living room so we can pretend to be upstanding, well-adjusted human beings, but I can’t because, love-starved animal that I am, my fingers are digging into his scalp and pressing his head deeper into the starving center of my body. If he bites my clit . . .

“Ahhh. Oh God, oh God, oh God. Griiiiiip.” In the midst of what borders on an out-of-body experience, I slam my palm into the wall for support. “Oh, please don’t stop. Yes! Dammit, yes.”

His mouth, right at the nexus of my pleasure, dips my inhibitions into boiling water, and they dissolve. Discretion takes a flying leap off Orgasm Falls, and I’m coming loudly and with unladylike enthusiasm when there’s a startled gasp from the other side of the heavy wooden door and then an awkward cough.

Grip freezes and reaches up to cover my mouth with his hand. His eyes are laughing and his lips are shiny. “Why are you so *loud*?”

I jerk away from his hand and narrow my eyes still teary from my cataclysmic orgasm.

“You bit my clit,” I hiss. “What did you expect?”

“Um, Bristol?” Charm taps the door, her voice sounding awkward. “We’re, uhhhh . . . out here when you’re ready to come—I mean, um, *come out* . . . here.”

“We’ll be right out,” I reply with false brightness before lowering my voice to a whisper. “You think they heard me?”

“Seriously?” He stands, a smug grin on his face. “They heard you in the Bronx, Bris.”

This isn’t happening. If I pretend long enough that they did not just hear me screaming my brains out mid-orgasm, maybe it will become reality, replacing this disaster where I’m still shuddering from coming hard as fuck on a stranger’s porcelain sink.

“We should get out there.” Grip grabs the knob.

“Wait.” I clutch his arm and hiss. I can’t stop hissing because they’ve

heard enough and anything above a hiss would only tell them more. “You’ve got . . . you need to . . .”

I pantomime rinsing my face off, furious when he tilts his head in confusion.

“You are not going out there wearing . . . *me* . . . all over your face,” I whisper fiercely. “I’ll go first. You . . .”

I motion between the faucet and his amused expression. I reach for my panties, but he holds them over his head, out of my reach, and then shoves them into a pocket of the jeans resting low on his hips.

“I hate you,” I growl.

“Yeah, it sounded like it.”

He has the audacity to smirk, and it’s so damn sexy I’m tempted to hop back up on that sink. Instead I draw a deep breath, reaching for the breeding my parents paid so much for, and open the door. I want to sink through the buffed-to-high-shine hardwood floors when I see a third person has joined Charm and Bridget. Apparently, Mrs. O’Malley arrived while Grip and I were indisposed. Bridget looks uncomfortable and slightly shocked. Charm looks amused and slightly jealous. Mrs. O’Malley looks . . . Jewish.

She’s the most Jewish looking O’Malley I’ve ever seen. That’s my first thought, and before I can pull a Charm and remind myself to be politically correct, she shakes my hand and introduces herself as Esther.

*Nailed it.*

The powder room door opens behind us and Grip steps out, turning his smile up to full wattage. Charm practically swoons.

“You must be Mrs. O’Malley,” he says, reaching for Esther’s hand. “I’m Marlon. You have a beautiful home.”

“It really is,” I agree. If he can recover smoothly and be all normal, so can I. “We were just admiring the powder room.”

*Abort mission.*

Why did I remind them about the powder room? But I can’t stop. My mouth runs ahead of my good sense.

“And noticing the, um . . .” What was I noticing other than Grip’s head between my legs? “The wallpaper.”

“Wallpaper?” Mrs. O’Malley’s thick, dark brows pull center. “There’s no wallpaper in there.”

“Exactly,” I rush to say. “I told Grip, I said, Grip . . . um, Marlon, I’m so glad they didn’t use wallpaper in here.”

“She did. That’s what she said.” Grip nods with great gravity. “What color would you call that paint, though, honey?”

The polite smile freezes on my face, and my eyes jerk to find his. He’s laughing at me. His mouth is a flat line, but those eyes are *a-live* with laughing at me.

“Oh . . . gosh, well, it’s such a . . . such a . . . rich color,” I stammer. I’m not a stammer-er, but it’s not every day I have an all-out orgasm within earshot of a little old Jewish lady with an Irish last name. “I’d call it . . . well . . .”

“White?” Mrs. O’Malley offers helpfully.

*Damn.* White. I didn’t exactly take note of the walls when we were in there.

“But it’s such a rich white,” I say, forcing my lips to stay curved.

“Well, this *is* Tribeca,” Grip deadpans. “There’s bound to be a lot of rich whites.”

An uncertain silence blossoms among us, one of those spaces where you’re not sure if it’s safe to laugh or if things just got really awkward. And then the most unexpected thing happens.

Mrs. O’Malley laughs—gut-busting, bend-at-the-waist, wiping-tears laughs. It’s a hearty sound, full of life. Chuckling, she links her arm through my boyfriend’s and starts walking off to show him the place. I’m still standing there getting my shit together as their voices mingle down the hall, and then a goofy grin finally finds its way to my face.

I knew I liked this place. Anyone who laughs like that knows how to make a home.

Charm and I pull up the rear, with Bridget, Grip, and Esther ahead of us.

“Bristol,” Charm whispers. “You were right.”

“About what?” I ask cautiously.

“That time we had that threesome with Bumpy Dick”—a skanky smirk slides onto Charm’s lips—“you definitely didn’t sound like *that*.”

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**GRIP**

“YOU CAN’T KEEP your hands off her, can you?”

Esther O’Malley studies me with a knowing grin. I don’t want to grin back. I should be embarrassed that this nice old lady just heard Bristol screaming her head off, but it’s hard to find the shame with Mrs. O’Malley grinning at me like a Cheshire cat.

“Um, no, ma’am.” I chuckle and try to look chagrined. “We haven’t seen each other in a couple of weeks, and I missed her. Sorry about earlier. That was . . .”

*Remarkable. Earth-shattering. World-rocking.*

“Unacceptable,” I say instead.

“Don’t apologize. She’s a beautiful girl.” Esther glances over her shoulder at Bristol and Charm bringing up the rear. Bristol splits a glance between Esther and me with bright red cheeks. I’ve seen that girl blush more lately than I can ever remember.

“That she is,” I agree.

Mrs. O’Malley leads me out and into an enclosed porch of sorts that looks like it might have been a greenhouse at some point.

“Are you two married?” she asks.

“Is that a condition for the lease?” I frown because I really love this place, more than any of the others Bristol sent pictures of this week while I was in Europe doing shows.

“Oh, no.” Mrs. O’Malley releases another one of those robust laughs. “Just curious.”

“We’re not married.” I pause to offer a one-sided grin. “Yet.”



“Engaged?” Her brows climb into silver-streaked bangs.

“Not yet.”

“What are you waiting for? Someone else to snatch her up?”

Even as a joke, that idea feels like a set of jagged fangs tearing through the muscles in my stomach, though I know it would never happen. I know she’ll never be anyone else’s.

“That’s not even . . .” I clear my throat. “No, I’m just waiting for the right time. There’s so much transition right now, so much going on. I just . . .”

I have no idea why I’m telling a complete stranger all of this, but there’s something about this lady. Ever since she busted out laughing over my joke and took my arm, a rapport has been building between us.

“I just want it to be right,” I finish.

Bristol, Charm, and her mother join us in the greenhouse before Mrs. O’Malley can respond. Bristol makes her way over and slips her hand into mine while the other ladies converse about the latest gossip in the city.

I assume Bristol is over her embarrassment, but I still bend to whisper, “You okay?”

I linger behind her ear, inhaling the mingled smells of her hair and perfume, heated by her pulse.

“Yeah.” She glances at Mrs. O’Malley still chatting with Bridget and Charm. “I owe you for that nasty trick you played on me. ‘What color would you call that, honey?’” she mimics.

“Your face.” I drop my head into the curve of her neck and chuckle. “Classic. ‘Such a rich white.’”

“Asshole.” When she draws back, the affection in her eyes and the smile on her face remove any sting. “Do you like this place?”

“My favorite so far, by a lot.”

“I don’t know.” A tiny grin teases the corners of her lips. “We could always go to my old stomping grounds, the Upper East Side.”

“I told you it’s too bougie.” I laugh because we’ve already had this debate.

“Is bougie anything like siditty? You called me that once.”

“That’s because you *were* siditty.” I dodge her small fist when it comes toward my chest. “And yes, kind of like that.”

“But it costs just as much to live in Tribeca as it does there.”

“Yeah, but Jay Z lives here.”

We both laugh at the ridiculousness of that statement.

“I really like this.” Bristol studies the outdoor porch with the comfortable couches and the table set for two in the far corner. “It reminds me of our roof at home.”

“Be a great place to watch the sun set,” I say. “Or snow fall. You know I’ve never seen snow fall?”

Bristol turns stunned eyes up to me.

“Are you kidding? You’ve never seen snow? How is that possible?”

“I’ve seen snow on the ground, but never falling.” I shrug. “I’m a Cali guy. We never had snow falling in LA. When my mom sent me to Chicago that year the violence was off the chain in my neighborhood, it was summer, and any time I’ve seen snow, it was after the fact. I just want to catch Mother Nature in the act, see it coming down.”

I glance around the renovated space that oozes charm and intimacy.

“This would be a great place to watch snow fall.”

“Yeah, this is a beautiful space,” Bristol agrees. “The whole apartment is really, and there’s a suite on the other side for Amir.”

I slant her a disbelieving glance and a quick frown.

“What the hell makes you think Amir’s coming with us to New York?”

“Well, I *will* be away some, and you need protection.”

Irritation rises as it usually does when someone implies that I can’t take care of myself—something I’ve been doing all my life in rougher neighborhoods than Tribeca and SoHo.

“He doesn’t need to,” I say. “If I have an event or something, he can fly in, but I don’t need him around the clock like some shadow.”

“Grip, you’re not just a local guy who made good and can—”

“I don’t want that, Bris,” I cut in, softening my voice when it comes out too harsh. “I said I can take care of myself. You think Amir’s going to walk me to school every day? Sit in class and make sure no one bullies me? What the hell?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Exasperation pinches Bristol’s lips together. “Your profile—”

“Let’s not do this right now. I don’t want to talk about my profile or my security detail.”

I glance at Charm sitting on one of the couches, typing rapidly on her phone.

“And I sure as hell don’t want to talk about a book deal.” I interlace my fingers with Bristol’s, tugging her close until I can see the onyx starburst in

her silvery eyes. “Don’t be my manager for a minute. We’re about to live together, move across the country together. This is a big step for us. Let’s enjoy it like any other couple taking a big step.”

She blinks up at me, a small breath shuddering past her lips. I cup her neck, spearing my fingers into her hair, and have to remind myself there are other people in the room.

“Can we just do that?” Emotion makes my voice husky as the truth of my words sinks in. “These last two weeks away from you reminded me how much I hated being apart when I was on tour this summer and you stayed in LA.”

She nods and squeezes my hand.

“You uprooting your life to come with me here to New York, it humbles me, Bris.” I swallow the warm knot in my throat. “Honestly, if you hadn’t agreed to come, I might not have pursued it and would have just let this opportunity go.”

“I know.” Her eyes are clear, completely at peace about her decision, about her sacrifice. “And I would hate being the reason you didn’t come here for this.”

I don’t care that we aren’t alone. I don’t care that they already heard Bris screaming with my head between her legs. Let them damn well think what they like. I brush our lips together, running my tongue into the corners of her mouth, kissing her with all the tenderness she inspires inside of me, like no one ever has before.

“Don’t stop knowing me better than everyone else does,” I say between kisses.

It’s our greatest intimacy, the way she knows me, accepts me. This is as intimate as when I’m inside her. It’s a closeness that goes beyond bodies.

“I’m trying.” She glances down at the flagstone floor.

“You don’t have to try. You just know me.”

“Well, you’re changing, evolving . . . coming into yourself, into your convictions.” She lays one hand against my jaw. “It’s awesome.”

I don’t get the chance to probe further because Mrs. O’Malley joins us, serving us both warm helpings of her smile.

“You two remind me so much of Patrick and me,” she says. “We should have been oil and water—me, the reserved only child from a good Jewish family, and Patrick, so loud and boisterous from his Roman Catholic clan of brothers and sisters. Neither of our families were thrilled about us being

together.”

Her assessing glance bounces between Bristol’s face and mine, and then drifts down to our joined hands.

“We didn’t care.” Her shoulders lift as if to say *c’est la vie*. “We knew. We loved. We did what we wanted to do.”

She casts a wistful look around the enclosed patio.

“This place, our home, was our last project together.”

“Project?” Bristol asks.

“Yes, I was a designer and he was an architect.” She laughs quietly as if at a memory just for her. “We moved here when prices were much lower. Best investment we ever made.”

“So you designed and decorated this place?” I ask. It’s gorgeous and modern; I never would have imagined the owners designed it themselves.

“We did. We even gutted this rooftop greenhouse and made it more functional.” She leans into us, lowers her voice, and points one bony finger up. “We replaced all the glass, tinted—you can see out, but no one can see in. Comes in handy.” She waggles her brows. “I’m sure you can guess why we did that considering your time studying the paint in the powder room earlier.”

Something between a horrified gasp and surprised laughter pops out of Bristol’s mouth at Mrs. O’Malley’s boldness. I’ve already seen this side of the roguish old lady, so my reaction is a little milder than Bristol’s. She ignores Bristol’s embarrassed response and waves her hand toward the table in the corner.

“We’d have our evening meals there with candles and the view of the city.” A breathy laugh. “We’d dance out here for the longest time, song after song, and then we’d . . .”

Her words wait on her lips while she swallows, a telling blush rising on the parchment skin of her cheeks.

“Those were good times,” she says, her voice softer, reflective.

“We love this place, Mrs. O’Malley.” Bristol’s voice is quiet and her eyes careful at the obvious emotion in the older woman. “We’d love to lease it, if you’d accept our offer, and we’d love to meet Mr. O’Malley.”

“That won’t be possible.” Tears well in Mrs. O’Malley’s eyes before she blinks and swipes ruthlessly at her wet lashes. “He’s . . . in a facility in Connecticut. Alzheimer’s.”

Time freezes, and even Bristol’s fingers in mine feel cold, affected by the frigid stasis. Pain saturates Mrs. O’Malley’s eyes again.

“He chose the facility before . . .” She clears her throat. “Before he couldn’t make those choices for himself anymore. I have an apartment near him, so that’s why we’re leasing our home.”

Fond memories collect in the watery eyes cataloguing the overstuffed outdoor furniture, the small dining table, the plants lining the periphery of the space.

“I can’t bear to sell it yet.” The shaky line of her mouth firms, and obstinacy overtakes any sign of weakness. “And I insist on it remaining just as it is, at least until he’s . . .”

My hand tightens around Bristol’s as Mrs. O’Malley struggles with the word she doesn’t say aloud but that still intrudes on her stubborn silence.

*Gone. Once he’s gone.*

“I’m so sorry.” Bristol touches her hand. “How long have you been together?”

The pain shifts on Mrs. O’Malley’s face, making room for something younger, fresher, an echo of past hope.

“Fifty years.” She laughs, passing a glance between my face and Bristol’s. “Longer than you’ve been alive. I knew he was it for me the first day I met him, and he knew, too. We were married a month later.”

“That’s beautiful.” Bristol leans into me a little deeper, a soft smile on her lips. The tightness of Mrs. O’Malley’s expression eases and she looks back to me.

“Don’t waste time when you know it’s real,” she says.

I think back to our discussion before Bristol joined us. There’s nothing stopping me from asking Bristol to marry me, certainly no obstacle in my heart. We haven’t been together that long, but I don’t care about that. I knew Bristol was the one years before she even gave me a shot.

“Fifty years.” Mrs. O’Malley lowers her lashes, blinking rapidly. “And it still isn’t enough. Anything that ended would never be enough for a love like ours. A love like ours is only satisfied by forever.”

She looks back up with eyes still shadowed by sadness, but direct and sure.

“Don’t feel sorry for us, for me,” Mrs. O’Malley says. “We have a great love. Emotion tells you about love, but hard times prove it. How can you know something is great unless it’s tested? Until then, it’s just an assumption. It’s a question, but life has a way of answering.”

I’m still absorbing the things she said, considering the great love I feel for

Bristol. I wonder when ours will be tested, but I have no doubt we can withstand anything life throws at us.

“So, what do we think?” Bridget triangulates a glance between Bristol, Mrs. O’Malley, and me. “You like it?”

Bristol and I exchange a quick look and an almost indiscernible nod before I speak up.

“We love the place.” I direct my words to the sweet Jewish lady with the Irish last name and naughty smile. “What do you say, Mrs. O’Malley?”

“I think we have a deal.” The wicked glint in Mrs. O’Malley’s eyes should warn me she’s up to no good. “Just remember that I want the house to remain as it is, so I hope you like the way it’s decorated. At least we already know Bristol likes the powder room.”

I want to keep her around just to make Bristol blush.

**BRISTOL**

“THIS WILL GO BETTER than I think it will.”

I’ve recited this mantra to myself all morning, hoping it’s like one of those affirmations you just keep putting into the universe until it comes true. If that’s the case, I’ll chant it all the way to Compton for the going away party Grip’s mother is hosting for him. I’ve been back a few times since that first disastrous Sunday dinner, and Ms. James has warmed considerably toward me.

I think she actually likes me now.

Jade, on the other hand, continues to give me a bit of a cold shoulder every time we meet. A few weeks ago, I ran into her at the studio where Grip was recording. He passed some of her songs on to a few artists, and now she’s actually writing for several of them. I congratulated her, but she still looked at me like I was something she stepped in—or maybe something she wanted to step *on*, like a bug . . . a white girl bug who has no business being with her cousin. She hasn’t said that outright lately, but every roll of her eyes and suck of her teeth tells me she wants to, and Jade isn’t one to hold back for long. I just hope that today at this party, when I’m surrounded by strangers and already feeling like I don’t fit in, she can refrain from saying what her body finds a dozen other ways to tell me.

“This will go better than I think it will,” I say again when the cage door of the elevator lifts on Grip’s floor—just in case the universe is listening.

I had an early meeting with an event organizer this morning. Grip hates it when I take meetings on the weekends, but with me leaving for New York soon, I have a lot to get settled in a short amount of time. It was so hard to

drag myself out of the warm bed with Grip naked and at half-mast in his sleep. The white sheet, stark against his roasted caramel skin, had dipped so low I could see the muscled slashes at his hips. A little restless when I left the bed, he flipped onto his stomach, and I wanted to lick up the wide smooth expanse of his back, nip the firm rounded cheeks of his ass when the sheet slipped even more, hid even less.

I check my watch to see if we have time to make good on that morning wood he was sporting before we leave for the party, and my key is still in hand when the loft door swings open. The last person I expect to see standing there is Angela Gray.

“Mother?” Surprise quickly congeals into suspicion. “Why are you here?”

Guilt clouds her expression before she reassembles her features into the lovely indifference I’ve been accustomed to my entire life.

“Just stopping by.” She digs around in her bag until she finds her keys.

Grip steps into view just behind her, and I’m distracted by the worry in his eyes.

“What’s going on?” I ask him over her shoulder.

“I’ll tell you inside.” He glances down at my mother. “Thanks for coming by, Angela.”

She sketches a curt nod without glancing up at him.

“I’ll keep you posted,” she says easily before turning her eyes to me. “We need to have lunch before you go to New York, Bristol.”

I stiffen at her words. She’s already told me what she thinks of me leaving LA to “chase” Grip. Apparently it’s anti-feminist to be with the man you love even when your job allows the flexibility to do so. I thought feminism was supposed to be about the power of our choices, and yet when I choose Grip, when I put him ahead of my career and convenience because I love him, that choice is denigrated. If women truly understood feminism, they would see the power of knowing what you want more than anything and pursuing it.

And I want Grip more than anything.

“You *are* still going, right?” she asks when I’m silent.

“Definitely.” I cross the threshold and tuck under Grip’s arm, pressing into the faded scent of yesterday’s cologne and the pure, raw maleness of him. “I’ll call about lunch. I have a lot to get done.”

She nods and walks over to the elevator, holding my stare until the doors close.



“She’ll miss you.” Grip kisses my forehead and closes the door. Once we’re inside, he cages me against it with his elbows and forearms pressed alongside my head. “That’s why she’s salty, not any of that pseudo-feminist crap she spouts about you adjusting your plans to come with me.”

“Why was she here?” I won’t be distracted by the hard body crowding me, by the delicious shape of his shoulders straining against his T-shirt.

“Hmmm?” Grip licks at the curve of my neck and shoulder, his tongue like rough velvet.

“Don’t ‘hmmm’ me, Grip.” I slide away from his warm body, putting some space between us. “It’s like being in the *Twilight Zone* for me to come home and find you with my mother, so cut the crap. What did she want? Was it about me going to New York?”

I don’t wait for his response.

“Dammit.” I drop my bag by the couch and flop down, eyes trained on the ceiling. “Why can’t she just let me live my life?”

Grip slides his hands into the pockets of the loose lounge pants that hint at the sleek musculature of his legs. He settles on the couch beside me and captures my hand, kissing the knuckles.

“She wasn’t here about New York.” His words emerge reluctant, low, sober.

I glance at his sharply hewn profile, noting the muscle ticking in his jaw.

“What’s going on?”

His chest rises and falls with the deep breath he draws and expels before beginning.

“It’s Parker.”

I only have to hear that bastard’s name to feel Parker’s fingers probing roughly between my legs again. I chew on my bottom lip and can almost feel the sting of him biting me there, of him making me bleed. I ration a slow breath through my nose, steadying myself as much for Grip’s peace of mind as my own pride. I don’t want him to worry, though I know him well enough to see concern in his dark eyes already.

“What about him?” I drop my head to Grip’s shoulder and wait for his response.

After a beat of silence, he speaks.

“He’s getting out.”

My body tenses involuntarily and I turn my head to search his face.

“When?”

He gathers both my hands in his and turns slightly on the couch so he can see me, pushing my hair back and cupping my neck.

“Next week or so.” Grip watches me closely. “We knew this would happen, babe. He’s got too much money and too many corrupt people in his pocket to hold him for long.”

I swallow, my muscles tautened with tension.

“I guess I hoped for a little more time to figure out a plan.”

“You ain’t figuring out nothing.” One brow lifts over Grip’s icy glance. “Son of a bitch is handled.”

“Handled?” A frown gathers on my face. “Handled how?”

“Apparently, his father has his own plans. He needs Parker free to make some merger happen. Shipping his ass off to Russia.”

“Russia? Merger?” I shake my head, but all the pieces still don’t make sense. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Ever heard of SiberTech?”

“Yeah.” I nod, mentally rehearsing what I know, trying to make the pieces fit. “Natasha Sukolov’s family owns SiberTech. She went to high school with us in New York, but their interests still lie mainly in Russia. What does SiberTech have to do with Parker getting out?”

“They’re using a marriage between Parker and Natasha to seal the deal.” Grip shrugs. “His dad found the right strings, pulled them, got Parker off.”

My fingers clench in my lap, anxiety twisting them. What if Parker comes after Grip again? My mind is already seeking out solutions, loopholes, anything to insulate Grip from whatever Parker might pull.

“Hey.” Grip covers my balled fists with one big hand. “He’s not touching you.”

My eyes fly to meet his. God, we’re a pair. We’d both do stupid shit to protect each other. I hadn’t thought of myself, only him, and he’s only thinking of me.

“We’ve been in constant communication with Parker’s mom. She’s pretty badass,” Grip says, admiration filtering into his expression. “With her help, we got it all figured out.”

“We?” I interject stiffly.

“Yeah, your mother and I,” Grip continues smoothly, but no way he doesn’t consider how un-cool it was to do all of this without me. “Mrs. Parker assures us her son is no threat. Her husband’s sick of cleaning up after him. He’s got his foot so far up Parker’s ass, he won’t piss without it being

tracked. Parker will marry this Natasha chick, fly away to Russia, run their business there, and leave us the hell alone.”

The tense line of Grip’s lips relaxes momentarily.

“And Mrs. Parker’s got so much shit on her *husband*, it’s in his interest to keep Parker in check. We have layers of protection, babe. We’ve been monitoring it for a few weeks. Now we know Parker’s getting out of prison, but also out of our lives for good.”

“Why am I just now hearing about it?” I ask, irritation crowding out concern or even relief. This is all good, but they were meeting without me, discussing something that is completely my business behind my back. “Why was my mother telling you and not me? Talking with you, not me?”

“Because I asked her to.” Grip’s voice brooks no argument, and the arrogant brow he cocks dares me to say something. He must have forgotten who he’s dealing with—I always have something to say.

“You asked her to cut me out of something that so obviously concerns me?”

“I just wanted to know first, Bris.” He pulls in that patient breath, the one that says he’s preparing himself in case I want to fight. “And see what we were dealing with. I was gonna tell you once everything was settled. Now it’s settled.”

“But—”

“I just needed to be sure. I wanted to be the first line of defense.”

“In this situation or . . . ?” I let my raised eyebrows finish the question.

“In everything,” he says decisively. “Do you have any idea how it felt to be locked up knowing you were even considering . . .”

His words thin to nothing, like he can’t bring himself to voice what I had planned to go through with. A deep swallow bobs the Adam’s apple in his throat.

Yes, I was going to fuck Parker to get Grip out of jail, and I would have done it had he and my mother not intervened. It would have gutted my soul, and maybe I would never have forgiven myself, but if I have to choose between my pride, my supposed virtue, and Grip’s freedom, well that’s not a choice at all.

“Don’t think I’ll let you wrap me in cotton, Grip,” I assert. “I can take care of myself.”

A scowl contracts the sharp lines of Grip’s face.

“Fucking Parker for all the world to see? That’s how you would take care

of yourself? And you think I'd want you to do something like that to protect me?"

He pulls away to fold his arms across his chest, the muscles straining against the sleeves of his plain white T-shirt. I feel the distance instantly, not just between our bodies, but separating our perspectives. This is a fight we never had. We talked some after he left jail, but we were just so relieved to get rid of Parker, too happy to have dodged the bullet and we didn't air this. Now it's in the air, and it's a cold front that makes me shiver.

"I didn't have a lot of options." I lay my palms flat against my bare legs. "I won't apologize for being willing to do whatever it took to protect you."

"Then don't ask me to apologize for doing the same. Look, just be glad it's handled. It's over." He stands and heads toward the stairs. "I'm gonna shower."

"We aren't done." I rush up the steps, close on his heels.

"Bris, later. We don't want to be late for our own party."

*Your party.* I don't correct him, but we both know this party could go on without me. There are probably several people there who wish Grip *would* go on without me.

He grabs his T-shirt from the back and yanks it over his head, tossing it into the bathroom hamper. My steps stutter to a halt. My eyes cling to his skin, stretched like dark velvet over the balletic play of muscles in his back. He shucks the bottoms and drops those in the hamper, too, unaware that my mouth has gone dry.

I know I had a point, but the flare of his powerful thighs, the tight curve of his ass from a tapered waist—it scrambles my thoughts. When he turns to the side to start the shower, his dick juts from the flat, ridged topography of chest and abs. I lick my lips, lips that have more than once been doused with the spicy-sweet taste of him in my mouth.

*Why is he so damn fine? It's not fair.*

"It's not fair," I mumble faintly. That jars me, reminds me I wasn't done with this argument. "Parker manipulated *me*, Grip. It wasn't fair to keep me out of it, and I want to make sure you don't do this again."

"Fuck fair." Grip steps into the shower. "I don't care if it's fair—I care if you're safe. We can fight about this every day if you want. You aren't leaving me over it, and I'm not leaving you, so what the fuck ever. Agree to disagree. I'm done talking about it, Bris."

With that, he turns his back to me, reaching for the shower gel.

He's right. I'm not leaving him over it, but I don't want to resent him. I want to trust him. I want him to trust me. That's what we have, and I won't let him ruin it with his irrational overprotectiveness.

I stand at the shower threshold and prop my shoulder against the wall. His head snaps around, the dark eyes narrowed and connecting with mine. He's braced for a fight I'm not giving him.

"Thank you," I say, wanting to ease things between us, even though it probably won't be our last clash over this issue.

Grip's wide palms slow in soaping his biceps. The tight line of his mouth loosens some and he sighs.

"Don't thank me." He braces one hand in front of him against the tile, eyes dropped to the water rushing down the drain. "It's my responsibility to take care of you."

He slants a look at me through the steam, a groove between his thick brows.

"That's all I want, Bris." He pierces me with the intensity of his eyes. "I want you safe. I didn't get the chance to personally protect you before. All I'm asking is that you let me do it now. I didn't want you anywhere near that motherfucker, and now you won't be."

Anger, concern, and sincerity knot in his deep voice, as tangled as the emotions twisting in my belly and coiling up tightly in my chest. Even when I'm driving him crazy, there's a fathomless affection for me in his eyes. It was there all those years when he was fucking other people and I was doing the same. It's there now, as clear to me as the water flowing in rivulets down the shower door.

There's something helpless about truly being in love, the kind of love they write songs about, that inspires poetry and launches ships and wreaks havoc. It leaves you slightly off balance, controlling when you mean to cherish, smothering when you mean to hold close. Maybe it takes a while to find the *just right*. I saw that in Rhyson when he and Kai first got together, and now I see it in Grip, too.

Hell, if I'm honest, I see it in myself.

Grip loves me desperately. I recognize that in him because it mirrors my own heart. I love him desperately enough to debase myself with Parker in broad daylight if that was what it had taken. How can I be angry at Grip for reciprocating that love? For feeling as helpless and off kilter as I do sometimes?

“Okay, Grip.” I draw a deep breath that’s scented and steamy from the shower. “I’ll give you this one, but you need to give me something, too.”

He ducks his head under the water streaming over him, licking along that body the way I want to.

“This isn’t a negotiation. I will protect you every time as I see fit,” he says. “But what do you *think* you want?”

“Amir moves to New York with us.”

“Hell no.” He glowers at me. “I don’t need him.”

“And I didn’t need you running interference with Parker, but I understand why you did that. For your own peace of mind. I need Amir in New York with you for mine.”

He’s quiet, staring at the tiles under his feet for a few seconds.

“Grip, I know you think you’re all straight outta Compton . . .” I pause for his chuckle, which I know is coming. “But you’re famous now—like really famous, and you cannot assume everyone has good intentions.”

“I know that, but I can take care of myself.” He looks at me, the conflict of wanting to please me and needing to maintain his pride clear on his face. “I always have.”

“Well you haven’t always been this version of yourself,” I counter. “And you’ll be in situations with factors you can’t control all the time. You need another set of eyes, someone you can trust.”

He considers me, the stubbornness in his eyes yielding a little.

“Rhyson’s had stalkers,” I remind him. “And he always resisted having a lot of security, but that taught him how vulnerable he is because of what he’s chosen to do. Now that he has Kai and Aria, security is tight and everywhere all the time.”

Grip just nods.

“Doing this for a living, it makes the stakes high,” I say. “But when you love someone, it raises them even more. You have more to lose, and I don’t want to lose you, Grip.”

Just the thought of something happening to him is like a hot poker through my heart. I know he can see the fear in my eyes. I don’t even try to hide it, and I am not above exploiting his love for me to get what I want if it means keeping him safe.

“Besides,” I say, struck with sudden inspiration I can’t believe I didn’t use earlier. “If Amir is there protecting you, he’s there to protect me, too, right?”

Grip's eyes narrow and his hands go still as he considers this.

*Bingo.*

“Okay, he can come,” he finally says, but sets his face in stone. “But no way is he living in the same apartment. I don't care how many floors it's got.”

“I thought you might say that, which is why I already called about another apartment up for lease in the building.”

“You already . . .” He shakes his head, exasperation and grudging admiration in his eyes. “Okay, Bris.”

I turn to go before I feel less magnanimous, glad I've found at least enough peace with the situation not to ruin what was already going to be a difficult day.

“We're good?” he asks, soaping the heavier muscles of his shoulders and his ink-splattered arms. Water skids over his chest and between the stacks of muscled abs. A trail of suds migrates south, catching in the hair nesting around his cock.

I lick suddenly dry lips and subtly squeeze my thighs together to suppress the involuntary pussy clench the sight of him incites. While I was negotiating, I could block out the absolute perfection of him, but now I can't look away from the wide head that still feels like it's splitting me open every time even after months together. I don't know if my body will ever fully adjust—I hope not, because the almost-too-much-ness reflects my emotions, like this love is almost too much, straining the seams of my heart until I think I may burst from what I feel.

“Yeah . . .” I clear the huskiness—and hussy-ness—from my voice and try again. “Yeah, we're good.”

A strong hand vices my wrist and tugs me forward until I'm just beyond the shower threshold, close enough for steam to slip under my dress, but not close enough to get wet—except I am wet. I may not be in the shower, but my panties are soaked. Then it only gets worse when, with his other hand, he strokes himself languorously, lazy flicks of his wrist that lengthen him into a thickly veined, rigid column.

“Bristol.”

My name on his lips pulls my attention from the steady pull between his thighs to the dark stare trained on me, his eyes narrowed with water droplets clinging to the thick lashes tangled at the corners.

“Tell me what you want.”

Those are my words, the ones I used to probe about New York. I knew what he wanted then, and he knows what I want now. I grit my teeth against all my wanton urges, but the words spill out.

“You.” My breath comes short and quick. “I want you.”

In a quick motion, he jerks me into the shower, fully clothed. My dress plasters my skin, and water seeps into my shoes. It will infuriate me later that he has ruined a perfectly good pair of Jimmy Choos.



**BRISTOL**

“YOU DID THIS ON PURPOSE.”

I flip down the visor mirror to study the bright red mark on my neck. I should have left that bathroom, but no, I just couldn't resist. Grip's shower ended like so many do—with me up against the wall.

Grip lets out a salacious chuckle from the driver's seat. He's one of the few people allowed to drive my car, and as he navigates back roads on our way to his mother's house, I'm glad I trust him to do it. As nervous as I am, I'd probably run off the road.

“So, you think in the middle of shower sex, I had the presence of mind to give you a hickey?” Grip flicks me a disbelieving glance. “Just to embarrass you at my mom's house?”

“Yes, I absolutely do, because you're always looking for ways to embarrass me.”

“Babe, I don't even know if the sky is blue when I'm inside you.”

“You're so full of shit.” My laugh takes flight on the wind with the top down. “Your sweet talk doesn't work on me.”

His knowing look picks my bravado apart, because his sweet talk totally works on me and he knows it.

“As if I'm not nervous enough.” I play with the cuff of my linen shorts, focusing on that small movement instead of the next few hours meeting Grip's friends and family. I've met some here and there over the last few months, of course, but with Grip on tour all summer, not many.

“Don't be nervous.” Grip's frown comes quickly now that he sees I'm legitimately not looking forward to this. “Amir will be there, and Shon. You

know them and they love you, and my mom is asking about swirl grandbabies every time we talk, so I'm pretty sure you've won her over. Once we procreate, you'll have her eating from the palm of your hand."

"Swirl . . . wait, what? Oh, my God." I'm not sure if my stomach flips over inside because of his mother's outrageousness or at the thought of having Grip's kids. I never saw myself as maternal—like, *at all*—but imagining myself pregnant with Grip's child is a different matter altogether. I'm assaulted with images and feelings better examined alone than when I'm heading into what feels like social battle.

"Everybody at this party," Grip says, "they're guys I grew up with, neighborhood ladies who whooped my ass when I was a snot-nosed kid, people from Ma's church."

"Church?" My hand flies to my neck to cover the bite marring my skin. "Oh, God."

"It'll be fine." He grabs my hand from my lap and kisses my fingers, not taking his eyes from the road.

"I want them to like me," I say. That's hard to admit because I can count on one hand the people I want to like me, and it's been that way all my life. I was born with a limited amount of fucks, but all of a sudden I need the approval of Ms. James and this whole group of nameless, faceless people who may hold the same views as Jade.

*Ugh, Jade.*

"Will Jade be there?" I ask, braced for the affirmative.

"Probably." Grip's shoulders lift and fall, quick and careless. "Look, Jade gets on board with us, or she doesn't. I don't give a damn."

He says that, but I know how happy it made him to restore their relationship, and the last thing I want is to be the reason it falls apart again. I'm still considering that when we pull up to the house where Grip grew up. The narrow street is lined with cars, trucks, bikes—everything from the infamous Impala to three-wheelers.

Some mix of nerves, dread, and anticipation climbs up to lodge in my throat where I can't gather enough breath. This is ridiculous. I run a record label. I make stars for a living, literally pluck people from obscurity and do whatever it takes to propel them into planetary stardom, from no-name to household name in the manner of an album release—and yet a house full of strangers on this crowded Compton street fills me with trepidation.

But it's not them. It's *him*.

Grip opens my door, the color of his skin even richer against the pink polo shirt he's wearing with army green cargo shorts. His eyes are set to simmer as he peers down at me in the passenger seat. He leans down and takes my lips between his softly, tenderly, like I'm the most precious thing in his world. His eyes say that, and he tells me all the time. He's the reason for my trepidation. Relationships, friendships—especially longstanding ones, familial ones—mean the world to him.

Would he always put me first?

I know he would.

Would it hurt him if he had to make those choices?

I know it would, and part of loving someone is doing everything in your power to make sure they don't hurt.

There's barely room to walk in the driveway with all the cars slotted into the tight space. Grip weaves his way between the vehicles, single-filing us in the narrow passages, his hand wrapped reassuringly around mine. The sounds flooding Ms. James' stamp-size front porch—90s Snoop Dogg, raucous laughter, and dozens of voices clamoring to talk over each other—reach us before he opens the screen door.

There is what must be a code-breaking number of people squeezed into the front room, running over into the hall, and presumably spilling into the back yard. The smell of grilled meat wafts past my nose, joining a tangle of other sensations. The whir of a fan oscillating in the corner of the crowded living room. The rich palette of colors—skin tones ranging from gold to bronze to copper, nutmeg to hazelnut to walnut, but none that match my skin, barely sun-kissed, stark and pale among the rich range of pigmentation.

They greet Grip, enthusiasm and undeniable pride in their words and the affectionate embraces they offer him. When their eyes latch onto me, though, they hold questions, speculation. They don't know me. They aren't sure I can be trusted with the boy they watched grow up and do better than most ever imagined anyone from this neighborhood could. I swallow my discomfort, determined to fit in, determined to shake off my sense of displacement and get to know the people Grip loves, the ones who obviously love him.

“Bristol, hey!”

I turn toward the familiar voice in the crowd, hoping there's a familiar face to go with it. I'm grateful to see Shondra, Amir's longtime crush and maybe now girlfriend.

“Shon, hi.” I reach for her like a lifeline, accepting the hug she folds me

into.

“You got this girl,” she whispers, a genuine smile spread across her pretty face. “These folks ain’t nothing to be scared of.”

Shon bore witness to the carnage of confrontation between Jade, Ms. James, and me the first time I was here. She spoke up for us, for Grip and me, and I’ll never forget that.

“What are you whispering about, Shon?” Grip asks, pulling her into a tight hug. “No, don’t tell me. I probably don’t wanna know. Where’s your boy?”

“And what boy would that be?” Shon lifts her brows in challenge.

“Whoa.” Grip’s grin turns into a full-bodied laugh. “You got more than one? Does Amir know?”

“Gotta keep him on his toes,” she says with an audacious wink. “He’s out back playing bones and *losing*.”

“I’ve never seen Amir win at dominoes. I might whoop his ass in Spades later, too.” Grip laughs, but is distracted when a gorgeous girl, no higher than his breastbone, walks up and places her hand on his arm, an invitation stamped clearly on her heart-shaped face.

“Grip, hey baby,” she purrs, her wide eyes and the dark hair curling around her shoulders a seduction. “Welcome home.”

My discomfort and nervousness dissipate at the sight of this beautiful woman with her richly golden skin practically petting my boyfriend. I’m standing right here. He’s holding my hand. We’re obviously together. I suppress the possessive growl curling at the base of my throat; better to let Grip handle it instead of behaving unreasonably and alienating people any more than I have to.

“Sierra, hey.” Grip deliberately lifts her tiny hand from his arm. “It’s been a minute. I heard you opened that shop down off Central Ave. Congratulations.”

“Same to you.” She tips her head back, the long hair winding down her spine and nearly touching her curvy backside. “You done good. Come a long way since we snuck behind the bleachers at football games.”

Her sultry laugh grates on my nerves, and my fingers tighten around Grip’s in a warning. If he doesn’t back this bitch up, I will.

“Uh . . . yeah. That *was* a long time ago.” Grip clears his throat and pulls me forward. “I don’t think you’ve met my girlfriend Bristol.”

Sierra’s subtly scornful glance starts at my wedge-heeled espadrilles,

crawls over my legs in mint green mini shorts, gains momentum when she searches my face, and finally is downright rude by the time she reaches the artfully messy bun I gathered my hair into.

*Fuck. Her.*

“Hi.” I extend my hand and smile politely. “Nice to meet you.”

She stares at my hand like it’s palsied for a moment too long before taking it between her French manicure-tipped fingers.

“I guess you’ll miss Grip when he moves to New York,” she says, watching for my response.

“Not really, since I’m moving with him.” I widen my eyes innocently. “Grip says this is my going away party, too, so thank you for coming.”

Grip catches his half cough, half chuckle in a fist at his mouth.

“It was good seeing you again, Sierra,” he says neutrally. “Good luck.”

“Well maybe we could—” she starts.

“Sierra, your sister’s looking for you out back,” Ms. James interrupts, suddenly appearing at my side.

“But I was just—”

“I know, baby.” Ms. James turns Sierra by one slim shoulder toward the back yard. “But she said something ’bout potato salad. Child, you better get out there. We *need* that potato salad.”

Ms. James waits for the tiny thorn in my side to get out of earshot.

“She always was a fast tail girl.” She tsks and shakes her head, her neat dreadlocks swooshing with the motion. “Been after my boy since training bra days. She don’t ever give up. Marlon, why you always late? You *stay* on CP time. You can take the boy out the hood, but you can’t take the hood out the boy. Bristol, come to this kitchen and help me with these greens.”

And she’s gone.

In a flurry of lightning-strike words, affectionate admonishments, and dreadlocks, she’s gone, plowing her way through the knot of bodies slowly realizing Grip has arrived and lining up to greet him. At the threshold of her neat kitchen, she turns, one brow lifting and reminding me of her son.

“You coming?” She rests a fist on one slim cocked hip. “These greens won’t cook themselves.”

Grip widens his eyes meaningfully and cocks his head for me to follow his mother.

“Don’t shoo me,” I mutter, untangling our fingers. I can’t hold back a smile, though, over what just happened. Ms. James put that “fast tail” girl in

her place and chose *me*—I mean, she just chose me for collard greens, but I'll take it.

“Hey, wait.” Grip tugs me back into his hard body, one hand palming the small of my back. He squats enough to kiss my nose then settles his lips over mine, lingering and taking his time to stake a claim on my mouth. “Don't be too long. I want everybody to meet my girl.”

Pleasure blossoms inside me. I hope when we're half blind and soaking each other's dentures, he'll still call me his girl. I'm feeling so good, even the weight of many pairs of eyes—curious, speculative, assuming—bearing down on my shoulders and back the whole way up the short hallway leading to the kitchen can't short-circuit my grin.

They can't, but Jade does as soon as I see her leaning against the kitchen counter. Our eyes clash and our smiles fade in sync. Her hair is neatly braided into rows, and her smooth skin is the color of burnt caramel. The big doe eyes narrow on my face, and she doesn't try to hide her irritation when she tosses her ever-present Raiders cap onto the counter.

“Hey Jade.” I brighten my voice, hoping the undercurrents that always run through our interactions won't be as strong today.

“What's up,” she responds dispassionately, not trying as hard. Apparently, I'm much better at faking than Jade is . . . or maybe I just care more.

“Put this on.” Ms. James passes me a red apron with *Thug Life* printed on the front. Her full lips tip into a smile.

“That was Marlon's idea of a joke one Christmas. Just put it on so your pretty outfit won't get wet.”

“Wet?” I tie the apron over my clothes and await further instructions. “You wanted me to help cook the collard greens, right?”

I try not to sound too eager. My heart should not skip a beat at the prospect of finally learning the secret to the greens she makes for Grip.

But it does.

“Oh, no, little girl.” Ms. James pats my shoulder. “You ain't ready for heat yet. You're on wash duty this first time.”

“Excuse me?” I glance at Jade for a clue about what wash duty means, but she's grinning down at her phone, fingers flying furiously over the keys. “Wash duty?”

Ms. James hefts several bags of greens onto the counter.

“Wash all these.” She grabs a knife, using it to wave me closer. “Watch

me now. You gotta take the leaves off the stalk just like this.”

She demonstrates, cutting the leaves away and discarding the center stalk while I stare at the massive pile of greens.

“And *then* I get to cook them?” I ask tentatively.

“No, baby. You ain’t graduated to cooking yet. Today your lane is just washing.” She heads for the door without looking back. “Stay in your lane. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Let me go check on this grill—you know Amir is out here grilling these links, and ain’t no telling what he’s messing up.”

She blows out of the kitchen as swiftly as she blew into it, and in her wake, I stand clutching the knife in one hand and a bushel of greens in the other. I really wanted to cook, but sense that she’s testing me. I’ve never met a test I couldn’t pass, and this one—though I don’t fully comprehend the point of it—will be no different.

While Jade continues texting, laughing under her breath intermittently, I set myself to methodically washing and cutting. The muted sounds of laughter and conversation from the living room along with the shouts of men playing dominoes in the backyard settle my nerves. I’m here, but not here. Nothing is expected of me for a few minutes. It gives me time to collect myself, and maybe that’s what Ms. James wanted to happen. Maybe she saw past my serene façade to the uncertain girl floundering inside and knew I needed a few minutes alone.

Well, alone with Jade, who wears a huge grin and keeps texting as if I’m not in the room. I clear my throat to remind her I’m here and ready to be her friend. I’m an idiot. I should be glad she’s not castigating me or looking at me like I’m pocket lint, but instead I’m drawing her attention. Why? Because though she’s a bitch, Grip loves her. I know he wants her in his life, which means she’ll have to be in my life, and I’ll have to be in hers.

Thus, the trying so hard.

“Someone special?” I ask, looking up from the greens with what I hope is a natural smile.

Jade’s answer is a cocked brow and dead eyes.

“Huh?” she asks, voice flat. “What’d you say to me?”

“Um . . . I just saw you texting and smiling and thought maybe . . . there’s a guy or—”

“I don’t do dick.”

My hands freeze under the stream of cold water. I can’t keep my foot out of my mouth around this girl. Did Grip *tell* me she was a lesbian and I forgot?

“Oh, that’s fine.” I shrug and keep smiling. “I mean, I’m fine with that.”

“Glad I have your permission to fuck who I want.” She rolls her eyes like I’m stupid, and I feel stupid most of the time when I’m talking to her. I know people. I *get* people, I figure them out. It’s part of my job to understand and charm them and, well, it sounds bad, but use them to get what I need for my artists. But, I can’t understand Jade, and I sure as hell can’t charm her.

“I didn’t mean it that way, Jade. I just find myself grinning like an idiot when I’m texting Grip and thought—”

“So now I’m an idiot?”

I toss a leaf into the sink, frustration making my movements jerky.

“Would you stop picking apart everything I say?” I draw a calming breath in through my nose and push it out through my mouth. “I’m trying to make conversation, that’s all.”

The slow, sweet smile that slides onto Jade’s face is incongruous and should be my first clue that she’s up to tearing me apart.

“Okay. Let’s make conversation, Bristol.” She straightens from the counter and crosses over to stand beside me. “Since you all in my grill and up in my business, I’ll tell you who I’m texting.”

She pauses, eyes riveted to my face for my response. I school my features and won’t give her one.

“It’s Qwest.”

That name should not give me heartburn, but every time I hear it, it’s like a lit cigarette behind my ribs. Maybe it was seeing Qwest with Grip all those weeks and knowing he was fucking her, fearing that she was fucking his feelings for me right out and I would be left lonely and still in love with him. Maybe it was Black Twitter rallying behind her and turning on me, painting her as the victim and me as the villain. I don’t know why I feel this way when I hear Qwest’s name, but she is my sore spot, and Jade knows it. She’s twisting her knuckle into a bruise on my heart, and even though I was prepared, I know my face doesn’t hide it.

“Oh, I didn’t know you and Qwest were together.” I laugh, trying to make a joke of it . . . a bad, awkward joke, which is the only kind I can seem to manage with Jade.

“Oh, no. Not me and Qwest. She *loves* dick.” Cruelty engraves a smile onto Jade’s smooth, pretty brown face. “Just ask Grip. He knows.”

These are the cleanest greens anyone will ever eat. I’m scrubbing this one leaf mercilessly, almost to the point of translucence, training my eyes on the



sink so Jade doesn't gain any ammunition from the hurt I know she would see. All I want is to be this girl's friend, and she can't tolerate five minutes with me. She's carrying on an entire conversation with Qwest while I'm standing right here trying harder than I've ever tried with anyone.

"I meant that I didn't realize you two knew each other," I mumble.

"We didn't really, until recently. I'm writing some stuff for her new album." Her pause fills with anticipation of something I know will be at my expense. "Grip introduced us a few weeks ago."

The knife slips off the stalk, slicing into my finger, matching the tiny nick Jade just made across my heart. It's not a big deal; rationally, I know that. Grip is contractually bound to work on Qwest's next album, writing and producing. Hell, I negotiated the deal, but he wasn't mine then—only he's *always* been mine, even when I didn't claim him, and it screws a wrench through my eye that I'm the one who threw them together, that Qwest knows the weight of his body because of me. That glorious fullness when he swells within me—she's had that. The sweet heat of his panting breath in my ear when he comes—she felt that before I did. I can't ever take that knowledge from her, but I want to strip every memory of him from her mind, body, and heart. So, I know it's not the tiny injuries Jade inflicts now that are at the bottom of my irrational response; it's all my old self-inflicted wounds that haven't quite healed.

"You know it's just a matter of time, right?" Jade tilts her head, considering me. "He's not the first black man turned out by some white pussy."

"Shut the hell up." I snap my eyes to her face. "Don't talk about us. You have no idea."

"You're just a high to him." Jade's full lips curl around her derision. "And just like any high, he'll come down. You'll wear off once he gets tired of explaining his blackness and answering your dumb questions. One day he'll want to be understood, not just fucked."

"I do understand him." I'm certain of it, but in a way, she carries the same brand of charisma Grip does, the same confidence that, even twisted around a lie, entices you to believe.

"Just watch him with Qwest the next time they're together," she sneers. "They fit. Everyone sees it except you. She's just waiting for him to wake up from this dream, shake off that jungle fever. Maybe you're a black man's fantasy, but she's real life, and when it comes down to it, Grip is nothing if

not real. Deep down, you know it.”

Her lies and speculation circle me like rope, slowly restricting me. For a frozen moment, I can't speak, and even though Grip's love is gospel to me, my religion, my truth, some little voice within me whispers, *What if she's right?*

Jade doesn't say more words. She's quiet, allowing the ones she's already spoken to take root. I know she's hoping she'll get under my skin, but she won't. Even with that tiny granule of doubt, I try not to let her. I'm still staring at the blood surging from the tiny cut on my finger when Grip walks into the kitchen.

“Babe, what'd you do?” He moves my finger under the flow of cold water, concern clumping his brows.

“It's just a cut.” I swallow against the unreasonable hurt that he introduced Jade and Qwest.

“Well I don't like any kind of cut on you.” His voice admonishes and caresses at once. “Jade, where are the bandages?”

“God, Grip. The girl's fine.” Jade huffs an exasperated sigh. “It's not like she's gonna lose a finger.”

Grip angles a glance at her, his frown deepening. “Would you just go find a Band-Aid?”

Jade's eyes connect with mine before she shrugs and heads out of the kitchen.

Grip watches the door for a moment, even after Jade leaves, questions queuing up in the eyes he turns back to me.

“She bothering you?” he asks. “I know she's still coming around about us.”

Is that what he thinks? Jade shows no sign of coming around any time soon, but even irritated with her, I see the affection, the place she holds in his heart, and I really don't want to come between them—especially not when that relationship is so newly restored.

“No, it's cool. She's . . . just being Jade.” I try to free my finger, but he doesn't let me go. “My finger's fine.”

“I'll be the judge of when it's fine.” He offers a lopsided grin. “And who thought it was a good idea to leave you in the kitchen with a knife?”

I know he's teasing me about my legendary culinary ineptness, but now is not the time. I'm still a little bruised from my conversation with Jade.

“I may not be a great cook, but I'm not a child.” I snatch my finger back.

“Like Jade said, it’s just a cut.”

When the words come out harsher than I mean them to, Grip grabs my finger, taking it into the warm silk of his mouth, sucking and running his tongue along the injured groove. Electric current spears me down the middle, landing in my core. He sucks all the oxygen from the room, and my lungs desperately push breath from my chest. He studies me under hooded lids, knowing exactly what he’s doing to me.

“Was Jade messing with you?” he asks, his voice husky, but his mouth a firm line. He’s abusing the sway he holds over my body. I know it, but he still makes me want to confess. I close my eyes and clear my head long enough to tell him only what I want him to know. I need to make my own way with Jade, and I won’t do myself any favors if she thinks I go running to Grip to complain every time we disagree.

“No.” I meet his eyes steadily. “I was just a little surprised. She was texting Qwest about a song they’re working on, and I didn’t realize they even knew each other.”

“Yeah,” Grip says. “I introduced them.”

His eyes are clear, free of discomfort or regret. I know he doesn’t think this should be problematic at all. It shouldn’t be, but I can’t resist pressing a little.

“You didn’t tell me they were working together.”

“Should I have?” Grip bites the inside of his cheek and frowns a little. “I didn’t think it was important. Qwest was looking for new material, and Jade’s looking for artists to work with.”

“And you thought they’d be a good fit.”

“Of course.” Grip’s powerful shoulders lift and fall carelessly. “They have a lot in common.”

“Really?”

“They both have this badass sensibility. I knew Jade’s lyrics would feel right to Qwest. They’ve both overcome a lot, lived through a lot of the same things.”

Things I have no idea about, things they can easily bond around when I basically have to negotiate a treaty just to have a conversation with Jade.

“You admire her.” It’s a statement, because it’s obvious he does. “Qwest, I mean. You admire her.”

“I respect her, yeah,” Grip says. “I mean, hip-hop’s a male-dominated industry where most of us call women bitch and ho without blinking, and she

shoved her way to the top. Her drive and talent and intelligence have made her one of the biggest names in the business, and she takes no shit from nobody.”

Grip watches me carefully, probably catching on to the fact that this means more to me than it should.

“Does it bother you that I respect Qwest?”

I could just say yes, but it’s not that simple. I, too, admire everything Grip just described about her. I relate to it because in many ways, those are the challenges I face in my career, too. Those aren’t the things that bother me, and I have to be honest with him and with myself about what does.

“It doesn’t bother me that you respect Qwest. I think it bothers me that you fucked her.”

He doesn’t even flinch, and I wonder if I can still shock Grip, or if he knows me so well he anticipates my thoughts, reads them in the air over my head before they make it to my mouth.

“And I hate every son of a bitch you ever fucked,” he says, his voice remaining steady though his eyes darken. “But I can’t change your sexual history, just like you can’t change mine. We can only worry about the future.”

His hand slips between our bodies, between my legs, to cup me, his wide palm hot as a brand through the thin linen of my shorts.

“And this,” he says, pressing into my pussy, “is the sum total of my sexual future.”

“Are you using my body against me?” I ask, my voice sandpapered by lust.

“I will use whatever is at my disposal to keep you with me forever.”

“And you think my pussy is at your disposal?”

Grip slides one finger over my clit through my clothes.

“You think it’s not?” He grabs my uninjured hand and presses it to his crotch. “Because *this* is completely at your disposal as much as you want, any time you want it, and any way you want to use it.”

He links his fingers with mine, careful of the cut on my pinky, and settles our twined hands over his heart.

“And this is yours, too, Bristol, all the time, whether you want it or not.”

My eyes rest on our hands over his heart, and I feel some peace for the first time since I walked into the kitchen to talk to Jade, maybe since we arrived . . . maybe since I woke up today with this party hanging over my

head. When things are out of control, he's always my peace, always my sigh of relief. He's the reminder that come what may, there's us, and we aren't going anywhere—ever.

I step closer, his hand still between my legs, my hand still on his dick, and rest my forehead against his chin.

“I’m sorry.” I breathe the apology into the Grip-scented skin of his neck. “I just feel . . . possessive, probably even more when it comes to Qwest because I know she would never have had you if I hadn’t thrown the two of you together. I love the way you love me, in and out of bed, and the idea of someone else having you . . .”

My words trail off as his dick thickens and lengthens in my hand. My eyes zip up to his face, where his eyelids hang heavy over the dark storm of his eyes and his lips are parted on a hot breath.

“Does it turn you on that I’m possessive of you?” I ask.

“I’d fuck you in that sink right now if it wasn’t full of collard greens,” he says, his eyes speculating like he might follow through on his threat anyway.

Despite power surging through me from the knowledge that I affect him this way, and even with the air so thick with lust I could cut it with the knife I used just minutes ago, I laugh. It’s a robust sound that scrambles from the bottom of me and climbs to the very top, like I’m a mountain and this sound scaled every challenge, every obstacle, to soar.

“Is that you laughing like a bird again?” Grip’s chuckle vibrates from his chest into mine.

I slide my hands over the ridges of his abs and chest to link my wrists behind his head, peppering gentle kisses over his lips.

“You’re never gonna let me live that down, are you?”

“Not a chance.” Grip rests his hands at my hips, pulling me into his hard heat. “You can be a bird—my pretty bird.”

I lift to touch my lips to his, ready to settle into a stolen kiss before we have to get back to the party.

“I shoulda known,” Ms. James says from the kitchen door, hands braced on her hips. “Sent you in here to get Bristol, and *here you go*, all booed up.”

Grip and I both laugh, holding each other loosely, our bodies cooling off as his mother approaches the sink.

“I heard you needed this.” She hands me a Band-Aid before leaning over to inspect my handiwork, nodding her approval.

“Good job.” She starts transferring the greens into a large pot of water.

“That’s enough for today.”

“But I just washed!” My mouth hangs open. “I didn’t learn anything new.”

“You gotta work your way up to my greens, girl.” A quick grin creases the still smooth skin at her eyes. “Next time, you boil.”

I take in her friendly face like a balm to the abrasions from my conversation with Jade. The first time I was in this house, Grip’s mother and I weren’t friendly. We didn’t exchange smiles, and there was no affection slowly growing between us. It’s been baby steps for us, both of us loving Grip and wanting to know and like each other for his sake. If I can have this with Ms. James, I have to believe one day I’ll have it with Jade, too. This warmth I’m basking in between Grip and his mother, the sense of family with them in this kitchen and permeating the entire house—I want it. I never had it for myself growing up, and I’m adopting it as my own.

I lean into Grip’s chest, tucking my head into his neck and smiling at his mother, who watches us with eyes warmer than I ever thought they would be.

“You’re right, Ms. James.” I give her a quick nod, returning her smile. “Next time.”

**GRIP**

BRISTOL'S laugh hooks me from across the yard, drawing my attention from the abysmal hand of cards I'm holding. If you're playing Spades and all your cards are red, that's not good. These cards are bleeding, but at least Bristol is still having fun. It's amazing the wonders food and alcohol can work. With a full belly and a bottle of beer, she's seated in a circle of lawn chairs, shoes off, hair tumbled from the knot she had it in earlier. She throws her head back, the muscles in her throat contracting to push out the sound that takes over everything else, at least for me.

She's sitting with Shon and several of the girls I've known all my life. Once they realized Bristol knows everyone in the music business and manages many of its hottest stars, she became really popular. They wanted all the gossip she could divulge. Talk of music quickly shifted to her shoes, her bag collection, where we'll be living in New York, all the details of our so-called glamorous life. Bristol isn't one of those women who has lots of friends. Over the years, she has handpicked a tight circle of people she trusts and would do anything for. Under the prickliness, and when she sets her mind to it, she's all charm. She has my lifelong friends eating from her hand and hanging on her every word.

Bristol was nervous and stiff at first, and I can't blame her. This isn't an easy group to jump into. Some are territorial, many mistrusting, and a few just downright racist when it comes to white women. But, they're also the most loving, supportive, give-you-the-clothes-off-their-back people you'll ever meet. They're my family, with or without blood. I know some of them don't like or understand that I've chosen to spend my life with Bristol, but

that's all based on shit assumptions. I've seen too much good in their hearts to believe they'll hold on to those notions once they see how much I love her and how good she is for me, once they see how much she loves me, and that is one thing Bristol can't hide. My dick twitches when I remember her confessing her possessiveness in the kitchen. This party is for me, but I'm wondering how soon we can be out. I leave tomorrow for New York, and Bristol won't be able to join me there for at least the next week or so. With Kai's debut album dropping Tuesday, Bristol can't and won't leave her side.

So, I'm thinking we should probably fuck a lot before I leave.

"Man, it's getting late." I lay my awful hand of cards face down on the table. "You guys still into this game or you wanna call it?"

*Please call it so I can take Bris home.*

"Oh, no. We're finishing this, *ese*." Mateo, my friend since elementary school, wrinkles the folds of skin above his brows into a frown. "You always trying to get ghost when you have a sorry hand. I know you."

I roll my eyes and, resigned to finishing this crappy game, pick up the blood-red cards.

"Maybe if you concentrate on the game," Mateo says, never looking up from his hand, steadily shifting cards around, "instead of drooling over your girl, you and your partner wouldn't be in the hole."

"I'm focused," I say, distracted again when Bristol gets up and crosses the yard toward us.

"I meant focused on the *game*. I give you a pass, though." Mateo turns his stare on Bristol, too. "'Cause your girl's fine as hell, Marl."

He's one of the few who never took to calling me Grip, which always irritated me, but not nearly as much as the fact that he's still looking.

"Matty." I lean forward to snap my fingers in his face. "Eyes on the cards and off my girl."

"Awww, you skeered I'll take her from you?" The bastard blows me an air kiss.

Mateo, half black, half Mexican, hair loose and hanging down to his waist, is a good four hundred pounds. I have nothing to worry about, but his remark does make me crack a smile. We both laugh, but when she gets closer and his eyes drift over her long, tanned legs, the laugh clogs in my throat.

"For real, Matty, I'm gonna fuck you up you keep looking at her like that."

Our eyes connect again and I can't even hold on to my ire, not with him.



Second to Amir, he's been my ace boom since diaper days. I'd trust him with my life. Growing up in these streets, I've had to more than once.

Bristol reaches us at the table and stands beside me. I capture her hand and bring it to my lips.

"You wanna sit?" I ask her.

She looks at the full card table, smiling at the other three guys playing Spades with me.

"There's nowhere to sit."

"As long as I got a lap," I say, patting my leg, "you got a place to sit."

She laughs, flashing the guys a self-conscious smile, but settles onto my lap and rests her back against my chest. Once she's seated, I introduce the other two guys at the table and leave Matty for last.

"Babe, did you meet Mateo?"

"No." She smiles. "Nice to meet you, Mateo."

Matty inclines his head, grinning at Bristol over the splay of his cards.

"He grew up with Amir and me here in the neighborhood."

"One street over," Matty says. "Just opened my business here."

"What do you do?" Bristol asks.

"I own a tattoo shop right up the street."

"He's done every tat I have," I say. "I wouldn't trust anyone else."

"Really? You do great work. Yours are beautiful, too," she adds, nodding to his arms, brightly painted with everything from the Virgin Mary to Snoop Dogg.

"Thank you. I don't see any ink on that pretty skin of yours." Matty gives her an outlandish wink. "But maybe you're hiding it."

Bristol's shoulders shake into my chest when she chuckles.

"Nope." She stretches her arms out. "Virgin skin."

"Well if you ever want that cherry popped . . ." The ring piercing Matty's eyebrow glints when he waggles it suggestively.

"All right," I cut in. "You ain't getting anywhere near her cherries."

We all laugh and turn back to the game and this shitty hand I was just dealt. Bristol falls back to my chest and drops her head to the crook of my neck and shoulder. Her scent, fresh and clean—shampoo, body wash, and just her—drifts up, filling the air around me. My arms frame her slim body as I study my cards, sad to see they're still just as red. I'm tempted to toss it in and drag Bristol's good-smelling ass out of here even though the other guys show no signs of stopping. I haven't seen most of these folks in a long time,

though. I can put my dick in check for another hour.

Maybe. If Bristol keeps squirming, maybe not.

“What game are we playing?” she asks.

“Spades.” Mateo looks up from his hand, his smug grin telling me his hand is a lot less red than mine.

Bristol leans back and whispers near my ear, “If it’s Spades, shouldn’t you have some?”

When her “whisper” reaches Mateo’s ears, he snickers, anticipating the ass kicking he’s about to deliver and smiling gleefully. I toss my cards down and push an exasperated sigh into the hair at Bristol’s neck.

“Babe, you just told everyone what’s in my hand.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, but she and Mateo still laugh.

I grab her hips and pull her deeper into my lap until she feels my erection and squirms, rolling her ass over me. I barely catch the groan rattling behind my teeth.

“Keep it up,” I say low enough for only her to hear. “You’re gonna mess around and get yourself fucked in my mama’s bathroom, and we both know you can’t be quiet.”

Her not-so-subtle elbow dig into my ribs has me *umph*-ing and trying to catch my breath to focus on the game.

“Aw, hell.” Mateo’s partner glances up from his phone, apologizing with a look. “I gotta go. Just got called in to work.”

*Fine by me.*

“Oh well.” I try to sound disappointed, leaning up, ready to slide Bristol off my lap so we can get the hell out of here and head home. “We’ll call it a draw and finish next time.”

“Let me play.” Bristol turns her head, eyes begging. “I can take his place. I’ve been watching. I think I have the hang of it. I’m really good at card games.”

“You don’t just pick up Spades,” I scoff. We take our Spades seriously.

“From what I’ve seen,” she continues, undeterred, “it’s basically a combination of strategic thinking, risk assessment, intuition, and good old-fashioned luck.”

We stare at her like she’s grown another head.

“Stick to games you can handle, like Crimes Against Humanity,” I say, “ow-ing” slightly when she punches my chest.

“It’s *Cards* Against Humanity,” she corrects. “And maybe you’re scared

I'll kick your ass."

"Uh, yeah, that's it." I slide her off my lap. "I'll teach you Spades another time."

"She would be my partner, right?" Mateo leans back in the poor chair creaking its complaint under his substantial weight.

Bristol pauses, halfway up from my lap.

"Yeah." She nods eagerly, scrambling over to take the seat Mateo's partner vacated. "I promise I won't let you down."

"This is crazy." I shuffle the cards into a neat deck. "She's a beginner."

"I'll take her," Mateo says.

Bristol claps enthusiastically and gives me a triumphant look.

"You have the deck." She nods her head toward the cards in my hand. "Deal."

I'll never truly understand what transpired over the next half hour, but somehow Mateo and my novice girlfriend go on an epic tear that leaves us a hundred points behind in the end. I'm stunned and disgusted as Mateo lifts Bristol clear off the ground and twirls her around. They commence mercilessly rubbing in their unlikely win, and even contrive some weird victory shimmy.

It's kind of turning me on. Maybe *now* we can go.

"Partner, you gotta drink to our win." Mateo proffers a forty ounce to Bristol.

This should be fun—Bristol drinking a forty.

She takes the bottle to her lips and then screws her face up with distaste.

"Oh, my God." She wipes the excess liquid from her mouth. "Do we *have* to drink lighter fluid?"

Everyone who has gathered around cracks up. Pink floods her cheeks and she covers her face with both hands. I pry her fingers away, one hand finding her waist and the other caressing her neck.

"Hmmm, I don't know what your problem is." I drop a kiss on her lips. "Tastes good to me."

She scans the circle of people gathered around us, her face lit up and still slightly pink by the time she looks back to me. She hooks her wrists behind my neck.

"Maybe it's an acquired taste," she says.

She's the acquired taste, and I don't need to ever have another woman for the rest of my life to know she's the sweetest thing, the only thing that will

satisfy me. I'm seduced by her openness, captivated by her willingness to dive into my world and find her place. She fills my vision to the very edge until I can't focus on anyone but her.

"No fraternizing with the enemy, Bristol," Mateo says, tugging her into a side hug and taunting me with a smirk.

"Find your own girl." I chuckle but pull her back to my chest, crossing my arms at her waist. She crosses her arms to hold my elbows and tilts her head into my neck.

"Now that I'm out, I can." Mateo's laughter fades, and he looks at me seriously for the first time all day. "I gotta thank you again, Marl."

I shift, tightening my arms around Bristol. I hope he doesn't make a big deal out of this, especially with everyone gathering around. Bristol glances up at me, the question in her eyes.

"Did he tell you what he did?" Mateo asks Bristol.

She shakes her head and waits for him to go on.

"I got pulled over in Vegas for some shit I didn't do." Mateo twists his lips into a grimace. "Wrong place, wrong time. I got caught up in some other nigga's drama and couldn't get uncaught."

"What happened?" Bristol asks, not flinching at his use of the N word. She's been around enough now that she's used to it. I don't know if that's a good thing or not, but it won't be the last time she'll hear it while managing a hip-hop artist, and certainly not the last if she's around my friends.

"I was rotting in a Vegas jail." Mateo runs his hand over his goatee thoughtfully. "The bail was high enough for nosebleeds. I couldn't touch it—no one could." Mateo flashes me a look of chagrin. "Well, no one I wanted to call."

Surprise is evident on Bristol's face when she looks up at me.

"You didn't know?" she asks.

"No." I tuck my chin deeper into the clean, sweet scent of her neck. "I was on tour, and this knucklehead didn't call me."

"I didn't want to be one of them dudes always needing shit from your homey when he makes it big, expecting stuff," Mateo says, a frown sketching his disgust. "Grip was the last person I wanted to call."

"Which is ridiculous." I roll my eyes at the proud stubbornness he's always had, even when we were kids. "This was jail, not asking me for a hookup. As soon as Ma let me know what was up, I sent a little something to help."

“A little something?” Mateo snorts. “A hundred thousand dollars ain’t a little something, Marl. I’d been sitting in that jail for two months.”

Indignation scratches me from the inside when I think of Mateo and thousands of others like him rotting in jail, innocent but unable to make bail.

“It’s a rigged system.” My voice comes out abrasive in the soft mass of Bristol’s hair. “As long as there are people financially benefitting from the imprisonment of others, our justice system can’t be pure. Prison should not be a business.”

I clamp my lips over the other things I would say. It’s not a night for my soapbox, and once I start talking about mass incarceration and the other things that affect black, brown, and poor people disproportionately, I won’t be able to shut up. It’s a party, not a protest.

“And that’s why you’re going to New York,” Ma says, startling me since I didn’t notice her take the spot beside me in the yard. “To learn how you can help our boys, right?”

“Right.” I stretch my arm to bring her to one side, shift Bristol to the other, and lay a kiss on the top of Ma’s head.

“Okay,” she says to change the subject, passing her grin around to everyone in the circle. “We ate. We played. We smoked.”

She points to Mateo in the middle of a long draw on the blunt he pulled from his pocket.

“I hope you brought enough of that for everybody.” She doesn’t pause for the laughter that follows her words. “But I want to say a few things before we go home, before Marlon leaves for New York tomorrow.”

If I could blush, I would—maybe I am under all my melanin.

“Now Marlon thought it was silly to have a going away party since he’ll be back,” she says, “and is only gone for the semester, but I’m just as proud of him for him doing this as I am of his platinum records. I always told him how important education was for everyone, but especially for little black boys.”

The sun has gone down, and tiki lamps around the perimeter cast patches of light in her small back yard. In the half-dark, I search my mother’s face. She’s changed so little in some ways, the skin at her eyes and neck still smooth and taut, but so much in others. Raising a boy in this neighborhood by herself took its toll. She always has a joke, always makes us laugh, but every person here knows the losses she’s endured and the sacrifices she made, mostly for me. She focuses her intense stare on my face with the

steady eyes that, for most of my life, shaped what I see.

“I’d come home from working my second job some nights,” she goes on, “and Marlon would be up reading or reciting a poem for school. He was a roughneck, don’t get me wrong.”

My chuckle joins everyone else’s laughter.

“But he was smart.” Ma wears her proud smile like a badge. “This is a hard life, and a hard place to grow up. It’s a rock that too many break themselves on, but you broke the rock, Marlon. You never let a place, a neighborhood, or our circumstances define you. You’re a mold-breaker. You always have been.”

Her eyes drift to Bristol, quiet and still against me, watching my mother as closely as I am.

“You keep living your life exactly as you see fit.” She smiles at Bristol. “Trust your gut. Trust your heart. They haven’t steered you wrong yet, and I’m proud of you.”

I’m unexpectedly moved by her words, by all the support surrounding me. Every face, every smile, every person in this backyard loves me. Some of them didn’t understand when I took a bus every day to another world at the performing arts school. Some of them didn’t understand when I was sweeping studio floors instead of getting a “real” job or going to college right out of high school. Some of them don’t really understand why, with a platinum album and a successful music career, I feel the need to go to NYU at all. Some of them don’t understand why the girl cuddled against my chest, who in most ways is completely foreign to them and to this life, is the center of my world. They don’t understand, but they support, and on the cusp of this new chapter in my life, unsure of what happens next, that’s all I can ask for.



## GRIP

“BRISTOL!” The barista calls out, scanning the crowd for the person who ordered the grande white chocolate mocha. I get it every day at this coffee shop within walking distance of NYU’s campus, and the drink has become my own inside joke for my relationship with Bristol.

Plus, that shit’s the bomb.

“Uh, mine.” I step around several other customers waiting for their orders.

Yeah, I miss Bristol so much, I give her name to the barista for my coffee. If that makes me a pussy, I don’t care. I don’t need caffeine. My heart is already galloping in my chest. After two weeks, she’s finally joining me at our place in New York.

“Damn, Grip,” says a low-timbered voice from behind me.

I turn to meet a pair of laughing eyes behind dark-rimmed glasses.

“I knew you were trying to be all incog-negro in my class,” Dr. Israel Hammond continues, “but I didn’t know you resorted to using girls’ names to keep your identity a secret.”

Shock and nerves lock up my words for a second. Is this how my fans feel when they meet me? I’ve been in Dr. Hammond’s class for over a week and haven’t mustered up the nerve to approach him. It’s like being star-struck, but smarter—more like mind-struck, because this guy’s a genius.

“Professor Hammond.”

“Call me Iz,” he insists. With his close-cropped hair, Malcolm X T-shirt, elbow-patched blazer, and shell toe Adidas, he’s a study in contrasts, all these cool pieces that don’t quite fit but make sense as a whole. “And technically



I'm not a professor. It's just for this semester. Then it's back to writing and running my organization."

After the success of *Virus*, he started an organization focused on the issues of criminal justice reform his book raised.

"Okay, Iz." I clear my throat and hope I sound like a grown man, not a fangirl. "I didn't even know you knew I was in your class."

"I've known since before the first day." He gestures to the corner with two leather armchairs. "Wanna sit?"

I settle into the seat and consider the man I crossed the country to study with. He's not your typical academic. Once you get past the glasses, he's more lumberjack than scholar. He's probably a good six five in socks with hulking shoulders and huge hands. If I didn't know he was faculty, albeit temporary, I'd assume he was a baller.

"The administration actually notified me that you'd be in my class before the semester even started," he says, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Why would they do that?" Irritation scrunches my face. As hard as I've been trying to be normal and like everyone else, the administration singled me out.

"Having someone famous in your class could be disruptive." He shrugs those massive shoulders. "If half the students will be lining up for autographs or throwing their panties across the class, I'd like a heads up."

A smirk works its way through my irritation.

"Thank God there's been nothing like that," I say. "I don't think most people know I'm even there."

"Well you sitting at the back with that hat pulled down low isn't much of a disguise, but I guess it's working for you."

"It also helps that your class is huge."

"Yeah. I had no idea there would be such a response."

"Are you kidding?" I know I'm gaping, but I can't check it. "Your book is . . . life-changing. This is my first semester on campus. I've been an online student for the last year and a half, and I relocated from LA for the semester just for this class."

He's a stone-faced man, but surprise ripples across his rugged features.

"I had no idea." His eyes drop to his drink and then lift to narrow on my face. "Why would you do that?"

I hesitate, self-conscious in the presence of someone who has become a hero of sorts to me—not the Superman, Marvel comic kind of hero, but the

kind whose superpower is reason and whose kryptonite is ignorance.

“I read *Virus* on my first world tour over the summer, and it articulated so many things I had either never considered, or knew but never put into words,” I say. “I didn’t set out to sell a million records. I wanted to be successful, of course, but fame is seductive. It has this way of making you forget who the real person is behind all the hype, and the bigger I get, the less I want this distance between who I am in public and who I am in private. If anything, I want people to know the things I really believe in and stand for.”

I pause to look at him frankly.

“I come from nothing. Where I’m from, a life like the one I’m leading now is a fairy tale. I want to leverage my success to change things for people who don’t actually believe another life is possible. Your book helped me see that.”

“So, if my book did all of that,” he says, taking his glasses off to clean them on the hem of his T-shirt, “why haven’t you at least come to my office hours? I can’t even get to my door most days for the line of students in the hall, but if we hadn’t bumped into each other here, I wouldn’t have ever met you.”

I take another sip of my drink, using that time to collate my thoughts.

“I guess I didn’t want special treatment because of . . . you know.”

“You don’t think you’re special?” he asks.

“Um . . .” This feels like a trick question. “Well, everybody is special.”

“Does everyone sell a million records?” He tilts his head, both brows lifted like he really wants to know.

“Well, no, but—”

“Do hundreds of thousands of fans across continents fill arenas to see everyone?”

“Look, I see what you’re getting at, but—”

“Would you say Martin Luther King was special?”

“Yeah, obviously.”

“But he would argue that he wasn’t better than anyone else.” He plows on, not waiting for the response I’m not sure of anyway. “And what about Ghandi? Wasn’t he special? But fighting a caste system, he would have been the last to say he was in any way superior.”

He and I watch each other, the sounds of conversation and lattes being slurped and coffee shop music coalescing around us as his words sink in.

“I guess my point is we are all created equal,” he says. “But it’s what we

choose to do with what we have that makes us extraordinary.”

He laughs, flashing white teeth against skin the color of mahogany.

“Or not,” he says. “Cause best believe most people don’t do enough with what they’re given. The fact that you did so much with the little you had makes you special. Own that.”

And just like that, uprooting my life, even missing my girl to the point of aching feels worth it. Some people are a revolution and, with their words, overturn the things you thought you knew. You don’t always see them coming, but once you’re with them, you know the impact they have will be like a crater, deep and lasting. That’s how much of an impression they will leave. Over the next hour as Dr. Hammond challenges me, pokes at my perspectives, and picks apart my preconceived notions, there is no doubt in my mind he is one of those people, and his impact on my life, unfathomably deep.



## BRISTOL

THIS IS MY NEW HOME, at least for the next semester.

It's not the pictures of Grip and me, of Rhys and Kai, Aria, and our friends sprinkling the mantle and other surfaces here in our temporary Tribeca apartment. It's not the clothes hanging on my side of our closet. It's not even my favorite Cookie Dough ice cream that Grip has already stocked in the freezer. These aren't the things that make this place home.

It's him.

If I'm in Antarctica, as long as Grip is there shivering beside me, it's home.

Now where is he?

I wander from room to room, checking both floors, but there's no sign of him. It's kind of anti-climactic considering I took an earlier flight to get here. That's what I get for trying to surprise him. I know his schedule as well as I know my own: he had class today then a session with Qwest's producers and writing team this afternoon.

*Grrrrr.*

I refuse to torture myself with thoughts of them working together while I was stuck in LA, although "stuck" isn't the right word. I was just a *little* busy making Kai's debut the freaking number one album in the country. If we thought the offers were pouring in before, now I'm flooded with movie roles, endorsement options, and more opportunities than she'll be able to handle. If all goes according to plan—mine and Rhyson's, that is—soon Broadway will be knocking, too.

"Dammit."

The muffled curse reaches me from the greenhouse, and quiet steps take me toward the outdoor retreat where I'm now sure he is. I wonder if it will always feel like this when I'm about to see him. Anticipation trembles in the air. My mouth dries and then waters with the promise of his kiss. There's a pillow fight in my belly and feathers float all around. Mrs. O'Malley's eyes still gloss over when she thinks of her Patrick, of the years they had before his illness. They made this place together. I take in the tinted windowpanes and the space they created for one another.

*Great love must be tested.*

Is there a greater test than your soul mate no longer knowing you? Than the memories you created together forgotten, lost to an encroaching darkness? I've seen Mrs. O'Malley clinging to what they had with all her strength, and it makes me want to cling to Grip harder and as long as I can—especially when he does sweet things like stringing fairy lights and preparing a dinner that even now prompts my stomach to growl. He stands over the table, the width of his shoulders and the strength of his arms confined in a slate-colored button-up, rolled up to his elbows. A black vest molds the power of his chest, and dark jeans fit the flexing muscles of his thighs.

“What the . . .” He trails off, clicking the lighter over the candles and looking baffled when there's still no fire.

“Need some help?”

He whips around toward the entrance where I stand. His expression shifts from surprise to pleasure and then settles into a slight frown.

“You're early.”

“Sorry.” I turn on my heel. “I can leave.”

I don't make it half a step out of the greenhouse before a strong arm wraps around my waist. Grip presses me into his chest, inhales a deep breath of me, and kisses my neck.

“You aren't going anywhere,” he mumbles into my hair.

I face him, reaching up to rest my elbows on his shoulders.

“Make up your mind. Do you want me?” I dust my lips across his, dropping my head back before he can take command of the kiss. “Or not?”

“Oh, I want you.” Lust roughens his voice. Love makes it soft.

His gaze drops, a lazy, heated sweep over my body, a sweet searing of my skin. The look is as heavy as a stroking hand, but so gentle that I barely feel its tantalizing weight.

“What's all this?” I gesture over his shoulder to escape this hypnosis of

passion. We could stand here all night staring at each other, and after nearly two weeks apart, I want to do more than look.

He takes my hand and walks us over to the table in the corner, the same place it was when we viewed the place a few weeks ago. Now it's loaded with domed dishes, sparkling glasses, cutlery, wine, and a bottle of champagne chilling in ice.

"Champagne *and* wine?" I ask.

"One for dinner," he says with a grin. "And one for a toast."

I grab the note propped against the wine bottle.

*Eat. Drink. Dance. Love. It's all better under the stars!*

*Welcome! Take care of our home and don't waste one moment. – Esther*

"HOW THOUGHTFUL!" I consider the beautifully set table. "Did Mrs. O'Malley do all this?"

"She sent the champagne to celebrate your first night here." Grip plucks the note from my fingers and drops it to the table. "The food I ordered from this place up the street that delivers and makes things look fancy."

The smell of him, the heat of his proximity works on my resistance—never the strongest to begin with—and I tip up to take his lips with my mouth, stroking his tongue with mine until he growls, his hands tight at my hips.

"We are not doing this out of order, Bris," he says, his breath misting my lips. "You saw the card. First we eat, then we drink. Then we dance."

"Then we love?" I finish, sliding my hand to his belt. "Are you sure you want to save that for last? Because I don't mind flipping the script."

"You're always so horny." His husky laugh feathers against my cheek. "It's one of my favorite things about you actually, but no. Tonight, we're doing it the right way. We'll eat."

I notice for the first time that there is only one chair. My lips twitch with a barely checked smile.

"Where's the other seat?" I ask.

"I burned it," he deadpans.

Our laughs tangle between our mouths at his ridiculous statement.

“You did not burn it.”

“Well it’s not here.”

Grip sits down in the lone chair, spreading his thighs and grinning.

“I guess you have to sit with me.” He grasps my wrist and tugs me forward until I’m standing between his legs.

I shake my head, smiling inevitably, and settle onto his lap.

“This could get awkward and messy.” I twist to get my plate and make room for all of our food on one side of the table.

“Think of it as food foreplay.” He pulls me back until I feel him hard and poking in the crease of my ass. “See? It’s working already.”

I wiggle in his lap, drawing a laughing “shit” from him as we dig in, reaching around each other to get to our food, eating from each other’s plates, one feeding the other, spilling food and wine all over the place. It’s a five-course meal with all the courses squeezed onto our little table at one time. It’s an orgy of decadent tastes and consuming conversation, the words flowing as smoothly as the wine. He’s asking for every detail about Kai’s release, about the days we were apart, and I’m demanding everything he can tell me about Dr. Hammond’s class. The name Iz peppers every other sentence, flavoring our discussion with Grip’s admiration and something close to awe.

“I think I’m jealous of Dr. Hammond.” I shift on Grip’s lap, feeding him chicken with greasy fingers. “I hope he hears my name as much as I’m hearing his.”

“More.” Grip eats past the meat to capture my finger in his teeth, tracing my fingerprint with his tongue. “He’s sick of hearing about how wonderful you are.”

“I can’t wait to meet him.” I pierce an asparagus spear on my fork and shove it into his mouth. “I bet your leg has gone to sleep.”

“Not my third leg.” He chews the crisp vegetable, stretching to grab and tear a roll down the middle then work it past my lips, laughing when I choke a little. “It’s wide awake.”

I grind my ass over that third leg, satisfied by and hungry for the stiff readiness behind his zipper.

“You made a mess.” Voice stripped of pretense and body tired of waiting, I tip my glass of wine toward the stain on his vest where the chicken’s rich burgundy sauce has left a splotch.

“Yup,” he agrees, eyes locked with mine. “I should take this off.”



He slips one button and then the others from the holes until his vest falls open.

I scoop up some of the sauce with my spoon, bringing it to my lips, but at the last minute allowing it to dribble on my silk blouse.

“Oops.” I breathe into the small space separating us. “So should I.”

I grab the hem of the stained shirt and pull it over my head.

He swallows loud enough for me to hear it. His jaw tics and his eyes roam over my naked shoulders and stomach, over the breasts barely contained by strips of silk and lace. He takes my glass of wine from me and goes to take a sip, allowing just a few drops to land on his shirt. I reach for it, fingers fumbling at the buttons, laying bare the sculpted plane of abs and pecs.

“Are we ready for love now?” I lick the heady traces of wine from my lips.

“Mrs. O’Malley said we have to dance.” His words are a dark-timbered rumble laced with want as he shifts me off his lap to stand. I press myself against his chest, grabbing his shirt by the lapels and shoving it down his arms to the floor.

“There’s no music.” I trap my bottom lip between my teeth and look up at him through my lashes because I know that drives him crazy.

He reluctantly steps away from the heat our bodies share and crosses over to the wall. With the press of a button, music wafts from the hidden speakers. The music is sensuous and whispers sex before the singer delivers the first lyric.

“Prince?” I ask, surprised. I recognize the iconic voice, but not the song. “What is this?”

“Adore.” Grip lifts my arms around his neck and hooks my wrists there. “One of my favorites.”

“I’ve never heard it,” I murmur, barely aware of saying anything. I’m entranced by the intensity of his stare. He cups my jaw, drawing me closer until all our bare skin presses together and all our covered places strain against our clothes, seeking out naked skin and heat. We sway to the music, our hands moving over each other in a dance of rediscovery. He palms my hip, sliding down to hold my ass through my skirt. My fingers wander over the ridges and dips of his torso, rendered in stone. I run my thumb across the fullness of his bottom lip, tracing the lines that are so precise it’s like an artist drew them.

*God, this man's mouth.*

I reach up to kiss him, slowly exploring the warm silk interior of his mouth, our tongues like the tide, pushing in and flowing out. We trade moans, our mouths sharing the soft, needy sounds. Our hands pick up pace, mine urgent at his waist, undoing his belt, his fumbling at my back, unsnapping my bra. It's a quick, thorough disrobing that leaves us naked in the moonlight, half-drunk on the stars with Prince on repeat.

"Now?" I pant at the right angle of his jaw, dragging my lips over his neck and licking at the saltiness of his clavicle. "Time for love now?"

He closes his eyes and draws in a deep breath, but his body betrays how much self-control he's exerting when his dick twitches against me.

"We have to drink," he says sternly, stepping back and leaving me chilled, bereft.

"We've been drinking," I whine, every cell of my body pouting because he's denying me.

"But we haven't toasted." With a devilish glint in his eyes, he walks naked over to the table, the high, round arch of his ass flexing with every step. He pours two glasses of champagne from the bucket that has been chilling all night. My eyes drop between his legs and I force myself to stay standing when he hands me the flute instead of dropping to my knees and taking him in my mouth. Carnality courses through my veins, feral desire possessing every part of me. I want him occupying every empty space. I want to lick his sweat and bite chunks from him, swallow him whole. I grit my teeth and accept the fragile glass filled to the top with exhilaration and bubbles.

"This is a lot of champagne," I say, letting the bubbles tickle my nose. "I'll be too drunk for . . ."

I clear my throat, leaving wild thoughts unspoken and bucking in my mind.

"I think you'll manage." He lifts his glass and quirks a smile at me, even as his eyes lose some of the humor. "A toast to our first night in our first home together."

He gently tucks strands of hair behind my ear, rubbing the texture between his fingers before looking back to me.

"You didn't have to do this, Bristol," he says softly. "Move here, disrupt your life, your career for me like this, but I'm glad you did."

"No, I did have to," I disagree, surprised to find myself blinking back

tears. “What I feel for you is not optional, Grip. It’s a mandate, a demand I have no problem meeting. I have to be wherever you are.”

He studies me a moment longer, and the intimacy and openness are almost too much, but I force myself not to look away. I’ve never been more vulnerable to anyone, and I’ve never trusted anyone else the way I trust Grip—with my life, with my heart.

“A toast then, to wherever we are.” He clinks our glasses together, raising his to his lips, but at the last minute and with a wicked grin, pouring just a little onto my chest. I gasp as the cold liquid trickles over my flesh, streaming between my breasts. Before I have time to recover, Grip pours more over my nipples, which immediately bud and lift as if they’re drinking in the potent liquid. Not done, he pours the rest of his champagne over my belly, wrenching a whimper from me when it drifts between my legs, sluicing into my naked folds, seeking out my core, the parts of me that silently beg to be filled.

“Grip.” My voice emerges on a need-broken whisper. “What are you—”

With his lips, he answers the question I didn’t get to voice, licking the champagne from my shoulders and flattening his tongue between my breasts, soaking up every drop in greedy swipes. His hands clamp around my hips and he sinks to his knees, his mouth venturing across the flat surface of my stomach like a sojourner, lost and searching. His tongue delves into my belly button then he nibbles the skin at my hips and above my pubic bone, the bristle on his chin abrading even as he withholds his mouth from me. Over and over, he kisses closer and closer, but never spreads me, never tastes me in the deeper places. The champagne boils between my legs as my body heats.

“Grip, please.” His lips, torture and promise, keep relief and release at bay.

“What, baby?” His heated whisper lands on me, but he won’t give me what my body is weeping for. He runs his nose over the slit dividing me, and with a deep inhale, draws in my scent. From his knees on the floor at my feet, he lifts his eyes, burning a trail of possession over my limbs. “Tell me what you want, Bris.”

I swallow the words, holding out as long as I can in a sensual battle of wills I won’t win.

He feathers kisses over my hips, runs his wide palms over my legs, kneading the muscles of my thighs, sliding his finger between the cheeks of my butt.

“Grip, you know,” I whisper. “Just do it.”

“I wanna hear.” The measured control of his words is at odds with the rampage of his eyes. “Tell me what you want.”

“My pussy.” Tears adorn the corners of my eyes, the need is so strong. “Eat my pussy.”

“Fuck yes,” he growls, his fingers separating me and his tongue unleashed to spear inside. He pulls my leg over his shoulder, opening me up, and bites my clit, a double-edged sword of pleasure and pain slicing through me.

“Oh . . . oh, God.” I dig my nails into his shoulders—it’s the only way I can stay upright.

He takes his time, sucking the lips, biting me, licking and slurping until the champagne is gone and he’s binging only on my juices, moaning at the juncture of my body. He springs to standing, grabbing me by my nape, pulling me into a kiss fierce enough, ferocious enough that my teeth cut into my lips. He’s feeding me the taste of my body, rich and tangy on his lips. It’s carnal and addictive. I grab his neck, too, sucking on his tongue and biting his lips until the metallic sting of our mingled blood christens the kiss.

With a growl, he lifts me up, and I lock my legs at the cleft of his ass. He walks us to the padded bench in the middle of the greenhouse, sinking down and fitting my thighs over his in a loose straddle.

“I’m gonna let you be on top the first time we fuck in our new house,” he rasps, setting the words on fire in my ears.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my voice desperate with the need to vise the length of him with my body.

“But if you don’t ride me hard enough, I’m flipping you over and tearing that ass up. Got it?”

“That sounds fair.” I nod frantically, no breath left for banter. I’m just ready to impale myself on him.

With one quick motion, I rise up, knees on either side of his thighs, and scramble onto him like his dick might get away from me, like he’s the last train and I might miss my ride. Every time, it feels like he’s too much, the blunt intrusion of his cock, but then my body remembers I was made for him. I allow myself one second to feel the pinch and then roll my hips once, slowly, letting him feel me again, the undulation of my body a promise. Each time he goes deeper, crossing any barriers my body, my heart would erect—only there’s no barrier, nothing between us. I grip his knee behind me for

leverage to grind deeper, roll harder. My breasts bounce in his face and he bobs his head, his mouth open and seeking until he has one in his mouth. He suckles me hard, zipping electricity from my chest to my core. It's a direct line, and with every thrust, every stroke, my heart contracts.

"I missed you so much," I say, looking him in his eyes, letting him see the ache I've carried around while we were apart. I withhold nothing from him. Not my body—he can have it any way he wants it. Not my heart—flung open like a door for him to walk through. Not my soul—twisting around his every time he hammers up into me, possessing me from the inside out.

"God, Bris," he says at my neck, scorching the skin with his breath. "I was going crazy. We can't be apart like that. We just . . . we just can't."

Words of love and devotion tumble between us, swirling around us, cocooning us in the greenhouse. We are hothouse flowers, growing in plain sight, blossoming under tinted glass. Beyond the roof, stars burn light-years away, bright and already dying, but here, between us, brews a solar storm, a stellar explosion behind my eyes, a constellation of love and lust, dots connecting inside as I clench and squeeze through my orgasm. He stiffens beneath me, his fingers clutching tightly enough to bruise. I'll bear marks in the shape of his hands, bites on my nipples, stubble burns inside my thighs, sensual mementos I'll carry with me. I'll wear his touch tomorrow under my clothes. The marks he'll leave on my body will fade, but the way he's marked me as his, the way he's carved himself into my heart, that's forever.



## GRIP

“MMMMM.” The sweet taste of plantain explodes on my taste buds, and I squeeze my eyes shut in culinary rapture. “This food . . . damn.”

“What’d I tell ya?” Iz sips his rum before diving back into the plate of oxtails in front of him. “I love Miss Lilly’s.”

The Jamaican diner is packed, and the asymmetrical patterns and bright, clashing colors animate the space.

“And not too far from campus,” I mumble around a forkful of saltfish. “I need to bring Bris here. She would love this.”

“And I need to find a way to get paid every time you say that girl’s name.” Good-natured teasing gleams from behind his glasses.

I could tell him that she says the same thing about him. Over the last month, Bristol has settled in at our new place, and she teases me about how much I talk about Iz. We’ve become friends, but there’s still a level of awe I hold for him previously reserved for the likes of the MJs—Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan. It’s his ideas, his perspective that impresses me, though, not his prowess on a court or in the studio.

“It’s good,” Iz continues when I don’t answer. “You obviously love her.”

“Very much.” I gulp pink Ting, the cool liquid chasing the Caribbean flavors of my meal. “That’s my girl.”

“She’s ride or die, huh?”

I pause mid-chew as the memory of Bristol in the holding room, desperate, willing to bow to Parker’s sick demands to get me out of jail, jabs my brain.

“You could say that, yeah.” I consider him across the table. We haven’t

really talked much about our personal lives. He knows I have a girlfriend I'm serious about and that she moved to New York with me. He knows, obviously, that I'm a musician, but most of our discussions have centered on mass incarceration, police brutality, and fatherlessness in the black community—issues we're both passionate about. We've run the gamut of ills, and I admire his intelligence and insight more than anyone's, but I can't say I know much about him. He's not what I imagined he would be. He's a cool cat with his vintage kicks and elbow patch sports coats. Though I hold him in the highest esteem, he's only a few years older than I am, I'm guessing in his late thirties. There has to be quite a story behind a guy as relatively young as he is accomplishing so much.

“What about you?” I probe. “Wife? Kids?”

He drinks his rum, his face unreadable before he replies.

“Divorced. One daughter.”

“How old's your little girl?”

“She's six,” he says. “She and her mom are still back in Philly. I see her all the time when I'm there, not as much while I'm teaching here this semester.”

“You got pictures?”

I ask because I know I'll be obnoxious with my shit, showing everyone pictures of our kids once Bristol and I have them. I'll be one of *those* dads. I never had one to be proud of me, but mine will, and if it's a girl? I'll probably buy my first shotgun the day she's born.

A tiny smile cracks the impassivity of Dr. Hammond's face as he pulls out his phone to show me his daughter. I see echoes of his features in her expression, but she must look a lot like her mother. Soft pigtailed brush her shoulders, and her snaggle-toothed smile is adorable. I can't help but wonder what our kids will look like.

“Man, she's beautiful.” I hand him his phone, already feeling like I know him better just from seeing her.

“Yeah.” His gruff laugh lands in his glass of rum. “Fortunately, she takes after her mother.”

“How long you guys been divorced?”

“Much longer than we were married.” He grimaces. “Let's just say I was more ready to be a father than I was to be a husband.”

I nod, leaving that alone unless he wants to elaborate.

Surprisingly, he does.



“Just be sure, when and if you take that plunge. Being unfaithful . . .” He leaves that comment on the table, polishing his glasses on the hem of his T-shirt, a habit I’ve noticed. “I guess it’s already pretty hard to stay faithful with all the ass that must get thrown your way.”

“Nope.” I shrug and turn my mouth down at the corners. “It’s just Bris for me. If she wasn’t the one, yeah, it’d be hard, but she is, so it’s not.”

It sounds too simple even to me, but I don’t know a better way to say it.

“No side chicks?” Surprise stretches his expression. “Groupies on the road?”

“Nah.” I shake the bottle of Ting over my mouth, teasing the last of it down my throat. “I couldn’t do that to her. Hell, I don’t even want to.”

If there are laws of attraction, she has rewritten them with a one-girl clause. I’m not blind—I notice when a woman is attractive, but actively want? Think about for more than two seconds? Just Bris.

“She must be something else,” Iz says with a smile. “I need to meet this girl.”

“She wants to come hear you at the Prison as Business forum in a few weeks, if she’s in the city. She travels a lot.”

“That should be interesting.” A frown settles between his thick eyebrows. “You know it’s basically a debate between me and Clem Ford.”

“That bigot.” Distaste for the man in question sours my meal and I put down my fork. “He’s making money hand over fist from prison labor.”

“At least he’s honest about his views,” Iz says. “Most of them lobby for longer sentences but never acknowledge the racism and greed underlying those polices. He’s an unapologetic bigot, and his radio show is his bully pulpit. He doesn’t hesitate to say black and brown people should be used this way, and he has an army of followers.”

Familiar frustration and anger seethe in my belly. That kind of systemic racism is blatant, and everyone else benefits—the people who lobby for longer sentences for nonviolent crimes, the businessmen exploiting prison labor for next-to-nothing pay, the bigots who believe those injustices are what we deserve. Everybody’s happy except the millions imprisoned, many unjustly, and the families splintered by it.

Iz’s phone buzzing on the table jars me from the thoughts darkening my mood. The name Callie flashes on his phone screen.

“Hey Cal,” he says, glancing at me and lowering his voice. “Yeah. I’m at Ms. Lilly’s with Grip.”

I gesture to a waitress and order another pink Ting while Iz listens.

“You don’t have to do that.” A frown puckers the straight line of his brows. “Okay. If you’re that close, then thanks.”

He ends the call, running his hand over the back of his neck, agitation clear on his face.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, that was my TA. I left my laptop in the lecture hall, and she lives around here. She’s bringing it by.”

“Oh, that’s sweet.”

“Sweet isn’t how I would describe Callie.” He chuckles. “But, yeah, I guess.”

Callista Garcia is a beautiful girl from what I’ve seen of her in class, petite with golden brown skin and a cap of silky dark hair.

“What is she anyway?” I ask.

He stiffens, his glass pausing halfway to his mouth.

“What do you mean *what is she?*”

“Like nationality.” I cock one brow and watch him more closely. “Ethnicity. She just has a unique look, and I wondered.”

“I think her mother is Dominican and her father is Asian, maybe Japanese, not sure.”

The woman in question walks through the door, and it’s fascinating to watch Iz’s response to her. His fist clenches on the table, and his lips tighten.

When Callie approaches our table, even her NYU hoodie doesn’t disguise the tight, curvy body underneath. Her short hair is ruffled like she’s been running her fingers through it, and she looks tired with shadows under her eyes. Her lashes frame dark eyes that shine with intelligence and curiosity.

“Hey Iz,” she says when she reaches our table and hands him the sleeve with his laptop. “Here ya go.”

There’s an ease to her, like she doesn’t realize she does remarkable things. When Iz introduced her on the first day of class, he said she graduated with honors from Yale. She’s a freaking Rhodes Scholar and is at NYU on some prestigious fellowship. The woman is brilliant, but you’d never know those things just looking at her. She looks like any other student schlepping around campus.

“I pulled some stats on Clem Ford’s business ventures and where they intersect with the prisons he’s invested in, along with some of his more incendiary comments.” She nods to the laptop case. “Slipped the printouts in

there for you to look at when you get the chance.”

“You didn’t have to do that, Cal.” Iz frowns and looks uncomfortable for just a moment. “You’re my TA. I don’t expect you to do anything outside of class, and this debate is technically outside the purview.”

“I don’t get technical when I’m passionate about someone.” Her eyes drop to her fingers toying with the strap of her backpack. “I mean . . . about helping someone, about doing something I care about.”

“I know what you meant.” Iz scratches that spot on the back of his neck again.

The implications of the tension I’m witnessing between them are still crystallizing in my mind when Callie gives me her attention and requires mine.

“Hey Grip.” Something shifts on her face, in her posture, and she looks even less like the scholar I know her to be and more like a thousand other girls who have stuttered when talking to me since I started performing. “I haven’t gotten to tell you, wanted to give you space in class, but I loved your album.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Iz mutters, rolling his eyes.

We both ignore him, and I do what I always do when a fan says something like this: give her my sincerest smile and a few seconds of my time.

“Thanks, Callie.”

“‘Bruise’ was my favorite.” She peels back the sleeve of her sweatshirt to bare her wrist. “It inspired this.”

Scripted over the fragile skin of her wrist is the most famous lyric I’ve ever written: *We all bruise*.

“Wow.” I’m dumbfounded. Fans have done some outrageous things to prove how much they love me and my music, but there’s something about this brilliant young woman memorializing my words on her skin that moves me especially. “I don’t know what to say, Callie. I’m incredibly humbled by this, for real.”

“You graduated summa cum laude,” Iz says. “You were a Rhodes Scholar with honors. Fucking *Yale*. The administration plucked you from three hundred applicants to be my teacher’s assistant this semester and you want, what? Some rapper’s autograph?”

He bends a look of unnecessary apology toward me. “No offense, Grip.”

“None taken.” I laugh. “I *am* some rapper. I’m a lot richer than you,

though. That's a small consolation."

"Asshole." He chuckles and shakes his head at the smartass comeback.

Fortunately, neither of us takes ourselves too seriously, which is probably why we get along so well.

"I can be all those things," Callie asserts, elevating one eyebrow. "And still be a fan, still love music, still appreciate a man who stands for something, who distinguishes himself from the rest of the herd and their bullshit. It's why I wanted to work with *you*."

She pauses just long enough for her words to sink in before going on.

"Was I wrong, Iz?"

The amusement withers on his face, and the current passing between the two of them makes me feel superfluous, like I'm in the way of something that started before I got here, something that has happened before.

"Thanks for bringing my laptop," Iz says evenly, not addressing her question.

She lopsides him a grin that says, *That's what I thought*, turns on her heel, and starts toward the door.

"See you gentlemen in class," she tosses over her shoulder.

A hundred of my unspoken questions pucker the silence she leaves behind.

"Sooooooo . . . have you two—"

"Don't." He aims a warning over the rims of his glasses.

I raise my palms up as defense against the intensity of that look.

"There was just a vibe, sexual tension or—"

"There's no sexual anything." His words slice into the space of the booth separating us. "She's one step removed from being my student, and I don't fuck my students."

"Well, speaking as one of your students, I'm glad to hear it."

The grin he concedes breaks the scowl on his face.

"I just wanna go on record as saying if you ever change your mind about fucking your students"—I knock back the rest of my Ting—"she'd be a great place to start."



## BRISTOL

“KAI’S ON IN FIVE.” The production assistant hands me a lapel mic and checks something off on her clipboard. “If you can have her put this on, we’ll make sure it’s properly positioned when she comes out.”

“Uh, yeah.” Leaned against Kai’s dressing room door, I glance up from my iPad. “She’ll be ready. Thank you.”

Five minutes. The countdown on Angie Black’s YouTube channel says the live feed starts in five minutes, too. I know Grip’s been looking forward to this Artists As Activists panel, but I’m not as excited. Seeing him with Qwest might only further water the seeds of insecurity Jade planted and I allowed to take root, at least a little. I’ll check back in a few minutes, but now I need to get Kai onstage for her performance.

“You ready?” I ask once inside her dressing room.

Kai raises wide eyes, pressing a silencing finger to her lips. Aria has fallen asleep at her breast. I’ve seen Kai feed my niece too many times to count, but never wearing a beaded halter top, leather pants, and full face of makeup. Her dark hair is flat-ironed and falling nearly to her waist. She carefully extracts her breast from Aria’s little rosebud mouth and gently places her in a travel playpen. She literally hasn’t missed a beat, dropping all her baby weight *and* her first solo album to rule the charts.

She picks up her phone and turns a pout in my direction.

“No messages from Rhyson.” She sighs and faces the mirror to check her makeup.

“He hasn’t landed in Prague yet. He’ll call when he gets there.” I consider her reflection and dig into the bag her stylist left behind. “Try these earrings

instead.”

“I’m exhausted. Aria was up all night teething.” She changes out the earrings, closes her eyes. “And I miss my husband.”

Her eyes pop open to meet mine in the mirror, and her smile teases me.

“I guess you miss Grip, too, huh?”

“Yeah.” I check the iPad once more—three minutes. “He has this panel airing in a few minutes that I need to watch. Qwest is on it, too.”

I try to keep my voice neutral, but something must tip Kai off because she offers a reassuring smile I don’t want her to know I need.

“You know you have nothing to worry about, right?” She turns and perches on the edge of the dressing room table. “Grip has been in love with you as long as I’ve known him, and he’s ecstatic to finally have you.”

“I know.” I force the words, blowing my nervous energy out in a sigh. “But he was with her, and I can’t help but think she still has feelings for him. I trust *him*.”

“Good, because he’ll never give you reason not to.”

A text message lights Kai’s phone on the dressing room table. She grabs it, smiling and responding.

“Rhyson?” I guess.

“No, my sister.” Kai grimaces. “Half-sister. She lives in Vegas with my dad and . . . his wife.”

I notice she doesn’t say stepmother. Kai and I haven’t talked much about her complicated history with her father, but I know they’ve been working on their relationship.

“She’s wishing me luck.” Kai sets the phone down and meets my eyes with a soft smile. “She’s a great kid.”

“You guys are close?”

“Getting there. We talk more than . . . well, more than I talk to my father.”

“Thank you for encouraging Rhyson to work on things with our parents,” I say. “Seeing you do it has helped him a lot.”

“I try, but it’s not easy. My father ruined my mom’s life for a while.” Pain etches lines between her brows. “He hurt a lot of people—the church he abandoned, his community.”

“You?” I venture quietly.

Kai looks up, blinking a few times and drawing a shallow breath.

“Yeah, me.” She glances at Aria, a tender smile tugging at her lips. “He

was my world. I think sometimes we don't realize that for our kids, we're everything. I mean, friends and family, of course, and as they get older, maybe their peers have more influence, but we're what they see most. I was a daddy's girl, through and through."

"And he left with her? With his current wife?"

"Yeah, she was pregnant." Kai licks her lips before going on. "She was the secretary at our church, where he was the pastor."

"Wow." I wrestle with surprise and disgust. "Another reason to skip religion."

Kai considers me in silence for a few seconds, crossing one ankle over the other before speaking.

"I get that." Her harsh laugh splinters in the air. "Hell, I felt that. For a while I wasn't sure what I believed because most of it came from my dad."

She drops her eyes to the floor.

"And I didn't believe in him anymore." She shrugs. "But liars *can* tell the truth. It took me a long time to figure out that just because my dad lied about his affair, it didn't mean every sermon, every Bible story, everything he told me about God was a lie."

"Is that why you're church shopping?" I give her a smile so she'll know I'm not mocking her.

Kai rolls her eyes and grins.

"Rhyson probably thinks I'm crazy. I know he's not big on faith."

"He has faith in *you*," I assure her. "He loves you more than anything."

"The woman he loves was shaped by my father," she says. "By my mother even more, but my faith was shaped by my dad. There's not a doubt in my mind that, in spite of his flaws, he understands faith. He understands God, even if he doesn't always follow. I've finally managed to sift out what was his and what's mine, what I want to keep and what I don't need. I want to pass that on to Aria. She'll have to go through the same process, decide what part of what I've shared is for her and what is not, but I want her to know that part of her mother."

Her smile wavers, bitterness leveling it out.

"The way I know that part of my father, the way I know all of his parts . . . even the ones I wish weren't there."

Three quick raps at the door interrupt and signal that it's time. Kai glances again at Aria sleeping peacefully, reluctance to leave obvious on her face.



“Don’t worry, I got her.” I open the door for the production assistant, who looks at me expectantly. “She’ll be right out. Thanks.”

When I turn back, Kai is leaning over the pen, smiling.

“Okay. I’ll be back.” She gives me a knowing look. “And don’t be paranoid about Qwest and the panel. She’s a great girl. It’s no secret she and I are friends, and I feel for her, for how things happened, but Grip has never really been anyone’s but yours. Remember that.”

With one last glance in the mirror, she’s out the door. I turn on the monitor mounted in the corner to watch the feed of Kai’s performance but mute it to focus on the panel that is just starting online.

“Thank you for joining us today,” the host says. “We’re continuing our web series entitled Helping Ourselves. Each week we discuss an initiative or a group of people making a difference in communities of color.”

Angie, her hair in its natural state, a beautiful nimbus of textured waves and curls, wears skinny jeans and an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt. Her skin is tiramisu brown, glowing with health and good makeup. She exudes complete confidence. I haven’t had any interaction with her at all, but I’m already impressed by what I see.

“We’re broadcasting on YouTube and Periscope,” Angie continues, smiling into the camera. “We’re also live tweeting, and the official hashtag is #HelpingOurselves.”

She gestures to her right, where Grip, Qwest, and a few other celebrities are seated. I try not to read too much into the fact that Grip and Qwest are right beside each other.

Angie performs quick introductions for each person, famous in their own right and arena, but Grip is the best known, by far. He’s not doing anything that should make you want to look at him instead of everyone else, but you do. You just do not want to take your eyes off him.

Or maybe that’s just me.

A new sense of purpose rests on Grip’s shoulders since he started Dr. Hammond’s class and moved to New York. He’s definitely still engaged as an artist, still the studio rat he’s always been, but there’s more to his life now, and I can tell it is deeply satisfying to him. It’s significance. He wouldn’t be the man I love without this passion, this thirst to do something about the things that need doing.

He’s laughing at something Angie said that I missed because I’ve been caught mid-drool. He leans back, his casual posture a thin veil over the coiled

energy always waiting to spring forth. The *Run DMC* shirt fits the lean musculature of his chest and arms. I smile at the cheap black plastic watch on his wrist that he's never without, the one I won for him that night years ago. Qwest may have more in common with him—culture, music, challenges—but that watch reminds me that Grip and I have a history and a future.

“Grip, you’ve always been socially conscious,” Angie says. “But ‘Bruise’ kind of put everyone on notice and started a lot of dialogue. Can you talk a little about what went into that song?”

“Yeah, sure. I grew up with that tension.” Grip leans forward, elbows propped on his knees and eyes lit by conviction. “Needing law enforcement because I lived in such a dangerous place, but fearing cops because we never felt they were checking for us. I didn’t write the song to take a side as much as to represent *both* sides, and hopefully show that we’re more alike than we are different, find some common ground to negotiate the most difficult things. It’s not right when unarmed black men are shot in the back for doing nothing and then officers walk away with impunity, but it’s also not right when good cops are judged by the same stripes as the bad ones. It’s not right to ambush good cops to make a point. Nina Simone said it’s an artist’s responsibility to reflect their times. That’s what I want to do.”

A wide grin hangs between my cheeks, pride swelling in my chest. His intelligence and passion are evident every time he answers a question. Angie has assembled a great group, each of them incredibly talented and popular, leveraging their moment for causes close to their hearts. I’m even touched when Qwest talks about Our Girls, the initiative she works with to raise awareness about women of color who go missing and the fact that they receive less media coverage and less attention.

“Grip, you’re here in New York now, right?” Angie asks near the end of the allotted broadcast time. “At NYU?”

“Yeah, for the semester.” Grip grins. “I love New Yorkers because they don’t give a damn about me most days. I walk to class and grab coffee and go home like everybody else. There’s an anonymity here that I really enjoy.”

“And what are you studying?” Angie asks.

“I’m taking Dr. Israel Hammond’s course on systemic bias in the criminal justice system. He’s a guest professor this semester.”

“Now that’s a woke brother.” Approval shines from Angie’s eyes. “I read *Virus* when it came out. It should be required reading for everyone.”

“He’s brilliant and cool as a fan.” Grip returns her smile.

The open curiosity gives way to a calculation I've seen on faces like hers on shows like these a hundred times. Even before she asks her next question, I sense the interview about to take a different turn. Call it premonition, or call it one ruthless bitch recognizing another, but I know.

"And you've been sighted with your girlfriend here in the city," she says. "She moved here, too, right?"

Grip must recognize that look, too. He shutters his expression, but keeps smiling.

"Yeah, she grew up here."

"I keep it real, Grip." Angie spreads the look to the rest of the panelists. "Every person here has been on the receiving end of my real. It's your first time, but I'm not gonna treat you any different."

*Oh, God. What is she about to say?*

"You sound like you understand and want to raise awareness about the issues facing black people." The "but" is all over her face before she even says it. "*But*, really how woke can you be sleeping with a white woman?"

All the air freeze-dries in my chest, just stalls and is enveloped in cold.

"What did you say?" Grip's brows bend like an accordion into a disbelieving scowl. "What does that have to do with being woke? With wanting to make a difference?"

"I'm just saying we get sick and tired of watching men like you talk about the cause," Angie says, her polite mask falling away, the indignation she must have been hiding rearing its head. "Talk about what our community needs and esteem black women from one side of your neck, and then go and choose a white woman as your partner. You out here playing in the snow. It's a little hypocritical."

"How is it hypocritical?" Controlled rage is evident in Grip's narrowed eyes and the fists clenched on his knees. "I don't see anything incongruent about those two things, unless you are operating under the false assumption that me wanting to end systemic racism equates to me hating white people. I don't hate white people—I hate *racism*."

Grip pauses meaningfully, tipping his chin back to study her closely.

"Racism in any form," he says. "Even the reverse kind."

"This isn't reverse racism," Angie snaps back, bouncing hot eyes to Qwest where she's seated beside Grip. "We gave you a pass when you chose a white woman over the black woman you *said* was your queen."

*Not true.* It drives me crazy when people assume "Queen" was written for

Qwest, and the #GripzQueen hashtag still haunts me occasionally on social media.

“Did you hear me asking for a pass?” Grip cocks one brow, his voice even but taut with outrage. “You don’t give me passes because I don’t need your approval.”

“All I’m saying is I bet you won’t find Dr. Hammond pulling this. You may *talk* woke,” Angie asserts with relish, “but your walk is broke.”

Oh, I bet she’s been saving that line for a special occasion.

“Oh, you wanna compare walks?” Grip sits up straight, his words sounding like a battle cry. “Check my record—I’ve put my resources where my mouth is. I take every chance to engage with these issues, not just throw money at them, and what exactly have you done other than start Twitter beef and host a podcast?”

“Don’t throw shade at me for voicing what most black women think,” she fires back. “I just thought I should bring it up because I wasn’t sure if you were ashamed of her or what. We rarely see you out or in the news with her the way you have been in past relationships. You must realize how bad it looks.”

“I see no need to satisfy the curiosity of people who don’t mean well,” Grip replies. “Who only want to play in mud and make a mess of people’s lives on Twitter and Instagram. She isn’t a public figure, and I’m protective of her privacy. She chose me, but she didn’t ask to live on blast. I try to honor that. Believe me, it has nothing to do with me being embarrassed.”

“She may not be a public figure,” Angie says. “But she’s sleeping with one, and she’s related to one. Her name is Bristol Gray, for those who may have missed it since you’ve been hiding her, and her brother is Rhyson Gray—now that’s a big name. You don’t mess around. Go white or go home, huh?”

“I came on this panel to talk about issues,” Grip says. “Real issues that are costing us lives and compromising our future. You, however, chose to talk about shit that doesn’t matter and isn’t anyone’s business but mine and my girlfriend’s. I bet the men sitting in jail too long for petty crimes, or for crimes they didn’t even commit, those looking for jobs or needing education to even compete for them, all the people I want to help won’t give a damn if the person helping has a white girlfriend or not.”

Grip stands, reaching to loosen the mic from the collar of his T-shirt.

“So, I say, with all due respect, Angie.” He holds the mic in his hand,

farther away from his mouth, but there's no mistaking his parting. "Go fuck yourself."

He flings the mic onto the couch, leaving various degrees of shock and satisfaction on the faces of those who remain.

"Peeps, you heard that." Angie turns her gaze to the camera. "Now I want to hear from you. Where do you stand on black men pretending to be all woke, but first chance they get, going for a white woman? Leave comments on YouTube, on Facebook, tweet us, tag us on Instagram. Hashtag #PlayingInTheSnow."

She levels a more parting smile at her watching audience, the kind of smile you give when things go exactly as you've planned.



## GRIP

“SHIT!”

The expletive bounces off the walls of the narrow corridor as I leave the stage and head for the greenroom to collect my things. I can't believe I allowed that conniving chick to lure me into that trap.

“Grip!”

I don't turn even though I hear Qwest right on my heels and calling my name.

“Grip, stop.”

I'm still not stopping. Rage pumps toxins into my bloodstream, and I might poison anyone I make contact with right now.

“Man, hold up,” Qwest says louder, irritation lacing the words. “Grip.”

“What?”

The word cannons from my mouth, and I turn around abruptly, Qwest slamming into my chest. Breathing like a bull, air streams from my nostrils. Angie Black is the red flag I can't get out of my head. How dare she use a panel on such important issues to create drama? And to bring Bristol into it, to call her name and imply that I'm embarrassed to be with her. My jaws hurts; my teeth are locked so tightly together.

“About what happened out there—”

“You mean the ambush?” I snap.

“Yeah. I didn't know anything about it.”

“Really?” A scoffing gush of air rushes past my lips. “You expect me to believe that? Don't give me that shit, Q.”

“Who you think you talking to?” The goodwill on Qwest's face gives

way to irritation. “You better act like you got some sense talking to *me*.”

“So, it’s just coincidence that we ended up on this panel together? You’re asking me to believe you didn’t know things would go left like that?”

“I don’t care *what* you believe.” Qwest’s anger clashes with mine in the tight space. “My cousin was snatched when we were twelve years old. There were no TV cameras, no vigils, no magazine covers for months wondering what happened to her. She was just gone, and we never saw her again, never got answers. That’s why *I’m* here, not for your conceited ass.”

Real pain etches itself onto her face, and regret pinches in my chest.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have questioned your motives.” I blow out a frustrated breath and drag my hand over my jaw. “That was just some sideways shit I didn’t see coming, and this was not the time or the place for her to pull that.”

Qwest nods, something close to sympathy filling her dark eyes. Finally, we sigh in sync, each of us letting go of our anger at the same time.

“I swear I didn’t know,” Qwest says, her voice softer. “What Angie did out there, it wasn’t cool, and I’m sorry she went out like that.”

I tilt my head back to study the ceiling for a second before looking back to Qwest.

“And I’m sorry if I took any of this out on you.” I lean against the wall, bending my knee and propping my foot there. “I’m just tired of this. What does me wanting to spend the rest of my life with Bristol have to do with me wanting things to improve? Wanting better for our community?”

Surprise and then something that resembles hurt flits through Qwest’s eyes before she drops them to the cheap corridor carpet.

“The rest of your life?” She forces a laugh. “So it’s like that?”

*Dammit.* I’m so Bristol’s, sometimes I forget I was ever anyone else’s. In this moment, I definitely forgot Qwest ever felt she had any claim on me.

“I’m sorry.” I scrub the back of my neck. “I didn’t think—”

“That I still had feelings for you?” Her mocking smile is turned inside out. “You’re a hard man to get over.”

A sheet of ice falls over Qwest’s face.

“But I have,” she says. “I’ll admit, seeing you again . . .”

She rolls a lusty look from my head to my Jordans.

“You could still get it.” She tips her head up to meet my eyes, a question there, one I hope she doesn’t voice.

“Qwest, come on,” I say, clearing my throat of awkwardness. “You know



I'm with somebody else."

"I bet she don't give it to you like I did," she says, all sass and bravado.

Actually, she does, but I choose not to make things worse by saying so. I just watch her, keeping my face indifferent.

"Let's not do this." I push off the wall, intending to step around her, but she pushes me back, leaving her hand in the center of my chest. It feels wrong to have someone else touch me, but I tamp down my unease and leave it there for now. I still feel guilty about the way I dragged her into the complex web of my relationship with Bristol. I hate that I hurt her before, and I want to handle her more carefully than I did in the past. I'll leave her hand there and leave our eyes connected until she says what she needs to say.

"If I had long, silky hair," Qwest says, bitterness tingeing her voice, "and gray eyes and a pretty golden tan, would you want me then?"

*Damn.*

"It has nothing to do with that, with those things, Qwest." I place my hand over hers, hoping the contact offers her some comfort. "Am I attracted to Bris? Of course, but I've been attracted to a lot of women."

"You were attracted to me." Boldness presses through the uncertainty on her face.

"I was," I agree. "But I've only ever loved one woman, and that's Bristol."

I pause, meting out my next words with care.

"And she's the only woman I plan to be in love with. So yeah, I'm spending the rest of my life with her, and I can't know what would have happened if she looked different, if she were blond, if she was black. For me, it's a moot point, because I'm in love with the version of her that I have. That's all that matters."

Qwest flinches, like my words were a slap in her face. She pulls back, and with the tiny weight of her palm lifted, I breathe easier. She steps away and clears her throat, the uncertain woman asking questions gone. The assertive badass I'm used to seeing, the one who has all the answers, stands in front of me again.

"Love who you want, Grip." Her voice, her eyes, everything about her is resigned now. "Just be in the studio when my team needs you. I may not have any hold over your heart, but I still got your ass under contract for my album."

I manage a laugh, hoping to get us back on the footing we've had over the

last few weeks I've been working on her project while in New York.

"I'll be there."

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I take it out to see Bristol's name.

"Well, I guess I should let you handle that," Qwest says, eyeing the screen.

Her typical swagger is at odds with the lingering hurt I see in her eyes as she turns to walk away.

"Bris, I—"

"Why is she touching you?"

Bristol's voice is that dangerous, about-to-go-HAM quiet.

"Um, babe, what?" I'm disoriented. "Why is who touching me?"

"Qwest. She was all over you."

"The hell she was. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, maybe you should check Instagram. That's where you and I and Qwest are all tagged in a picture that shows her *touching you*."

With her still on the line, I pull my phone away from my ear and go to my little-used Instagram account.

"Well, damn."

Some intern, production assistant, gofer-ass punk skulking around here in the halls must have snapped a picture of Qwest with her hand on my chest and posted it just that fast. The moment that felt wrong when it was happening looks even worse out of context on Instagram. What was me trying to protect Qwest's feelings and not hurt her any more than I already have looks intimate, like a secret, and the caption only adds fuel.

*Maybe @TheRealGrip is taking @MsAngieBlack's advice to heart and going back to black. Who is really #GripzQueen? #TheBlackerTheBerry #TheSweeterTheJuice #OnceYouGoBlack #YouWontGoBack #WokeCheck #PlayingInTheSnow*

NEITHER BRISTOL nor Qwest are referenced specifically, but both are tagged.

*Fuck my life.*

"Bris." Now my voice is dangerously soft. I'm good and damn tired of

people in my damn business every time I turn around, poking their noses in my shit where it doesn't belong, messing with me and my girl. "You know this isn't real."

"It looks real," she whispers. "It feels real."

"Bristol Gray, if you tell me you believe this, I'm fucking you into next week when I see you."

Typically, she would say, *Is that a promise?* or offer some smartass comment, but the other end stays silent.

"Bris, come on." I bang my fist into the wall. "You know this isn't true. If she were a guy, I would kick Angie's ass."

"Well she's a girl," Bristol says, her voice hardening. "And I do plan to kick her ass where it will hurt most."

"What do you mean?"

"Meaning I'm calling her producer. That shit was way beyond the scope of what we agreed to, and I want her head on a platter."

"That isn't the way to handle it."

"The hell it isn't." Bristol's indignation and resentment nearly choke her words. "She thinks she can come for me—for *us* like that with no consequences? She's about to learn differently."

I squeeze the bridge of my nose, bracing myself for a fight I really don't want right now.

"Bris, you're not doing that."

Her voice drops. "What did you say?"

*Aw hell.*

"I said you're not doing that. That's what she wants."

"Then she'll be very happy to find herself out of a job because if she wants a fight, I'm her girl, and she should know better than to bring a fucking tweet to a gun fight."

"You don't want beef with this chick. It'll only turn the tide against you."

"Why? Because I'm white? Because everyone's looking for a reason to turn against me anyway since I'm with you? Like the tide wasn't already against me."

"We're in the twenty-first century, and nobody should still hold these views, but it's just a few, Bris. They are just the vocal ones. I know it's hard. It's hard for me, too."

"I'm so sorry I'm making life hard for you, Grip."

"Stop it." Anger flares in my words. "We're not doing this. Us fighting

won't make things any better.”

“No, what will make things better is teaching Angie Black that I'm not the bitch to mess with. She's firing shots? I'm firing back.”

“You're not,” I say, barely holding on to my calm. “Not representing me, you're not.”

An ominous silence swells from the other end, reaching across the country to suffocate me.

“What did you say?” she finally asks.

“Look, it's my career,” I force myself to reply. “And I determine what will or won't be done on my behalf, and I say no.”

“I see,” she says, suppressed fury embedded in her response.

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to take them back. I know this will only push Bristol away, will only make her angrier, but I will not have her embroiled in some beef with one of the most influential figures in the socialsphere. They want to come for me? Let them, but I'm not having them hurting Bristol. I should have just said that; it would have gotten a better response than this.

“Bristol, look, I—”

“I should go,” she cuts in. “Kai's almost done with her segment, and Aria's here with me. She just woke up.”

I sigh, resigned to not making this right until she comes home.

“Okay. Can I pick you up from the airport tomorrow? What time does your flight land?”

“I don't think I'm coming.” Her voice is cool and distant. “Things are still hectic for Kai. Luke's reality show starts production this weekend, and I'm thinking I should stay here for that. I'll come . . . I don't know, next week.”

This is bullshit. I know it, and so does she. Does she not feel how this distance is killing me? Not just the three thousand miles separating us, but the chasm opened up by this asinine fight.

“Are you sure that's why you're not coming home?” I ask, letting my frustration leak through the words.

A baby's cry cuts off her response. Aria.

“I have to go,” Bristol says hastily. I hear her *shhhh*-ing our goddaughter.

“Bristol, wait.”

The line dies, and there is nothing but silence on the other end, a gaping hush swallowing all the things I wish I'd said instead of all the wrong shit I spoke. I consider calling her right back, but I don't want to distract her when

she's taking care of Aria for Kai. Besides, I need to get to the studio in Harlem for a session. I glance at my watch to see how much time I have to get there. I stare at the piece-of-shit watch I never take off, only to find that it has died. After almost a decade, this watch that has never failed me decides to die today. I'll never forget the night Bristol gave me this watch, the night of our first kiss, trading hurts and hearts a hundred feet in the air, stuck on a Ferris wheel. The watch may have finally stopped working, but *we* still work. We'll always work. In a world of pieces that never seem to fit, we do. We work. We make sense when nothing else does, and I have to remind her of that.



## BRISTOL

I MESSED UP.

As soon as I told Grip I was staying in LA for work instead of returning to New York, I knew it was the wrong thing to do. The voice in my head calling me a fool is so loud and insistent, I can barely focus on anything else. Sitting here on the set of Luke's new reality show, I'm not really needed. I mean, it's good for me to be here, sure. Luke appreciates it, but he doesn't *need* me. Grip, however, does need me. Even across the country, I *feel* his need, the desperation to make things right. I need him, too. I feel it, too. It hounds me. After yesterday's disaster, another public dragging, the only place I want to be is in his arms, reassured that we're okay and, no matter how many stupid fights we have, will always be okay. Where am I instead? Here suffering indigestion from bad craft services food.

"That sound good, Bris?"

My unfocused gaze locks in on Luke, who watches me, both brows lifted in query.

"Uh, sure." I shake my head to pull myself back in. "Wait, I didn't actually hear what you said. What are they asking you to do?"

For the next few minutes, he details a segment the producers have set up showing him in the recording booth of the studio where we're shooting.

"Yeah, that sounds great." I glance at my phone, checking for missed calls or texts from Grip. Nothing. We don't fight often, but when we do it's a conflagration, burning everything to the ground, and right now I'm charred. Grip is usually the first to apologize. He's a better person than I am, the bigger person, but not this time. I'm making the first move, and it's on the

next plane out of LA.

“I need to go to New York,” I say abruptly, cutting in on whatever Luke was telling me.

Luke’s startled expression morphs into understanding.

“Is this about that Angie Black thing yesterday?”

Oh, that’s right—Luke knows. Everyone knows, because my life is an open book—and not the fairy tale kind, more like a Stephen King novel.

*Misery* maybe?

“Yeah.” I gather my iPad and bag. “I was supposed to be there by now, but . . .”

I let him fill in the blank with my cowardice and avoidant behavior.

“You *do* realize most people don’t feel that way, right?” Luke asks with a kindness not typically found in this industry. “The things Angie said . . . I know there are some who agree, but most don’t. Look at all the support you guys got afterward.”

I was pleasantly surprised by all the flak Angie received, lots of it from black women wanting us to know they didn’t agree with Angie. It came from groups Grip has donated to, from cops he’s worked with who defended him. It was actually pretty amazing. There were, of course, those vocal in their support of Angie’s position, but it was heartening to see the support for us, too.

That still doesn’t fix the fact that I messed up.

“This is some high-profile shit, Bris,” Luke says. “But you can take it.”

“Taking it is easier said than done when ‘it’ is blasted all over every social media platform and your relationship is reduced to tacky hashtags by people who want to see it fail.”

To my absolute dismay, my voice shakes and I’m blinking back tears. I hate being reduced to this weak, teary *girl*. This time it’s not what *they* did to me. It’s how badly I’ve handled things.

“Hey.” Luke takes both my hands in his and dips his head to catch my eyes. “I was there the week you and Grip first met. I saw him love you for years, and I saw you try your best not to love him back. It’s never been more obvious to me that two people belong together. This is a bump in the road, and not even a bump of your own making. Somebody else’s biases shouldn’t be causing problems between you.”

Right now, Luke isn’t my client; he’s the friend I’ve known for more than a decade, since before the money and the fame, and he’s right. Urgency to



make things right quickens my breath and smolders in my blood.

“You’re a wise man.” I pull my phone back out of my bag, my mind and fingers already racing ahead while I start searching for a flight. “I’ll have Sarah on set tomorrow, but I need to get to New York tonight.”

“Maybe.” Luke aims his megawatt smile over my shoulder. “Or maybe New York will come to you.”

Before I can fully process what he’s saying or turn to see what’s over my shoulder, a warm, familiar weight settles at my hip. That clean skin-deep scent I’ve come to associate with one person envelops me. I look up and over my shoulder to find Grip scanning my face with sober eyes.

“Hey.” That’s all he says, like he’s supposed to be here on the set of a reality TV show instead of in class, instead of in New York. His fingers tighten at the curve of my waist, though, belying the calm greeting. The tension rolls off his body and onto mine. I absorb it, feel it tightening the line of my mouth and clenching my hand around the strap of my bag.

“Dude.” Luke reaches for Grip’s free hand, doing that man clench handshake thing. “What’s up? Good to see you.”

“You too.” Grip’s mouth relaxes into a smile for our longtime friend. “You think you big time now, huh? Now you got your own show and all.”

Luke laughs, his bright blue eyes lighting up and crinkling at the corners.

“I’ve always been big time.” He offers an immodest shrug of his shoulders. “The rest of the world’s just catching up, thanks in large part to your girl here.”

“Yeah, she’s something else.” Grip’s smile dims a little, but he doesn’t look my way. “Well, congrats.”

Before any of us can say more, the director’s assistant interrupts, her harried expression and flyaway hair conveying the kind of day it’s been.

“Luke, Steven’s looking for you.” She sets her stress aside long enough to ping-pong admiring glances between Grip and Luke. I can’t blame her. Facing one another, they’re a study of beautiful contrasts, Grip’s darkness and raw sexuality a perfect foil for Luke’s blond hair and surfer-boy-next-door good looks.

“You said Steven needs me?” Luke prompts.

“Um, yeah.” She blinks the stars from her eyes and frowns. “He wants to talk through a few things for this next sequence.”

As much as I loathe the thought of leaving Grip even for a few minutes, I force myself to turn to him, prepared to ask him to wait for me, but again, it’s

Luke to the rescue.

“Hey, I got this, Bris.” His kind eyes smile back at me. “I’m sure Grip didn’t come all this way to see me.”

My eyes lock with Grip’s, and I already see the reprimand behind his impassivity.

“Okay,” I say. “I won’t leave, though, until you’re done. Come find me. I want to make sure you feel good about everything.”

“That works,” Luke says, turning back to the production assistant. “Take me to your leader.”

He gestures for her to lead the way and they’re gone, leaving Grip and me alone.

“Is there somewhere we can talk?” He scans the studio’s parking lot, which is doubling as our set. We’ve broken for lunch, and the crew swarms around the craft service table like ants at a picnic, hungry and industrious. There won’t be much time for food. Everyone’s focused on the meal, but not too focused to miss Grip. His star has risen stratospherically since his album dropped. They pretend not to be starstruck, but their surreptitious attention presses in on the privacy this conversation requires.

“Luke has a trailer of sorts.” I flick my chin toward it, across the parking lot that has been cleared for today’s shoot.

“That’ll do.” A thick fan of lashes hoods whatever is in his eyes. I hate not knowing what he’s thinking, other than that he’s not pleased with me.

I can’t blame him; I haven’t been pleased with me since that damn panel.

We’re halfway across the lot, and the silence is suffocating. The air hasn’t been this heavy between us since before we got together. I hate that I did this. He walks beside me, a gulf-sized space between us and his eyes set on the trailer like it’s a finish line. Once we’re inside, I walk farther into the room, setting my back against the wall and watching him across the few feet separating us. Grip leans against the small bar stocked with Luke’s favorite drinks and stares back at me. Everything is heightened in the small, tight space. Tension coils between us, pushing against the flimsy trailer walls. While a thousand ways to apologize fill my head and rest on my tongue, the silence tautens and lengthens.

“I was coming to New York tonight,” I finally say. As apologies go, it’s pretty lame, and not quite actually one.

“I heard you saying that when I walked up.”

Grip looks good. He always does, but after more than a week apart, my

eyes are as hungry for him as my heart is and I can't look at anything else in the room. He's wearing dark jeans and a Kelly green T-shirt that says *JOBS NOT JAIL* on the front.

*God, did I mention he looks good?*

I just want to skip to the part where he's soothing this ache at my core, where he's banging me like he's a bull and I'm his china shop. His still somber eyes tell me we're not there yet, but the compulsive clenching between my thighs reiterates that I'm ready to be.

"I'm sorry I pulled rank on you." His quiet apology when I was wrong on so many levels—when by all accounts, I should be apologizing first instead of just eye-fucking him—squelches my raging hormones.

"No, you were right." The words fight to get out of my mouth. "Not confronting Angie was the right call."

"I know that." He lifts one dark brow. "It would only make things worse, but I should have talked that through with you until we agreed on it, not tried to use the advantage our working relationship gives me to manipulate you."

He pauses, hesitation evident in his expression.

"I want to be your partner, Bris," he says softly. "In everything. There's no rank between us—ever."

I drop my eyes to the hands clasped in front of me.

"Thank you for that. I'm sorry, too. I should have said it first. It seems like whenever we fight, you're always the one . . ."

I swallow my pride and set aside every insecurity that's assaulting me to give him the truth.

"I'm just glad you're here." My voice wobbles. *Dammit.* "I'm just . . . I'm sorry."

I don't look up, but I hear him taking the first steps, feel him drawing closer. I anticipate his touch, shaking with the need of it. And then it comes. The perfect simplicity of our fingers twined together, of him holding my hand. It paradoxically brings me peace and incites my senses. Even as my soul seems to exhale in relief, want and need form a blazing knot in my belly. He tilts my chin until I have to meet his serious stare, his loving eyes.

"Bris, this is all we have." His words are so low, if someone else were in this tiny room with us, they wouldn't hear. They are only for me. "Until this semester is over, our time is split, and this is all we have."

I press our palms together.

"If you legit had to stay here in LA this weekend for work, I get that," he

continues. “You know I’m not that dude who wants you compromising your career for me, but if you were avoiding me because of our fight—”

“I was.” The admission leaves my lips before I can dissemble. His closeness, the intimacy of our fingers clinging, of our hearts beating through our chests and straining toward each other, demands my unequivocal honesty. I don’t look away, refusing to let embarrassment over my childish behavior deprive me of these beautiful dark eyes for even another second. I don’t miss the flash of disappointment at my words.

“I know that.” Grip’s mouth tightens, and I want to lick at the seam of his lips until they open for me, until he lets me back in. “That’s why you should have had your ass in New York this weekend.”

With him standing here in front of me, solid evidence of his love, I’m ashamed of myself, ashamed that I let doubt and insecurity rule me. I let them keep me here when I should have been there with him.

“You’re right,” I state simply.

“I hate it when we fight.” He drags a hand across his face. “I can’t focus. I can’t sleep. I can’t . . .” His words straggle into a growl of frustration and his brows snap together. “Nothing feels right when we aren’t right. You let that shit Angie Black brought up get to you when you know it means nothing, and that stupid post on Instagram . . . I get how someone else would think something was up with Qwest when they saw that, but for you to . . .”

The questions build up in the look he gives me until I’m sure the moment will explode.

“Why, Bris? There’s gotta be more to this than just the shots Angie fired. We’re used to that shit. What’s up for real?”

The reality of him, the steady pulse of this connection we share—with him standing in front of me, all the things that kept me on this coast seem ridiculous now.

“I . . . um . . . I was . . .” I squeeze my eyes closed for a second, feeling ridiculous now. “I was jealous.”

“Jealous? Of Qwest?” The heavy breath he expels breaches the air between us. The demand of his eyes is louder than the word, louder than her name in the quiet room. “Because of some awkward photo posted to Instagram? How could you possibly be jealous of anyone when you know I’ve looked my own mother in the face and told her I would choose you over anyone?”

*Well, when you put it that way . . .*

“I didn’t . . .” I falter because it’s true; he did that. As much as Ms. James has sacrificed for him and as much as he loves her, he told her that, for me. “Not Qwest specifically.”

“Baby, I’mma need you to get specific, because not one day since we got together have I *ever* given you reason to be jealous of any damn body, and yet you tried to play me—”

“I did not try to play you.”

“You tried to play me,” he persists, “like I was born yesterday morning and would accept some shit excuse for you staying here when you were supposed to be with me.”

He levels a hard look at me that somehow still manages to convey his love.

“Now tell me why.”

How do I put into words this awkward thing when nothing is ever awkward between us? But this is. This fear that crept insidiously into my head after my conversation with Jade and blossomed while I watched that panel—it’s awkward.

“I’m not jealous of Qwest specifically.” I’m embarrassed to even say this, but I have to. “When I watched that panel, I listened to Angie, and even to Qwest, to the other people onstage. I listened to you, and you were so passionate and knowledgeable and . . . I’m not—not about those things. What if some morning you wake up and my curiosity feels like ignorance? And you’ve lost patience with the things I don’t know that someone else would. What if one day you decide you want someone who’s . . .”

My voice peters out because to even say it feels wrong, but it’s what I’ve been wrestling with since my last conversation with Jade, even though I haven’t acknowledged it to myself.

“What if I decide I want someone who’s what?” Grip tips my chin up again to search my eyes. “Someone who’s black?”

I don’t nod, but he knows. What if he decides someday that the one thing he really wants, really *needs* is the one thing I can never be?

“Bris, I get it. The more active and vocal I am about these issues, the more some people want to focus on me being with someone who isn’t black, but listen.” He slides his hand to cup my neck, his thumb caressing my jaw. “I won’t ever want someone who isn’t *you*.”

I know that, or I knew it before I was on one coast and he was on the other and everyone had something to say about us and all the warning seeds

Jade dropped in my ears started taking root.

“I’m sorry I freaked out.” I draw a deep breath. “I kept thinking about you guys working together on her album, having your music in common, and then both being activists . . . all I could hear were the things Qwest was saying, the things Angie was saying, the things Jade said, and I—”

“Jade?” Grip’s question slices into my explanation. He narrows his eyes, searching my face for answers I didn’t mean to ever give him. “What does Jade have to do with this?”

*Shit.*

“Um . . .” I offer a nervous laugh while I search for a way to put him off Jade’s scent. “Nothing. It doesn’t have anything to do with Jade. I just meant—”

“Bris, you know better than to lie to me. What did she say to you?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit. Tell me.”

I press my eyes closed against his questions.

“I don’t want to come between you and Jade now that you’ve cleared the air.”

“You won’t. Me and Jade, we’re good. We’ll *be* good. Just tell me what she said.”

He dips his head and searches my eyes for anything I might hold back.

“Tell me everything.”

I lick my lips, trapping the bottom one between my teeth before I start. Grip’s family isn’t like mine, fractured and dysfunctional. His family, especially his mother and Jade, mean everything to him. The last thing I want to do is cause more trouble than his relationship with me already has.

“When we were at your mom’s house—”

“Wait,” he cuts in. “You haven’t been to my mom’s since the going away party. This conversation was that long ago?”

“Yeah,” I say carefully. “Then.”

Grip crosses his arms over his chest and studies me closely, displeasure clear in the twist of his lips before he speaks.

“So, you’ve been thinking like this for a while and never talked to me about it?”

“It wasn’t like that, I promise. It was . . . just some of the things Jade said got to me, and when I watched the panel, it all came back.”

“What did she say?” He speaks the words smoothly, but there’s a dent

between his eyebrows.

“Just that one day you’d get tired of me not understanding your blackness.”

“Understanding my . . . *what?*”

“You know, not knowing the movies or the songs or getting the jokes or knowing the things that are such a part of the community that means so much to you.”

“Hmmm. What else?”

“She said I was a fantasy, a high you’d come down from, and then you would want something real, a woman like Qwest, to cure your jungle fever.”

A startled laugh erupts from Grip.

“She actually said jungle fever? Who says that? Damn, that’s some 90s Spike Lee shit. I’m embarrassed *for* her.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Babe, it kind of is.” The short-lived humor fades from his expression. “Actually, what’s not funny is that you bought into it and let it come between us. You’re it for me, Bris. You know that.”

“I do know that. I’m sorry I was an idiot.”

He softens his voice. “I’m sure it won’t be the last time.” His hands coast down my arms, heating my skin along the way before he takes my hands between his.

Anger stirs anew when I consider the stunt Angie Black pulled.

“I still say Angie shouldn’t get away with this completely. Can’t I—”

“She didn’t.” Grip’s full lips thin into a severe line. “I blasted her ass when we got off the phone.”

“You did?” I hope he gave it to her good, though I would have enjoyed peeling her skin off myself.

“I did, and I talked to her producer about it. He was apologetic and said he hadn’t known she planned to go there. They’re suspending her for two weeks.” He squeezes my hands. “It wasn’t that I didn’t think she needed somebody’s foot up her ass, I just didn’t want it to be yours.”

He was protecting me. I feel worse and better at the same time.

I lean up, whispering my regret to him. “I’m sorry.”

“Baby, it’s okay. Just don’t do that shit again.” He grins and pushes the hair back from my face. “Let’s go home.”

“Are we making it permanent now?” The half-joking question slips past my lips on a fractured breath and a broken laugh. “Is New York home?”

Grip brushes his thumb over my mouth, dipping his finger into the bow of my top lip, pressing against the bottom until he's touching my teeth and tongue. His eyes rest hot and heavy and possessive on my mouth before he captures my eyes with his, making sure he has my attention.

"I'm your home, Bristol."

He's so certain. He never wavers in his love for me, in his certainty that we belong together no matter what anyone ever says. I'm ashamed again that I let Jade's words, Angie's criticisms, and Qwest just being Qwest make me doubt even a little bit.

"And you're mine," he adds.

"You better believe it," I agree with a smile. "But speaking of our current home, aren't you supposed to be in New York? In class?"

"I skipped."

I know how much he loves Dr. Hammond's class and what this time means to him. That he would miss that class speaks volumes.

"You skipped class?" I ask, my mouth hanging open.

He's told me a hundred—a thousand times how much he loves me, but that girl who moped around a deserted mansion while her family traveled the world without her, the one who crouched beyond her brother's rehearsal room listening to the magic of his music, looking for a way in, she still treasures being the most important thing to someone as incredible as Grip.

"You came for me." I cup his jaw, my voice and my heart softening the longer we're together.

Grip cups my face, too, his rough palm a welcome abrasion, his eyes intent.

"I'll always come for you. You should know that by now." He bends to press our foreheads together, his words misting my lips. "I have no pride when it comes to you, to this. I'll chase you anywhere."

I don't have words for how secure and completely adored that makes me feel, so I don't speak. I shift my head, my lips clinging to his, just for a moment. I deepen the heated contact of our mouths until our tongues move in tandem, tangling, wrestling, tasting.

"Don't run from me again." He breathes the words into my mouth and his fingers clench in my hair. Though just a whisper, they arrest me, an imperative that grabs me by the heart.





## GRIP

THERE'S a certain sense of rightness seeing Jade in the studio, not the way she used to come, her eyes lit with a hidden jealousy for my success, a nurtured resentment that the shot I got—the scholarship to a performing arts school—could have been hers. She has her own shot now, and I love seeing her take full advantage of it.

The ever-present Raiders cap is on the floor by her feet. Her head, hair sectioned into cornrows, is bent over a notepad. The guy she's talking to, Skeet, an old friend who needs other people's lyrics, notices me at the door before Jade does.

"What's up, superstar?" He crosses over, daps me up, and surveys me thoroughly. I know what he sees. My clothes are casual in that deliberate, understated way you have to pay a lot of money for. We started from the bottom together, but I kept rising, and he keeps slipping. I hope Jade's clever flow can help him.

"What's good, Skeet?" I ask, wishing I didn't know him well enough to recognize the calculating light in his eyes.

"You on the come up." His laugh is a prelude to the question I see coming a mile off. "When you gon' put me on? Let me spit on a track. I need some of that Top 40, double platinum love."

"We'll see." My smile is super-glued in place, not slipping a millimeter. "I'm not really recording right now, at least not for myself."

"Oh yeah. I heard you and Qwest in the booth again." Calculation becomes speculation. "I saw that panel Angie Black put on, by the way. That was messed up, man."

I shrug, unwilling to give him anything more to work with and tired of talking about it.

“Nothing I haven’t heard before. Won’t be the last time somebody comes at me with ignorant shit like that.”

My eyes find Jade, who sits on the couch across from the sound board, tossing her cap from hand to hand. She knows I’m here to see her, and she’s just waiting for Skeet to figure it out.

“A’ight, bruh,” I say, patting his back. “I need to holla at Jade for a minute. You mind?”

“Nah. We were just going over some notes before the engineers get here for the track we’re recording tonight.” He grabs a bag of weed from the sound board and heads for the door. “I’mma go burn one. Take your time.”

He turns at the door, smiling at Jade.

“And thanks for hooking me up with your cousin,” he says. “Her shit’s the bomb.”

He leaves behind a silence thick with my displeasure and Jade’s curiosity.

“Yo, what’s good, cuz?” She pounds my fist, scooting over so I can sit on the couch beside her. “Thought you were still in New York.”

“I was, but I came to get Bristol. We’re flying back tonight.”

Irritation flashes across her face before she can hide it. I really thought we were gaining ground, but I realize now she believes Bristol is an itch that, once scratched, will be gone. She’s just been biding her time.

“I’m glad to see you working with Skeet.” I slouch into the cushy leather worn to buttery softness during many late-night recording sessions. “He needs the help.”

“Yeah, his stuff was whack.” Jade keeps a straight face for a few seconds before sharing a grin with me. It makes her look younger, carefree, and I glimpse that girl who used to ride bikes with me until the streetlights came on. It’s for that girl that I want to be gentle.

“I need you to try with Bristol, J.” I cut the small talk and get right to it, my voice soft enough to persuade, but firm enough to insist.

“And what’d Miss Run Tell Dat say?” She twists her lips into a grimace. “I knew she couldn’t keep her mouth—”

“She didn’t.” I’m losing patience the more Jade lets her resentment show. “I had to drag it out of her, what was bothering her.”

“And it was me?” Jade touches her chest. “I’m what’s bothering her when I haven’t even talked to her?”

“Not since my going away party, right? She finally told me about the conversation you had in the kitchen.”

“I didn’t tell her anything Angie Black didn’t say in front of the whole world,” Jade snaps. “When you gonna realize Bristol is not for you? You have an opportunity to make a difference, and being with her is ruining it.”

“Ruining it how?”

“How much can black lives really matter when you fucking a snowflake?” A disparaging puff of air coasts past her lips. “We supposed to respect that? Just get rid of her and find someone like Qwest, that’s all I’m saying.”

That’s all? Jade says it easily, like it should be self-evident, like giving up Bristol shouldn’t break me, when it would. How can she think she knows me and not realize that losing Bristol would crush me?

“You still think she’s a trophy or a phase I’ll grow out of, don’t you?” I lean forward to study her face in case it tells me something different than her words do.

She just looks at me, the *damn right* so clear on her face, she doesn’t bother voicing it. I reach into the pocket of my leather jacket.

“Does this look like a phase to you?” I open my palm, exposing the large square canary yellow diamond I picked up before I went to the set of Luke’s show. Jade glares at the ring like the lights bouncing off the facets taunt her.

“You really doing this?” she grits out. “Wait’ll Aunt Mittie sees that.”

“Oh, she saw it.” I slip the ring back into the safety of my pocket. “When she helped me pick it out. Now all she talks about is swirl grandbabies.”

“You’re gonna have kids with *her*?” Disgust wrinkles the smooth surface of Jade’s face.

Now she’s pissing me the hell off.

“Yeah, I’m gonna have kids with her,” I snap. “As many as she’ll give me. And fuck you for making it sound like some kind of violation. I found somebody I love and want to spend the rest of my life with.”

“Oh, everybody says forever in the beginning.”

“We’ve been through this before, Jade. It *is* forever with us.”

Jade rolls her eyes and shoves the Raiders cap over her cornrows, resignation wrestling with protest in her expression.

“Listen to me.” I take both her hands in mine and look at her until she looks back at me. “I *will* choose her over you.”

Her lashes drop and blink several times, a frown drawing her brows

together.

“And if you can’t get over this bigoted shit, you won’t be in our lives.”

Her eyes fly to my face, widen and then narrow.

“I love you, Jade. You know that, but you need to understand something: anyone who wants to hurt Bristol has to go through me to get to her.”

I pause meaningfully before finishing.

“And they will *not* get to her,” I warn. “Keep showing your ass when she comes around, and you won’t *be* around. I’m not tolerating the toxic.”

An unexpected smile quirks her mouth. She reaches into the pocket of her baggy jeans for lip balm and slides the stick over her lips.

“Alliteration,” she murmurs.

“What?” I exhale a frustrated breath. “Are you hearing me?”

“Yeah, ‘tolerating the toxic’—it’s alliteration.” Her smile reminisces. “You came home one day from school. We were in like the sixth grade or something. You learned alliteration that day and couldn’t stop talking about it, giving me examples, making me come up with some. You were the smartest boy I knew.”

She shakes her head, something close to pride creeping into her eyes.

“You still are. Even on that panel, you stood out. You’re the best of us, Grip, and I wanted you . . .”

Her rueful sigh says it: she wanted what she thinks is best for me, namely, for me to choose a black woman. I hook an elbow around her neck, pulling her into me.

“You know what?” I touch our heads together. “Even though I dated all over the place, every ethnicity, I think somewhere in the back of my mind I thought I would settle down with someone just like Ma. Maybe I assumed that meant she’d be black. I never gave it much thought, but that’s not what it meant. Bris is strong and determined and loyal and as ride or die as they come, just like Ma. I didn’t see this coming, but she is exactly what I need.”

I kiss Jade’s forehead and stand, looking down at her.

“I’m not giving her up, J,” I tell her. “Not even for you.”

She doesn’t reply, but fixes her eyes on the floor, offering no more words. I don’t wait for her to say anything, just head out the door. My words should be the last because they’re the only ones that count.



## GRIP

“THIS IS REMARKABLE, IZ.” I study the proposal in front of me, so excited my foot is bouncing and I can practically feel my blood zooming through my veins. I saw an early draft, and talked Bris to death about it on the plane back to New York, but the final version is even better. “I want in,” I say decisively.

“What do you mean?” Iz glances up from the stack of papers he’s grading in his office. “Want in on what?”

“I want to invest in this program,” I say. “The community bail fund program.”

Surprise widens his eyes behind his glasses, and he tosses his red pen onto the chaos of his desk.

“Man, I wanted your opinion, not your money.”

“Well you got both. Where are your beta cities?” I ask. “You say you’ll launch it in five major cities—which ones are you considering?”

“LA is definitely on the list.” His deep chuckle fills the small office. “If that’s your next question.”

“Now I really want in.” I take a deep breath. “But I want a seat at the table, not just somewhere to throw my money.”

“What does that mean exactly?” Iz takes off his glasses and polishes them on the hem of his Morehouse College T-shirt.

“With your organization, is there any room on the board of directors for a ridiculously rich budding philanthropist who needs to learn the ropes?” The question comes easily, but I’m holding my breath. I want this—as much as I wanted my first record deal, as much as I wanted studio time so badly I swept

the floors for it. The only thing I've ever wanted more than this was Bristol. I got her, and I'm getting this, too.

"For a man with your resources," he says, leaning back in his chair and steepling his fingers at his chest. "That could be arranged."

"For real?" I don't want to sound eager, but the chance to pour my energy into something that will have immediate impact on the community where I grew up? Hell yeah, I'm eager.

"For real." Iz nods. "And when I say your resources, I'm not just talking about your money, Grip. You're a smart guy—principled, articulate. You have a level of influence, a platform no amount of money could buy."

Iz's words affirm me in a way I don't think I ever have been, in a way I don't think I knew I needed. It feels different than the things my mother told me growing up. He may not be old enough to be my father, and I may not have known him very long, but there's no one else I respect more. That was one of the few things Angie Black and I did agree on.

"By the way," I say, turning the subject partially to avoid the emotions his encouragement elicited. "Not sure if you caught that panel I was on last week, but Angie Black was singing your praises."

He picks his pen back up to resume grading papers, his forehead crinkling into a frown.

"Yeah, I saw it." It feels like the words are being pulled from his mouth with pliers. "As much as we'd talked about your girl, I never thought to ask if she was a sister. I just assumed."

"And I never thought to mention it because it doesn't matter." I suck my teeth then grit them. "I can't believe Angie turned what should have been a thoughtful, productive dialogue into a circus, and she had the nerve to question my commitment to these causes because my girlfriend is white. How ridiculous is that?"

He's especially preoccupied with the papers in front of him. He doesn't acknowledge my statement with even a grunt, and suddenly I need him to.

"Right, Iz?" I press. "The idea that my effectiveness is compromised somehow because Bristol is white—it's bullshit, right?"

He doesn't lift his eyes from the page in front of him.

"Well, you do like to make it hard for yourself, don't you?"

Tension stretches across my back like a wire hanger.

"What does that mean?"

"It's just an awkward time to be talking black and sleeping white." He



shrugs the linebacker shoulders rebelling against his tweed sports jacket with patches on the elbows. “To be dating someone outside your community when you’re emerging as such a voice *for* it.”

The smartest man I know just said some dumb shit.

“You see those two things as somehow incongruous?” My question is laced with dread as I brace myself for the man I saw as a hero to show his feet of clay.

“I just think a lot of successful brothers do what you’re doing.” He finally meets my eyes, tossing the pen down again. “You probably don’t even realize that you’ve been societally conditioned to see the white woman as the ideal. On some level, winning the white man’s prize is a symbol that you are now equal to him. You acquire her as an extension of your success.”

“*Acquire* her?” I throw my voice across the desk like a blade, honed and precise.

“It’s natural really,” he continues matter-of-factly. “It’s the ultimate act of defiance against those who have traditionally oppressed you. She’s an ideal to achieve, and we see that, in every aspect of your life, you’re an overachiever.”

“Bris isn’t some ideal, some lie mainstream media fed me and I fell for. This is love, not politics.”

“Love *is* politics,” he counters. “Because love is merely a function of your values and priorities.”

“If you think love is politics, then I see why your marriage failed.”

A storm cloud bursts on his face, raining anger.

“Watch it, Grip,” he says. “You’re way out of line.”

“*I’m* out of line?” Incredulity and fury brawl within me. “You dare to bring this bullshit to me, insult the woman I plan to marry, insult *me* this way, and then you say I’m out of line?”

He narrows his eyes on my face at the word “marry.”

“That’s your decision, of course,” he says. “Not one I would ever make. I believe the greatest expression of commitment to black people and the black family is the commitment to a black woman. For that reason, I don’t date outside of black, much less marry.”

“Oh, so I imagined the vibe between you and Callie?” A mocking laugh grates in my throat. “You don’t date or marry outside your race, but you’d fuck outside of it if Callie was down.”

The fury in his eyes bores into me. “Who the hell do you think you’re

talking to?”

“I really have no idea who I’m talking to.” I grab my saddlebag and stand, my hands shaking with the rage I’m suppressing. “I can’t believe I moved to New York to study under a bigot.”

He surges to his feet, fists balled like a boxer.

“You have the audacity to call *me* a bigot?”

“I have the audacity? You’re the one talking to me about Gandhi and Martin then spouting this crap. Martin said we should judge people by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, yet here you are judging Bristol because she’s white before you’ve even met her? Hypocrite.”

Anger ignites in his eyes at the insult, but he runs a slow hand over the stubble on his jaw. He sighs, shoving big hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“Look, we’re both upset,” he says. “This is why I didn’t bring it up. I knew we didn’t agree on this subject, and it does no good to talk about it. We can still work together, do a lot of good. That seat on the board is yours, and I meant what I said—it’s not just because of your money.”

“So we can work together and do all this good,” I say, “but the whole time you’re looking at my wife and thinking she’s a mistake? That she’s some Anglo trophy I use to prove something to other people? Even worse, because of some self-hate, to feel better about myself?”

He goes quiet, his chest swelling with the deep breath he draws in. I gesture to the proposal abandoned on his desk, my excitement smothered by disappointment and disillusion.

“How do you squeeze such big ideas into such a narrow mind? You’re smarter than this, Iz,” I say quietly. “I thought I could follow you. I thought you had answers, solutions.”

I walk to the door and give him one last sad, disgusted glance, saying what I’m fully prepared to accept may be my last words to him ever.

“Turns out you’re the problem.”



## BRISTOL

I'M in the kitchen when Grip comes home. I bought a cookbook, and it openly mocks me from the counter, its pages a reminder of my culinary failings. Occasionally I have these domestic urges. They typically pass, but ever since we moved into this beautiful place that has never been anything but a home since the O'Malleys drafted their first designs, the urges are harder to ignore—to buy fresh flowers for the kitchen from the stand up the street, to try cooking pan-roasted chicken with lemon garlic green beans.

That's why I'm in the kitchen asking myself how the hell to make lemon garlic sauce when Grip comes home. It's crazy that I know him so well, but I allowed Angie Black and Jade and others to get under my skin, to play on my unreasonable insecurities. And I do know him. I know how his steps sound at two in the morning when he's been at the studio laboring over a track and drags himself through the front door, or when Dr. Hammond says something that rocked him to the core, rearranges the way he thought about life. Those days his steps eat up the hardwood floor, eager to find me and share. Today's steps stutter, like someone lost and looking. They pause, wait. They're not sure.

He's on the couch when I enter the living room, head in his hands and elbows on his knees. On bare, silent feet, I pad over to him. He doesn't look up until I rest a hand on his head, caress the tight muscles in his neck.

"Hey." He manages a bend of his lips, almost a smile, but his eyes are defeated.

I instantly want to make whatever it is better, and my fix-it instinct springs into action. He pulls me down onto the couch to straddle his lap.

Many days I don't leave the house because it's also my office, but today I met with Charm about Grip's book deal. The Stella McCartney dress I wore to her office inches up my bare legs as I settle over him. His hands are on me right away, caressing my calves and feet, venturing over my thighs, reacquainting himself with the shape of my back through the thin silk. He greets my body the way he typically does, but there is nothing typical about his expression as he lays claim to me one limb at a time.

"Baby, what's wrong?" I back the question up with kisses feathered over his jaw.

He surprises me, grabbing me by the neck and pulling me into his lips forcefully. He kisses me like a savage, a greedy plundering of my mouth, consuming me with both hands. His kisses spill down my chin, a delicious mess. I hate to stop this but I know him too well and love him too much to be an escape hatch.

"Hey," I say against his lips, scooting back from the stiffening length of him. "This is all very nice, but I asked you a question. What's wrong?"

He stares into my eyes, and I see hurt there. Someone hurt him, and now I'm the savage. My teeth clamp down. My nails cut half-moons into my palms. All I want is a name, a name I'll find a way to erase. He leaves kisses in the hair curling at my temple from the heat of the kitchen. I just caress his jaw, giving him room to tell me what happened.

"Iz and I talked about the Artists As Activists panel." He shakes his head, a fraudulent laugh escaping. "I assumed he'd be on my side, that we believed the same things."

I already know, but I still ask.

"Believe the same things about what?"

At my question, a shadow passes over his face, like the sun playing hide and seek with the clouds. In an instant, he goes from telling me to protecting me.

"It's nothing." He shrugs and pulls me back down to lock my crotch over his. I resist, forcing resolve into my look and my voice.

"Tell me."

He sighs and licks his lips before speaking.

"Iz doesn't think we should be together," he finally says. "He doesn't believe in us."

*Doesn't believe in us.*

I don't think Grip realizes how telling the phrase is, how much the

professor's opinion has come to mean to him. In a relatively short time, Dr. Hammond has become much more than Grip's temporary professor. Grip moved here for the social justice maven with the brilliant mind, but he's become friends with the man. He respects Dr. Hammond as much as I've seen him respect anyone ever. He may not say it, may not even be able to put into words how deeply injured he feels, but it's there.

"And to think I was about to donate to his community bail program." Grip shakes his head, disgust written plainly on his face.

I stiffen against his chest, pushing a chunk of hair behind my ear and processing what he's saying. On our flight back to New York, Grip showed me the preliminary plan for Dr. Hammond's program. His eyes lit up, passion and purpose humming through every cell of his body. I can't get that image of him out of my head, and his friend Matty is there in my mind's eye, too—the one who sat in jail for months because he didn't have money for bail, the one who hadn't really done anything wrong. For him, I have a name and a face, but how many men are in that position and worse? Men we don't know are suffering, and nobody is saying their names.

"But now you won't?" I ask. "Because Dr. Hammond doesn't approve of us, of me, you won't work with him?"

A scowl etches Grip's expression.

"Hell no I'm not working with him. He's a bigot, Bris." The words fly from his mouth like hornets, swift and stinging. "Why am I here? I uprooted my life, had you uproot yours, to chase a small-minded reverse racist. I feel like a fool."

I understand his disappointment, but I can't say I agree fully with his assessment. I've known Grip a long time and he's breathed his convictions since the day I met him, but I've never seen him the way he has been these last few months. There is a focus and determination all encircling this incredible sense of purpose, like he understands what he was made for. I don't want him to lose that because of me. Besides, his mother felt the same way about us not too long ago, but her heart has changed; why can't we give the professor's heart the chance to change, too?

"Imagine something with me for a minute." I trace the velvety line of his eyebrows and run my thumb over his full lips.

His eyes drift closed as he absorbs my touch, sounds of contentment stirring in his throat and vibrating against my fingers.

"Let's say I have cancer."

He opens his eyes to glare at me.

“I don’t like this.”

“Just hear me out. I have cancer, and there’s nothing more they can do for me.”

He goes still, and for a moment I don’t even feel his heartbeat through his chest, like the thought of my heart stopping stopped his.

“I don’t have much time left,” I whisper, letting him feel the possibility of me being gone. “But then someone discovers the cure for cancer.”

He tips his mouth to the left and he traces the curves of my knees.

“There’s just one catch.” I dip my head to capture his eyes. “The man who discovered the cure—he’s a white supremacist.”

He looks back at me unblinkingly for a second before allowing himself one blink—just one.

“Do you accept the cure for cancer?”

“What good is this when—”

“Answer the question. Do you accept the cure for cancer from a white supremacist to save my life?”

“I’d accept the cure from the devil himself to save you. You know that.” He sighs. “It’s not the same.”

“What’s the title of Dr. Hammond’s book?”

He rolls his eyes.

“You know the title, Bris.”

“Humor me.”

“*Virus*. The title of his book is *Virus*.”

“And the point is that racism is a virus that’s constantly changing, constantly adapting, right?” I ask. “That it adapted when slavery was outlawed and when Jim Crow was eradicated and when segregation was legally struck down. It works its way into our systems, like our penal system, right? It’s a nasty bastard that just keeps morphing and surviving like a cockroach.”

Now I have his attention. He’s stopped countering my every word, stopped protesting and thinking this is a useless exercise. He’s finally listening.

“The person who finally cures cancer won’t be perfect,” I tell him. “They’ll just be the person who figured out the cure for cancer, and the people who live because of that won’t care that he cheated on his taxes or stepped out on his wife. They’ll care that he cured cancer. Dr. Hammond has

a cure, at least for part of the problem. With his ideas and your resources and influence, imagine how much good you can do.”

“He doesn’t think we should be together, thinks I’ve been societally conditioned to ‘acquire’ you.” Grip’s flinty look doesn’t dissuade me, even though that is some bullshit.

“I bet there are more things you agree on than disagree.” I prop my elbows on his shoulders, leaning into him and persisting. “I bet when he gets to know me, I’ll go from being a ‘they’ to being Bristol. Isn’t that what you said months ago when you performed ‘Bruise’ for the Black and Blue Ball? That sometimes it takes us being around each other and getting to know each other, at least giving us the chance to go from being a category to who we really are? As individuals, who we really are?”

He shakes his head, genuine humor apparent for the first time since his steps stuttered through our front door.

“So, what?” A grin tilts his mouth. “You remember *every* word I say?”

*He really has no idea.*

“If I only get one life with you,” I mutter into his neck, “then, yes, I’m holding on to every moment and every word you say.”

He pulls me away from the crook of his neck, studying my face. His eyes darken, emotion redolent in the air between us.

“You’re so precious to me, Bristol,” he says, his voice the perfect blend of raw and reverent.

I kiss him deeply, my tongue sliding against his, a choreographed dance between two partners, sensual and tender. I feast on his bottom lip, nipping and licking at the spot until he groans and shifts me lower again, his hardness marrying my softness, my wetness. *Not this again.* He keeps getting me off topic.

“Will you consider it?” I ask, inserting space between our lips, cutting into the hungry kisses.

“Huh?” Passion glazes Grip’s eyes. “Consider . . . what?”

“Dr. Hammond.” I pant between our lips, resisting the temptation to sink into another kiss. “You’ll think about still working with him?”

He tilts his head back into the sofa cushion, lashes lowered over the resentment in his eyes at the mention of the professor’s name.

“Yeah.” He nods, but derision still twists his lips. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good.” I startle him when I hop off his lap.

“Hey, where are you going?” He points to the situation behind his zipper,



the pole in his pants.

“We’ll have to handle that later, babe. You think you love me now? Wait’ll you taste my garlic lemon chicken thingy.” I head toward the kitchen, calling over my shoulder, “By the way, don’t bother me tonight. I have lots of reading to do.”

I downloaded *Virus* a long time ago, and it’s well past time I read it for myself. If I used Grip’s own words to prove my point, maybe I’ll need to use Dr. Hammond’s own words on him, too.



## GRIP

“CAN I SEE IT?”

Amir and I are in the kitchen. He’s frying, of all things, bologna, and I’m on my laptop working on an assignment for Iz’s class. Things have not been the same between the professor and me since our argument. He was watching the door the next day when I came in, like he wasn’t sure I’d show, and honestly, I was ready to pack up my shit, grab my girl, and fly back to LA. Even sitting through his class felt like a betrayal the first few minutes, like I was telling him it was okay to think the things he does. If it hadn’t been for Bristol, I would have chucked the deuces on his ass.

But during class, we dove into case after case, injustice after injustice that reiterated just how broken our justice system is, how black, brown, and poor people are clearly disproportionately suffering the brunt of it. This is bigger than even something as important as whether or not Iz approves of me loving Bristol. For me, that’s a heinous bias, and I can’t believe the same bright mind that produces brilliant ideas for programs and policies confines itself to that kind of thinking, but he *does* have solutions. He *does* have good ideas, and together, we can help a lot of people. Maybe we can even change things.

“Bruh, you gonna show me or what?” Amir scowls through the smoke rising from the sizzling pan.

“Not while you got my house smelling like a heart attack.” I glance from my laptop to the sizzling grease in the pan. “You can’t keep eating like this. We’re thirty, not thirteen. You need to eat better.”

“Who you supposed to be?” Amir demands, a grin on his face. “The surgeon general?”

“The surgeon gen—” I shake my head and laugh. “Also, if we’re gonna get technical, you’re thirty-one, a year older than me.”

“Aw, hell. Here we go.” Amir rolls his eyes and takes a sip of his beer.

“I mean, we can’t forget you flunked the first grade.”

“You know I was sick that year and missed a lot of days.”

“Still.” I slant him an amused glance. “First grade.”

“You ain’t ever gonna let me live that down, are you?” He shakes his head and adjusts the flame on the burner.

“My point is you gotta adjust that diet. You know all the shit that runs in your family.”

“What runs in my family?”

“Hypertension, heart disease.” I tick the afflictions off on my fingers. “Diabetes.”

“Always with the ’betes,” he mutters.

“And that’s just your mama’s side.”

“Don’t talk about my mama,” he warns, but still chuckles.

“I’m just saying, half your aunts died with no feet ’cause of the ’betes. You can’t even crip walk with no feet, bruh.”

“Do I have Bristol to thank for the lecture?” Amir asks. “She got you eating healthy? She cooking vegetables for you every night or something since we moved to New York?”

My laugh booms in the kitchen, and even after it fades, a grin still hangs around on my face.

“Did you ask if Bristol . . . *my* Bristol . . . has been cooking every night?” I clarify with a laugh. “Occasionally she’ll get in here and try a little something. Not that I give a damn. I don’t care if Bris can’t boil water. She has other talents.”

“Please don’t talk about your sex life.” Amir grimaces. “It turns my stomach to see a man so pussy-whipped.”

“Least I’m getting some.”

“Ooooooh. That’s low.”

“On the regular,” I continue goading. “Daily. Usually twice a day, and it’s the bomb.”

“You just gotta rub it in, don’t you?”

“Hey, you can’t call a brother pussy-whipped then get salty when he tells you how good it is.”

“You got me there.” Amir laughs.

We've been teasing each other this way since eighth grade when we both got our dicks wet for the first time. I'm not one of those guys who fucks and tells, especially about Bristol, but I've never been able to take a shit without Amir knowing. That won't change any time soon.

"What about you and Shon?" I ask.

"What about us?" Amir's eyes narrow, wariness seasoning his words. "What you mean?"

"I *mean* what about you and Shon? I tell you all my business. You've told me jack shit about you and Shon."

"Nobody asked you to spill all your business."

"I'm pretty sure you *did* ask me to spill all my business."

"Yeah, but now you can't shut up about your girl." Amir offers a good-natured smile and shrugs. "Since it's Bris, I'll let you get away with it. Me and Shon went on a few dates. We're taking it slow."

"Slow?" I ask with disbelief. "Dude, you met her in pre-k. How much slower can you take it?"

"You didn't close the deal with Bristol for eight years. I think I'm on pace to do better than you."

I laugh when grease flies up from the hot pan and pops his hand.

"See, that's what you get for cooking that shit in here."

"You know you love some bologna," Amir says with a grin. "Don't even try to get all new now that you live in Tribeca."

"If I'm not mistaken, you live downstairs *in Tribeca*."

"I ain't footing the bill, though. That's on *your* dime."

"You a freeloading motherfucker." I laugh at the expression on his face. "You knew good and damn well I didn't need you to move with me to New York, and you let Bristol get herself all worked up about *security*. I hope you're happy now, living in Tribeca and getting paid to do jack shit all day."

"Man's gotta make a living," he says, his grin unabashed.

My discussions with Iz about increasing enterprise in urban communities, a green revolution for people of color, come to mind.

"What do you want to do, Amir?" I flip the high-backed chair around and straddle it, folding my arms on its back.

He glances up from flipping the bologna to the other side.

"Do with what?"

"Bruh, with your life." I shoot him a skeptical glance. "It's gotta be more than pretending to protect me for the next fifty years."

Amir turns down the corners of his mouth.

“I was taking some night classes before I won the lottery on your security detail.”

We share a grin before he sobers, shrugs.

“I took some business courses at the community college. Maybe I’ll get on the Magic Johnson tip, ya know? Bringing quality businesses to the hood, that kind of thing.”

“Hey, I’m here for that, too.” I hesitate before voicing the idea that has been unfolding in the back of my mind for a few weeks. “You could do what I’m doing, get a degree online, business or something. Between music and the stuff I want to do with Iz, I might not have much time for the businesses I’d like to see happen.”

“So, what?” Amir points the spatula he’s holding at himself. “You want me to do some black enterprise stuff or something?”

“Why not?” I ask. “You’re smart. You know how to hustle and understand the hood, know what it takes for businesses to make it there. I trust you. Who better to invest with? All you’d need is some training.”

Interest sparks behind Amir’s eyes before he looks away to open a loaf of bread.

“I’ll think about it,” he says and clears his throat. “Now back to my original question. Can I see the ring?”

I let him get away with changing the subject.

“I hate that I even told you I had it.” I grin and make no move to get it out.

“Stop being a pussy and show me the ring.”

I reach into my bag, take out the ring I’ve been carrying for the last week, and walk over to the counter where he’s still frying up heart disease in the form of meat product.

“Shiiiiit.” He stretches the expletive out like a Slinky, obviously impressed as he takes it from my fingers. I want to take it back as soon as it leaves my hands, not because of how much it costs—though, *damn*, it cost a lot—it just feels like he’s holding my future in his big ol’ clumsy hands.

“If you get grease on the ring, I’m gonna—”

We hear the front door open, and Amir’s eyes go as round as plates. Bristol’s heels tap on the hardwood, the sound louder as she rounds the corner. Before I can take the ring back, Amir tosses it into the sugar canister.

“What the . . . ?” I smack the back of his head.

“I panicked!” He shrugs just as Bris enters the kitchen.

“What’s that smell?” She wrinkles her nose, distaste on her face.

She joins us at the counter, tipping up for a kiss. I try to think what acting-normal Grip would do . . . he would cup her face with both hands and kiss the hell out of her, so I do. She’s liquid against my chest and breathless by the time I’m done. She glances at Amir, smiling a little self-consciously even though he’s used to us.

“Is that what you’re wearing to the debate?” Bristol asks.

The conversation on race and mass incarceration between Iz and Clem Ford is tonight and being broadcast live from a nearby bookstore.

“Yeah.” I glance down at my narrow black slacks, gray button-up, fitted black leather jacket, and boots. “What? It looks busted?”

“No.” She frowns at her pantsuit, not even wrinkled after a full day of meetings. “The opposite—you look too good. I need to step up my game and change.”

She looks gorgeous.

“You look gorgeous.”

“You have to say that.” But my compliment puts a smile on her face. “Are you going with us tonight, Amir?”

He meets my eyes over her head, and I silently shake my head and give him the finger-slitting-the-throat warning.

“Uh . . .” His eyes dart from her to me and back again. “Nah. I have . . . um . . .”

“Shit,” I offer helpfully. “He’s got shit to do tonight. Besides, the bookstore is only a few blocks away. We can easily walk. We’ll be fine.”

“There’ll be a lot of racist idiots there.” She glances uncertainly between the two of us.

“I said we’ll be fine.” I’m barely holding on to my patience now.

“You strapped, dawg?” Amir asks.

I lift my pant leg and show him the gun at my ankle.

“Is that really necessary?” The concern trebles in Bristol’s eyes once she sees the gun. “You know how I feel about guns.”

“And you know how I feel about not being able to protect you—not gonna happen.” I drop the pant leg and turn to Amir. “Like I said, we’ll be fine walking.”

“It’s cold out there.” Bristol rubs her arms like she’s still standing on the sidewalk. “It’s December.”

“I’m the Cali dude,” I tease, “and I’m willing to walk in the cold, but you grew up here and are wimping out?”

“She’s right, though,” Amir says, poised to take the first bite of his sandwich. “It is cold.”

I point in the direction from which Bristol just came.

“Why don’t you take your heart attack on white bread and go back to your place?”

Bristol gives the sandwich a cautious glance.

“What is that?”

“You never had bologna, Bris?” I ask.

“No.” She offers an investigative sniff.

*This I have to see.*

“You probably wouldn’t like it,” I say casually. “It’s what we grew up on. We had to eat it in the hood—you know, us being poor and all, struggling to make ends meet. Right, Amir?”

He catches on immediately and jumps in.

“Oh, yeah,” he agrees. “Some nights this was all our moms could afford, but I understand, Bristol, if *you* don’t want to try—”

“Give it to me. I’ll try it,” she interrupts, stepping over to Amir and the sandwich in question. “I bet it’s . . . well . . . I’m sure it’s . . .”

Her voice dies when she comes face-to-face with the processed meat. Looking brave, she bites into it. She goes a little green for a second, like she might be sick, then she chews it quickly, determined not to ever let us know. Meanwhile, Amir has a coughing fit to disguise his laugh. I’ve had lots of practice keeping a straight face when messing with Bristol.

“You like it?” I ask.

“Mmmhmmmm.” She swallows her gag reflex. “I can see why . . . see why you guys loved it. It’s . . . so . . . so . . .”

“Good?” I supply.

“Yeah, it’s good.” She hands it to Amir like it’s burning her fingers. “I don’t want to take it all from you, Amir.”

“Oh, no, Bristol.” He pushes it back toward her. “You can have—”

“No, really.” She shoves it back to him, looking like she needs a barf bag. “Please take it.”

“I’m gonna head out then.” Amir bites the sandwich, closing his eyes in ghetto rapture. “Hmmmmmm. Thanks for leaving me some, Bris.”

“Of course.” She laughs nervously, like she’s afraid she’ll have to down



some more. “You keep it. You eat it . . . all of it.”

As soon as we hear the door close behind him, Bristol rounds on me.

“Oh, my God. Why did you let me eat that shit?”

My laugh bounces off the walls.

“That’s what you get for trying to hang with them hood boys. It’s definitely a meal we learned to love out of necessity.”

“Next time a warning would be nice.” She stretches up to grab a mug in the cabinet, smiling at me over her shoulder. “You ready for tonight? Are you gonna behave?”

“A rapper, a white supremacist, and a narrow-minded professor walk into a bar.” I cross my arms over my chest and shrug. “What could go wrong?”

“It’s my first time meeting Dr. Hammond.” She pours this morning’s coffee into a mug and pops it in the microwave. “I’m a little nervous.”

“Don’t be.” I scowl at the thought of introducing Bristol to Iz knowing how he feels about our relationship.

“You just leave the professor to me.” She reaches for the—*holy shit.*

*The sugar.*

I race over and slam my hand on the canister.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Um . . . making a quick cup of coffee?” She slides a perplexed look from my face to the canister. “It’s been a long day, and I just need a hit of caffeine to get through tonight.”

“It’ll just make you jittery.” I sound jittery as hell. I feel like the ring might glow through the canister and give itself away.

“I got up way too early. *Someone* woke up before my alarm and demanded sex.” She cocks a chiding brow. “Twice.”

“What can I say?” I lift and drop my shoulders. “A man’s got needs.”

“So does a woman. I *need* my coffee, and I take sugar. Move.”

“You can’t have this sugar because . . .” I twist my brain around until I stumble on a logical explanation. “Roaches.”

Judging by the horror on Bristol’s face, you’d think I said Nazis.

“Did you say *roaches*?” Her voice drops several decibels to deathly quiet.

“Yeah, I, uh . . . saw a roach in the sugar.”

“Here?” I’m pretty sure her face blanches. “In Tribeca?”

“They get around, Bris.”

“I better dump it.” She goes for the canister, but I slide it out of her reach.

“I’ll throw it out.”

She pulls her phone from her pocket.

“I’ll just call property management. They need to—”

“Let me do that, babe.” I pluck her phone from her fingers and slide it back into her pocket. “You go get dressed. We need to leave soon.”

“But you’ll call?” She gives the sugar canister one last anxious glance. “I may not be able to sleep tonight thinking about that roach.”

“I have creative ways of putting you to sleep.” I lean down, lips on her, hand locked onto the canister. I pull away and turn her toward the stairs. “Go get even more beautiful for me and we’ll go. We don’t want to be late for the showdown.”

I swat her ass, smiling when she jumps a little and laughs back over her shoulder before taking off up the stairs.

Relief slowly pushes a breath out and slumps my shoulders. With one last furtive glance to make sure she’s not coming, I lift the lid and dig around in the sugar to retrieve the ring. The purity of it captures then reflects the overhead lights, a spectrum radiating from the yellow diamond.

“No roaches.” I slip the ring back into my pocket. “But I did find a canary.”



## BRISTOL

“WHY DO YOU KEEP SMILING?” I ask Grip as we walk toward the bookstore for the debate.

“You’re wearing my necklace.” He squeezes my hand and slants me a smile, his eyes locked on the gold bar dangling between my breasts.

“*Your* necklace?” I touch the chain around my neck, tracing its inscription. “I distinctly remember buying this myself.”

“But I inspired it,” he says smugly.

The Neruda line carries such significance in our relationship, declaring, *my heart broke loose on the wind*. I can’t wear it without thinking of our first kiss, without remembering him slipping under my armor, his own vulnerability tempting me to share things with him I’d never shared before.

“I love it when you wear it.” He studies the sidewalk as we walk briskly toward the bookstore. “You look beautiful tonight, by the way.”

“Well I knew I needed to dress warmly since you were making me walk.” I laugh at his good-natured grimace.

A white sweater fits my torso closely, and cropped, wide-legged pants of the same color swing loosely from waist to mid-calf. My camel-colored leather boots and cashmere coat finish off the outfit.

“These boots are already killing me,” I complain, sneaking a glance at his face.

“I don’t want to hear it.” He laughs and tucks my arm into his. “It’s a gorgeous night for a walk, and you know it.”

He’s right. The chill in the air underscores the holiday cheer lent by Christmas decorations on every corner and in the store windows.

“It’s our first Christmas as a couple,” I say.

“Yup. Too bad we’ll be back in L.A. Maybe I’d get my snowfall on Christmas morning if we stayed here in New York.”

“Do you want to stay?” I hope he doesn’t. I miss my palm trees and my goddaughter, my brother and Kai. I think I even miss my parents. It *must* be time to go home.

“Nah.” Grip pulls his leather jacket a little tighter around him. “I’m ready to go back. I’d rather have our friends and family than snow.”

“Maybe you’ll get it tonight. They’re calling for it.”

“I’m not gonna count on it.” He stops in front of a bookstore with a line of people stretching from the door. “We made it, and look, your feet didn’t give out.”

“Very funny.” I lean into his shoulder. “I’m really looking forward to hearing Dr. Hammond.”

Grip’s smile drops, and he glances into the store.

“Yeah, well, Clem Ford may be an ignorant ass bastard, but he’s also smart and tough. Hopefully Iz can hold his own.”

He more than holds his own. I’m astounded by the sharpness of Dr. Hammond’s mind. His thoughts are agile, contorting and twisting to cut Ford off and anticipate his arguments before he makes them. I was impressed when I read his book that impacted Grip, but hearing him in person, I understand why we moved to New York, why this man’s ideas swept through Grip like a hurricane.

Dr. Hammond is unlike anyone I’ve ever met. There is a restrained power to him, to the force of his intellect. Physically, he’s more like a football player than a professor. Six five or so, he’s not so much wearing the dark blue suit as leashed by it. I can already tell he’d rather be comfortable than fashionable. Picture a younger Idris Elba, and you’ve got Dr. Hammond. His charisma is time-released, fed to you in slow, sneaky doses, slipped to you with a smile that seems like it’s costing him something. His reserved demeanor, which should make him seem aloof, instead pulls you closer. It draws you in and sits you down to listen. I glance around the bookstore, crowded with his students and readers clutching copies of his book. His deep voice pitches low, and you’re not sure if you’re on the edge of your seat because you’re straining to hear or because what he’s saying is turning the things you thought you knew upside down, but either way, he has you on edge.

In contrast, everything repulsive in this world convenes in Clem Ford. I want to scrub my ears after sitting through an hour of his thinly veiled racist rhetoric. He has a brand of charisma, too, a dark pull, an undertow for bottom feeders.

He has his own supporters here, young students who follow him to the edge of blatant bigotry. As a businessman, he is convincing and astute. Unfortunately, his business is prisons. I never considered that many corporations use prison labor at a fractional cost, and having a large incarcerated population is good for business.

And bad for prisoners.

Ford and Professor Hammond personally dislike one another; it's apparent from their opening statements and the first questions they take from the audience, standing on opposite shores with an impassable body of water between them. Ford's ideas are fiscally sound, but morally bankrupt. The professor picks apart each argument methodically, persuading the audience with a formidable grasp of history and philosophy, and a compelling vision for the future.

Grip still isn't happy about Professor Hammond's perspective on our relationship, but I read grudging respect in his eyes, a reluctant pride in how well Iz—as he told everyone to call him—represents the issues they're both committed to. I squeeze his hand, and he turns to look at me.

"You okay?" he asks, head bent attentively.

"Yeah." I nod and lean over to drop a kiss on his jaw. He palms my head and brings me close enough to whisper in my ear.

"Are you bored?"

The question almost hurts my feelings. I know he's just being considerate because this isn't necessarily the world where I spend most of my time, but I want him to know I'm on the edge of my seat along with everyone else.

"I love it." I press my hand along his face. "Professor Hammond is brilliant. I'm glad I came."

Pleasure widens his smile and crinkles his eyes at the corners.

"I'm glad you came, too."

He sits back and tunes in again. They're almost done with the Q&A; I missed the last question, but I listen closely to the professor's response.

"Don't feel bad for not knowing," he tells the young student still standing at the mic set up in the aisle for questions. "Feel bad for not doing once you know. The things you've heard here tonight, now that you know about them,

what will you *do* about them? Ignorance is a naturally occurring state. It's not what you feel guilty about, it's what you *do* something about. We are born not knowing, and our experiences feed us information. You limit your knowledge and understanding of not only your place in this world, but the place and plight of others by doing what you've always done and knowing only what you've always known. Position yourself socially and intellectually to know more, to understand beyond the scope of your experiences. That is how we evolve as individuals and as a society."

I want to stand up and yell, *Mic drop!* after just about everything he says, and this especially appeals to me. Jade was right: there *are* a lot of things I don't know and don't get about Grip's upbringing, his past.

I definitely don't get bologna sandwiches.

But I won't feel bad for not knowing. I'll do what the professor said. I'll keep positioning myself intellectually and socially to know more. It's no different than what Grip had to do, than what millions of people do to understand what is unfamiliar to them but essential to learn.

When the moderator thanks everyone for coming, the crowd breaks and splits, Ford's followers clamoring to speak to him and a line forming in front of the table where the professor is posted to sign books.

And they aren't the only ones people are eager to talk to.

"Yo, Grip, could I get a picture?" asks a young guy with dreadlocks.

That one request sets off a chain reaction of people realizing Grip isn't just another student, but a superstar. Within seconds he has a line of his own and is signing copies of the program we received when we walked in, taking selfies and listening to teary-eyed girls tell him how much his music has touched them. Like a good little celebrity and with much more patience than I would have, he navigates it all with a pen in one hand and my hand in the other.

"Hey." I tug on his hand to get his attention. "I'll be right back."

His smile slips and he turns to me.

"Where are you going?"

I affect a cockney accent. "Can't a lowly servant girl go to the restroom while you hold court, m'lord?"

He tilts his head and scrunches his face up.

"I don't even know what you're doing right now."

I laugh and pull my hand free.

"Never mind. I'll be back," I tell him, walking backward. "Deal with your

. . . public.”

I’m still chuckling at the look of frustration on his face as I walk beyond his reach. Bigots make him nervous, and apparently, there are a lot of undercover ones here tonight. They hide behind their hedge funds now, behind profit sheets instead of white sheets, but the heart is the same.

I take my place in line behind a few other people clutching copies of *Virus*. I pull mine out of my bag and wait my turn. I can tell the professor has signed quite a few of these tonight, and his patience has started to fray. He’s not like Grip, a practiced professional used to all the attention and demands. He’s a brilliant man who wrote a book he never expected to do what it’s done. If the frown he’s wearing is any indication, having “fans” and signing autographs isn’t exactly his forte.

“Who should I sign it to?” he asks brusquely without looking up from the book I handed him.

“Make it to Bristol.” At my name, he looks up sharply, his eyes speculating if it’s a coincidence or if I am who he thinks I am. “Yes, I’m Grip’s Bristol.”

A slow smile works its way onto the handsome face marked with lines of weariness.

“You certainly are.” He extends his hand. “A pleasure finally meeting you.”

“Is it?” I accept his hand, making my tone just cool enough for him to know I’m aware of the words he’s spoken against our relationship.

“He talks about you all the time.”

“I heard he left out one important detail.” I pause meaningfully. “At least important to you.”

He has the decency to look uncomfortable for a second, but it passes quickly, and in no time the same self-assured, self-contained man who dismantled Clem Ford’s flawed arguments tonight stares back at me, awaiting my next move.

“Could you sign by my favorite quote instead of in the front of the book?” I ask. “I folded down the page and highlighted the passage.”

He turns to the page, and I know he’s being confronted with his own words, words I’ve nearly memorized.

*Too many of our American systems are built on bias. The irony is that these biases are often inextricably, if unconsciously, connected to our own sense of superiority. The very biases that make those in power feel stronger,*



*better, actually weaken them. Our biases are our blind spots, and we need others to guide us in the darkness of our own ignorance.*

He contemplates the passage for a moment before signing and handing the book back to me.

“It’s not personal,” he says with what looks like genuine regret in his eyes.

“When you’re the person, it feels personal.” I lean closer, speaking for his ears only. “What you wrote in that book about bias, I believe it. Do you?”

“Touché,” he says with a tired smile. “You don’t pull punches, do you?”

“No, I don’t, especially when it comes to Grip. Even though he knows where you stand on us, he still respects and admires you. So do I. I believe you can help each other and help a whole lot of people.”

I let those words sink in before going on.

“For that reason, I encouraged him to continue his work with you.” I firm my lips and narrow my eyes. “But hurt him again, and you’ll have to deal with me.”

For a moment, shock overtakes his expression, and I wonder if I went too far. Then something cracks. His eyes light up, and laughter—completely at odds with the sobriety he’s demonstrated all night—spills from his mouth. It goes on for several seconds, and I’m determined not to join him, but my lips twitch, which only sets off another round of laughter. After a few more seconds of me awkwardly watching him laugh at me, he settles into a relaxed grin.

“Message received, ‘Grip’s Bristol.’ Have a good evening,” he says, dismissing me with a nod and still smiling. “Next in line.”

I step aside with my signed copy pressed to my chest. Grip still has quite a few fans he’s making his way through, and he catches my eye and mouths, “Sorry.” I cross my eyes at him, drawing a wide grin before he turns his attention back to the selfies and autographs. I do what I’ve become accustomed to doing trailing behind superstars—my best imitation of a wallflower, posted up and waiting.

“Excuse me, have we met before?”

I glance up and can feel surprise and disgust warring on my face when I see the man in front of me. I school my features, unwilling to give Clem Ford the satisfaction of knowing my thoughts.

“I don’t think so, Mr. Ford.”

“Well you obviously know me.” He smiles like an amicable snake.

“I’m here tonight, so of course I know who you are.” I turn my attention to my phone, refusing to engage with him. “But no, we haven’t met.”

“Your mother is Angela Gray, right?”

Despite my inward double take, I look at him with no sign of surprise.

“Yes. You know her?”

“The Hamptons.” He snaps his fingers as if now he has it. “Last summer in the Hamptons. We were both at her fundraiser for some charity or another.”

I nod, remembering as vaguely as he does, but enough to know I was there.

“Yes, but I don’t believe we met.”

“Not formally.” His eyes make quick work of my clothes like they aren’t there and he can see what’s beneath. “But who could forget a woman like you?”

Clem Ford is sixty if he’s a day, and he might be a bigot and an opportunist, greedy and corrupt, but he’s not a dirty old man . . . so I’m not sure why he’s trying to convince me that he is. His eyes, poured into their deep sockets and surrounded by a network of wrinkles and saggy flesh, hold no real interest, at least not of a sexual nature. He’s not a man who does things for no reason, so why is he bothering with me?

“Can I help you?” Grip asks from behind Ford.

If I hadn’t been watching him closely, I would have missed the glint of satisfaction in Ford’s eyes before he turns to face Grip. No, he didn’t have any real interest in me, but he knew how to draw the person he *is* interested in. I was the unsuspecting bait in whatever trap he wants to set for Grip.

“Mr. James.” With his back to me now, I’m left with the unflattering view of the balding back of Clem’s head. “I’m sorry we didn’t get to hear from you this evening.”

Grip’s eyes remain locked on Ford, assessing, picking around his intentions.

“From me?” Grip quirks one brow, but otherwise shows no response. “Wasn’t my night.”

“Dr. Hammond is definitely a worthy opponent in a debate.” Ford slides his hands into his pockets and rears back. I don’t need to see his face to know he’s up to no good. “But you’re the man everyone’s talking about and listening to. You’re the voice for this new American Dream.”

Grip watches him, waiting for the point. Despite the languid posture,

arms folded over his chest, he's on high alert, ready to flare barbs like a porcupine at the first sign of threat.

"I know you don't think we have much in common," Ford says, "but you're wrong. I can think of at least one thing we both seem to love."

Grip's eyes slit and he swallows, and I feel him bracing for Ford's next words. I'm sure they'll be handpicked to antagonize him, and I silently will him not to fall for it.

"And what's that?" Grip asks.

Ford steps closer to whisper into Grip's ear. I don't hear whatever nastiness he feeds Grip, but in a flash of lightning and with a thud that sounds like thunder, Ford lands beside me on the wall, pinned there by the manacle of Grip's hand.

"Say it now." Grip's voice razors through air viscous with animosity.

Even under the weight and pressure of Grip's hand, Ford forces a strangled, taunting chuckle. The chatter in the room dies down as people turn their attention to the drama playing out between these two men.

I ignore Ford and step close to Grip, placing my hand on his arm.

"You need to let him go," I say fierce and low. "Now."

Frustration bunches the muscle along Grip's jaw and his fingers tighten fractionally around Clem's throat.

"Man, he's not worth it," Dr. Hammond says, materializing on the other side of Grip. "This is what he wants—for everyone to see some violent thug when they look at you. Whatever he said, it's not worth it. Let him go before somebody turns the cameras back on or calls the cops. Or even worse, start a riot in here."

He glances at the crowd, a few of Ford's supporters making their way toward us, wearing outrage on their faces. Others inch closer, trying to catch the words flowing between us. A tall, suited man, apparently from Ford's security detail, steps forward menacingly, but Ford holds up a staying hand, stopping him from intervening.

"Is this what you wanted to see?" Grip asks Clem, loosening his fingers but not letting go. "The violent thug?"

"I knew he was in there," Ford rasps. "It's just a matter of knowing which button to push. We all have our weaknesses."

His eyes flick to the side and find me, a wretched grin sawed into his face.

"Don't look at her." The words fire from Grip's mouth. "Look at me."

Clem takes his time turning mocking eyes from my face back to Grip.

“You want to push my buttons?” Grip demands. “I would gladly do time on one of those plantations you call a prison for her. Try me and see.”

I gulp back a river of profanity. The thought of this man using me to provoke Grip unleashes a rage that I leave boiling in my belly. I can’t very well talk Grip down if I’m standing on the ledge beside him, ready to jump.

“Grip, please let him go,” I say, finding matching concern in Dr. Hammond’s eyes across Grip’s arm, a stiff bridge from his body to Ford’s neck.

As abruptly as he grabbed him, Grip releases Ford.

“Get him out of here,” Dr. Hammond tells me, watching as Ford coughs a little, adjusts his suit, and walks back to the group of admirers security is holding back. When I see the outrage on their faces, I realize just how ugly this could have gotten. Grip’s fans and Dr. Hammond’s students and followers study the smaller group of supporters who showed up to demonstrate solidarity with Ford. This has the potential of a bomb poised to blow, and I need to get Grip out of blast range.

I drag him through the door and down the sidewalk. My feet hurt in the high-heeled boots, but I ignore the discomfort, covering as much ground as possible at a bruising pace.

“Bris.” Grip tugs on my hand, trying to slow me down. “Babe, hold up.”

I ignore him and keep moving, as much to give myself something else to focus on as to actually get away from that scene.

“I said stop.”

Grip pulls us up short, stronger and able to stop me when he wants to. He lifts my chin, forcing me to look at him. We’ve been practically running in the freezing cold. Exerted, we watch each other through frosted-air breaths. He scans my face under the streetlights, impervious to the steady stream of people trickling past, a few of them wearing questions about Grip’s identity on their faces. It’s times like these I wish he was just mine, wish the whole world didn’t feel they had a right to be in our lives.

Actually, I pretty much feel like that all the time.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Am *I* okay?” My voice spikes with incredulity. “You’re the one who just choked a white supremacist in a roomful of white supremacists, but yeah, I’m just dandy, Grip. What the hell?”

“I did not choke him. I firmly held him against the wall. The limp dick

bastard could have gotten loose at any point if he'd tried hard enough."

"And why do you think he didn't try?" I demand. "Why do you think he held back his security? Why'd he grin like a maniac the whole time? You played right into his hands."

"Fuck this." He tries to start walking, but I grab his elbow.

"No, listen to me. You're there for a debate on people of color and mass incarceration and you do something like that? You know what you're up against. You have everything he thinks you don't deserve. He wants to discredit you, and you opened the door to let him. You have to be wiser than that."

"Wiser?" Anger forces a plume of breath out to freeze in the air. "So now you're telling me how to be a black man in America? Like I haven't negotiated this shit my whole life?"

"Oh, is that how it's gonna be?" Hurt crowds my heart in my chest until it's just a small thing barely beating. "I don't get to tell you things like this? Why? Is it a black thing and I wouldn't understand?"

"This isn't going to a good place." He runs both hands over his head and down his face. "Let's get home."

"No, I want to know." I tuck my hands, like blocks of ice, into the pockets of my cashmere coat. "Are there things that are off limits with us? When we have kids, if they look more black than white, will it be 'our' community and 'our' causes and 'our' struggle, and Mommy just gets to watch? Is that what you envision for me? Another family where I don't quite fit?"

Tears blur his face in front of me.

"Because I've done that." I swallow the painful lump searing my throat. "If that's how it's going to be, tell me now. I want to be prepared if you don't want what I thought you did—something that doesn't have barriers or boundaries. I would never be disrespectful, you know that, but don't . . ."

I look down at the cracks in the sidewalk, wondering if somewhere inside I'm cracking, too.

"Just don't leave me out," I whisper. "Don't make me feel like there are parts of your life I can't touch, because I don't have *anything* you can't be a part of."

He's quiet . . . not just a quiet that is an absence of words, but a quiet that gives him space to think. He's turning it over in his mind, the things I've said, and I've known him long enough to leave him with his thoughts for a

while. He'll come back to it when he's ready.

"Look." I take his hand, loosening the tension of the last few moments. "I would never assume I know what it's like, but I know rich, entitled assholes. I grew up with them, and *that one* is after you. You gave him ground he should never have."

I shake my head, bewildered by the idea that he would allow himself to be in that position.

"Why did you get so angry? What did he say to you?"

A wall of ice falls over his face and his lips pull tight at the question, at the memory.

"Let's go."

He starts walking again without waiting for me. I stay right where I am in the middle of the sidewalk, and he's several feet ahead before he realizes I'm not trotting after him like some Cocker fucking Spaniel. When he glances over his shoulder and I'm where he left me, his shoulders stiffen and swell with a breath I'm sure he draws to keep himself calm. *Good luck*. That shit rarely works for me.

He heads back with swift strides, his eyes a dark maelstrom, nostrils flared, and all I can think about is the amazing make-up sex we'll have after this fight.

"What?" Hands locked at his hips, the leather jacket fitted to the ridges of his chest, his expression a study of irritation. I just want to shake him up like an Etch A Sketch and jar that look off his face.

"My feet hurt."

"Your feet . . ." He shakes his head as if to clear it. "What are you talking about?"

"You said we'd be fine walking home, but my boots have four-inch heels, and my feet hurt."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have worn four-inch heels."

"And maybe you should have called for a car like I suggested."

"For four blocks?" He rolls his eyes, but the brackets around his mouth disappear. His shoulders, all rigid muscles moments before, drop just a little. "We're New Yorkers now—we're not taking a car for four blocks."

"I've been a New Yorker all my life, and I never had a problem taking a car four blocks wearing four-inch heels."

He cups my neck, his thumb caressing my cheek, his eyes filled with a familiar exasperation and affection reserved for me.

“How many fights do you want to have at one time, baby?” he asks.

“That depends.” I smile and nod to his shoulders. “Are you giving me a ride?”

“A . . . a ride?”

“Piggyback.”

His truncated laugh rides on a puff of frigid air.

“You’re joking.”

“Is that a no?” I keep my face neutral. “There’s only a block and a half left.”

“Exactly.” He throws his hands up. “You can walk a block and a half.”

I look at him. He looks at me. I’d rather our wills clash over something this trivial than what we were wrangling about moments ago. Those things had weight and depth, not suited for sidewalk conversation. Those things should wait until we get home.

“Hop on,” he finally says grudgingly, but with the tiniest flicker of amusement buried in his eyes.

There aren’t many people out as we get closer to our place, and the ones walking past don’t look too closely. They’ve seen odder things than some guy carrying his girlfriend piggyback.

“You’re choking me,” Grip says, but it’s a lie. Just to tell him I know it is, I tighten my arms around his neck.

“Ow.” He laughs. “As if it isn’t already hard enough carrying you.”

“Are you calling me fat?” I inject indignation into my voice. “Keep it up and you’ll find yourself on the couch.”

“First of all, there are three bedrooms,” Grip says. “Second of all, if I slept on the couch, you’d be on top of me when I woke up.”

I smack his head.

“What?” His shoulders shake under my arms as he laughs. “You love couch sex. I mean, you love all sex, but especially couch sex.”

“Oh now I’m a nympho?”

“Only for me.” He pulls my hand from where it’s hooked loosely at his throat up to his lips for a quick kiss. “And that’s totally acceptable.”

For the last block, we don’t speak much, there’s less need to. We *feel* the things we need to know instead of say them. With my chest pressed to his back, forgiveness, love, understanding, and tenderness transfer noiselessly between the layers of our clothes, an emotional osmosis through blood and bone, through hurt and fear. I don’t know how I realized this was what we

needed, but I did. It's hard to touch when you're fighting. The anger is like a force field, keeping your bodies as far apart as your opinions. I knew if we could feel each other, my breath syncing with his, my heartbeat seeking the rhythm of his, my nose buried in his neck, his hands hooked under my legs—if we could get back here, touching, we could right ourselves.

And we have.

Even on the elevator, he doesn't put me down, like we're afraid to break the truce our hearts negotiated through these points of contact. At our door, he slowly lowers me to the floor, turning to press into me with his arms on either side of my head.

"How about a good night kiss?" he asks, like this is a date and we're parting ways instead of living under the same roof and sleeping in the same bed on the other side of that door.

A wordless nod is the only signal I give, and the only one he needs. His breath warms my lips after the cold walk home. The sweetness, the rightness of it squeezes around my heart. His mouth is familiar, the shape and texture, the soft fullness I've memorized with mine, and yet every time, every kiss is a revelation, a mystery trapped between his lips, hidden under his tongue for me to discover. I will kiss him a million times in our life together and never tire of it. My lips will always cling, curious and searching. His touch is an endless thrill. I don't know if we'll have five years or fifty like the O'Malleys, but I will never get used to this wild yearning, will never get enough of this deep contentment.

I can only hope we end every fight with a kiss.





## GRIP

“WINE?” I ask once we’re inside.

“God, yes.” Bristol sits on the arm of the couch and gingerly takes off her boots like her feet might come off with them. I owe those boots new soles, a spit shine—something to express my gratitude. If it weren’t for them, Bristol and I might still be snapping and snarling at each other on a New York sidewalk.

That’s not to say we don’t have to finish our conversation. We do, but with calmer heads and hearts back in alignment.

“Meet me in the greenhouse,” I say, heading for the kitchen to grab a bottle of whatever is already chilled. When I get out there, she’s curled up on one of the thick-cushioned outdoor couches. Her legs are folded under her, and her head is tipped back as she stares up at the stars through the tinted glass.

I pour us both a glass of Bordeaux and take my place beside her. There are many kinds of quiet. The kind we shared the last block of our walk home needs nothing added. Then there’s silence like the one we’re sitting in now, one that’s primed for confession.

“That white pussy,” I say, barely loud enough for her to hear. I don’t want her to.

“What?” She turns her head, still tipped back on the couch, to watch me. “What’d you say?”

“That white pussy,” I repeat. “That’s what Clem Ford whispered to me. He said the thing we have in common is that we both love that white pussy, and that fifty years ago I would already be dead for fucking you.”

I suppress the anger that immediately ignites in me again at the words he said, at the way he looked at Bristol before he said them. I'm such an idiot. I knew he was setting a trap for me, but he used the only lure I would never leave in his snare. As much as I told myself not to respond, my hand had a mind of its own as it wrapped around his fleshy throat, and in the moment, it felt like my hand had the right idea.

"Oh, my God." Bristol gulps, indignation stealing her breath. "I can't even . . . That's awful."

"Yup." I sip the Bordeaux, waiting for the expensive liquid to settle me, not feeling the effects yet. This situation may require weed.

"As much as I want to kick his ass myself," Bristol says, anger straining her features, "you know he was just provoking you, trying to get a rise out of you. You can't let him."

She turns her body to face me, but leaves her cheek against the cushion.

"And I'm just concerned. I didn't mean to lecture you." She holds my eyes with hers, takes my hand, and weaves our fingers together. "You know I would never presume to tell you anything about being black in America."

"That was a stupid thing for me to say," I interrupt. "I was angry and frustrated. I'm sorry."

"Maybe I was being . . . I don't know, presumptuous." She fixes her eyes on our fingers twisted together. "I just wanted us to both see what he was doing and not fall for it next time."

Bristol grimaces delicately.

"And I'm afraid there *will* be a next time. There's something about you that offends him. Actually, I think it's everything about you. When there are guys like you running around, how is he supposed to sell his false superiority bullshit? Men who are smarter than he is, rich like he is, more accomplished. Famous. Well respected. He wants to think you're an aberration, but he's scared there's more where you came from."

Her assessment is spot-on. Now I have to wade into what is sure to be one of the toughest conversations we've ever had.

"When I first started at the performing arts school," I say, studying our hands caressing, mine darker and rougher than hers, "I'd never really had a white friend. Your brother was the first."

She watches me, not making a sound, so still I wonder if she's breathing.

"There were pretty much no white people in my neighborhood," I continue. "Not at my school, not in the stores where we shopped. The only

white people I ever saw on a consistent basis, who were in my life, were cops, and I'd been conditioned to fear them.

I take a gulp of wine.

"That's how separate we felt. I'd go as far as to say sometimes we felt forgotten." I pause to laugh. "When I showed up at my new high school, I'd never seen an episode of *Friends*, and who the hell cared about that show? The kids' jokes weren't funny, but I was the only one not laughing, and when I tried to be funny, they didn't get it. None of it made sense to me. It was foreign, like a parallel universe where up was down."

I glance up to find her eyes fixed on me in complete concentration.

"If Rhyson and I hadn't become close, I probably would have quit. He'd never seen *Friends*, either. He knew less than I did in a lot of ways because he'd been on the road busting ass like a grown man, playing piano since he was eleven years old."

I shrug, trying to remember why I thought I should tell her this.

"I just . . . Tonight, you asked if it was a black thing and you wouldn't understand." I sigh, unsure how to approach this, but needing to say it all without a filter, the way our other conversations have always been. We've never done eggshells, and tonight sure as hell isn't the time to start. "Is that how you feel when you're at my mom's or . . . wherever with me? With my friends?"

"Sometimes." Her voice is soft, but her eyes remain undaunted. "Like everybody understands something I don't. Like at any given moment, I'll make a fool of myself and not even know it. It's a very vulnerable feeling—that you don't even know what you don't know. I think that's why I let Jade's words get to me. You know me, I'm not the girl who gives a fuck, but around Jade, in situations like that, I find myself trying so hard—not trying to be black, just . . . *trying*, because I want to understand."

"I'm sorry if I make you feel excluded sometimes. I don't mean to." I tilt my head to peer into her eyes. "Some things are specific to my cultural experience, and I don't know if you'll ever fully grasp them all. Real talk, I don't *care* if you don't. Ethnicity is just one part of who I am, a very important part, yeah, but just one, just like it's only one part of who you are. There are things about your job, your past, your experiences that I won't completely get, either, but I want to know about them because they make you who you are."

"You're right." She looks at me, the open love and need in her eyes

burning a path to my heart. “There will be things I can empathize with, but won’t ever know firsthand. Please don’t ever feel there’s anything you can’t say or that we can’t share. I want a love with no walls. This world uses whatever it can—race, politics, religion—to divide us. We can have differences, but promise me they won’t be walls that divide us.”

“I can promise you that.” I capture her hand because I can’t *not* touch her when the air throbs with our honesty.

“We’re doing something hard, Grip,” she says, her expression earnest. “In a culture, in a climate that would push people like us apart, we choose to be together. We *fight* to be together.”

“Yeah.” It’s all I can manage because the passion on her face, resonating from her body, steals my words, quickens my heartbeat.

“And I will have uncomfortable conversations with you. I’ll confess embarrassing things so you understand me. Whatever it takes. Listening to Dr. Hammond tonight helped me understand that even if I find bias in *myself*, if *I’m* ignorant in some way, it doesn’t mean I don’t love you. It means I don’t know.”

She reaches up, her hands trembling around my face, her eyes deep and dark and frank.

“And I want to know. I need to know because I love you. You’re my end game, Grip. Any hurdle we face, we’ll overcome it together. Nothing will stop us.”

There’s no other way to respond to that except to touch her; to physically express how her words have exploded inside of me. I lean to drop a kiss on her lips, meaning for it to be quick, but she’s so sweet, so addictive, I can’t let go . . . can’t pull back . . . can’t stop. My fingers drift into her hair and my thumb presses on her chin, opening her up to go deeper, seeking the passion that gave me those words. She shudders when I lick the roof of her mouth.

“Grip, God,” she whispers into me. “It’s always so good.”

My lips dust over her jaw and behind her ear, the delicious scent of her hair making me dizzy, making me want her more. She tips her head back to give me access to the smooth skin of her neck.

“Oh my God!”

If she’s saying that now, wait till I get this sweater off.

“Grip.” She taps my shoulder. “Hey, stop for a second. Look up. I think you’re finally catching Mother Nature in the act.”

I drag my attention from the curve of her neck to glance up through the

greenhouse glass tiles. Huge snowflakes drop from the sky, a starless black hole that stretches beyond my imagination. At thirty years old, I'm seeing my first snowfall. I doubt it will even stick or that there will be much accumulation, but the point is seeing it happen, seeing what feels like a miracle in progress. Most people have experienced this, felt this wonder when they were just kids. Having it this late in my life makes it sweeter, makes me appreciate the miracle of nature that it is.

And I know exactly how I should mark my miracle.

"Close your eyes, Bris."

She swings a look around to me that asks what I'm up to.

"What do you—"

"Would you just do what I ask for once without all the—"

"I will kick you in the balls if you say without the *sass*." Bristol crosses her arms over her chest. "I'm not a fourteen-year-old girl and you are not my father. I don't need paternalism from you, Grip."

"Okay, can you further the feminist cause later and just close your damn eyes?"

"I will." Bristol grins widely. "But only because it's your first snowfall."

"Why you gotta make everything hard?"

"If that's a hint that you want to have make-up sex," she says, finally obediently closing her eyes. "I *won't* give you sass on that."

I slide off the couch and onto the floor in front of her, reach into the interior pocket of my jacket.

"All right." Standing on my knees, I face her, wedged between her legs. "You can open your eyes."

She does, and they immediately widen beyond what I think is humanly possible.

"How about engagement sex?" I hold the delicate platinum band between my thumb and index finger. "I've heard it's even better than make-up sex."

Her jaw drops a few more centimeters with every second that passes. Bristol, who always has something to say, is struck dumb, and I'm about to tease her about it when fat tears slip over her cheeks.

*Holy shit.* I can't do Bristol tears under any circumstances, even joyous occasions.

"Babe, don't cry." I swipe a thumb over her cheekbone and cup her chin. "You're gonna give me a complex."

"How can I not . . . you just . . ."

She gives up, shaking her head and dropping her lashes into the wetness gathered under her eyes. Her forehead falls to rest against mine, and we just sit there for a few seconds. Her hand slides around my neck and she kisses my jaw, sniffing and blinking rapidly against my face. I turn my head to look at her and she stares back at me, her silvery eyes as clear as crystal, as certain as the sunrise.

“You just gonna leave a brother hanging like this?” I ask, my voice husky with emotion.

Her chuckle breezes over my lips, and she sits up straight with a red-tipped nose and damp cheeks.

“I heard you say something about engagement sex,” Bristol says. “But I haven’t heard an actual proposal.”

My smile wavers and then drops. I can’t lighten this moment any more. It has more weight than anything I’ve ever done, and it deserves more than I’ve ever given anything.

“Bristol, I’ve loved you so long, my heart doesn’t remember life before you. For the last decade, you’ve been the first thing I think about and the last thought in my head.” I proffer the ring. “Would you do me the honor of forever? Will you marry me?”

She swallows and fresh tears fill her eyes, but she blinks and bites her lip as if she’s trying to keep it together.

“I aspire to be many things,” she finally says, “but there is nothing I will ever do that will make me prouder than being your wife.”

When she puts it that way, knowing her ambitions and her drive, to hear her esteem our relationship above all else as we start our life together humbles me. If I wasn’t already on my knees, that would have brought me to them. I take her hand and slip the ring on her finger.





## GRIP

“THERE IS NOT enough coffee in the world for this week.” Callie looks up from the corner of Iz’s desk she has commandeered for her stack of papers.

“I told you to focus on finals—grading mine and taking your own.” Iz studies her over the rims of his glasses. “Grip and I have this proposal under control.”

“Well, don’t you have finals, too?” Callie asks me.

“I do.” I flash her a grin. “But this is the only class I’m taking this semester. Next semester, I go back online and home to LA.”

Callie tosses her pen down, sitting back in her chair and crossing her legs.

“Wait. Did you move to New York just for Iz’s class?” she asks.

Iz and I have negotiated a tentative *détente*, but it’s still galling that I moved across the country to learn from a guy who thinks I shouldn’t be with Bristol. It’s narrow-minded, and it makes me feel stupid for coming here, but . . . the guy *is* a genius, and this proposal we’re working on is something I could only dream of being a part of before I met him.

“You could say that,” I mumble, looking back to the pages I’ve been marking up. “So, are we set on the college campus tour?”

“Uh, yeah.” Iz sounds about as uncomfortable with Callie’s question as I am. “You need to run this schedule by your team or whatever?”

“By Bristol,” I say deliberately, looking up to meet his eyes. “She manages everything, but this far out, we should be able to accommodate these dates.”

“And just to be clear,” Callie says, propping an elbow on the desk and leaning forward, “you’re going to college campuses all over the country

talking about this community bail fund?”

“And the community justice defense initiative,” Iz adds. “For those who have been wrongfully accused or convicted and can’t afford quality legal representation.”

“And Grip will perform at each stop?” Callie asks.

“Yeah, a few songs, not a full concert,” I clarify. “And I’ll talk about the program. We want to mobilize the next generation around these issues, raise awareness, recruit volunteers.”

“This will slay.” Callie grins and swings her eager look to Iz. “Where do I sign up?”

“Say . . . huh?” Panic fills Iz’s eyes for a moment. You wouldn’t expect a woman who barely clears five feet to scare the living shit out of a guy as big and imposing as Iz, but I get the impression he always wants to beg me not to leave him alone with her. I suspect it’s so he won’t screw her into the nearest wall, but these are merely my speculations since he won’t talk to me about it.

Not that we’ve talked about much outside of the program lately.

“I want in.” Callie sets her mouth in a stubborn line. “I’d be volunteering like anyone else since I won’t be your TA after this semester.”

The stare they hold picks up where some conversation I haven’t been privy to left off.

“We’ll see,” Iz mutters, turning his attention back to the proposal.

“Yeah, we will.” Callie gathers her backpack and stands. “I need to get to class myself.”

When I glance up to tell her goodbye, that same odd expression she wore the first time she went fangirl on me is back on her face.

“Not to make this weird, but . . .” she says in that voice people use right before they make things weird. “I’ve acted like a normal person all day and think I deserve a commendation for not bringing this up earlier.”

I stifle my grin because I already know where she’s going.

“Yes?” I lift both brows sky high and wait.

“Oh my God,” she gushes, unlike any other Rhodes Scholar you would ever meet. “Is it true? Are you engaged?”

So much for stifling grins, because the shit-eating-est grin of all time overpowers my face. Bristol was with Kai for a late-night talk show performance, and some of the production team backstage spotted her ring. A few posts and several tweets later, everyone knew—or thought they did, since we haven’t confirmed anything and really have no plans to. Bristol may

promote for a living, but she doesn't like that lens turned on our private life, not even a little bit, and I can't blame her. It's a pain in the ass. We'll have to eventually, but it's only been a couple of weeks, and we're right here at Christmas. Maybe after the New Year we'll draft something to announce, or maybe we won't confirm at all. In the meantime, it's no one's business that I'm the happiest son of a bitch on the planet.

"Well, are you?" Callie presses, her indomitable spirit infectious.

"If you can keep your mouth shut," I tell her, shit-eating grin still firmly in place, "then, yes, I am."

"Eeeeeep!" Callie sits back down and drops her backpack like she's got all day to hear the details. "Tell me everything."

"Don't you have a class in two minutes, Callie?" Iz asks pointedly, flicking his eyes toward his office door. "See you tomorrow."

Callie holds his glance for a moment longer before retrieving her backpack and heading toward the door.

"Congratulations," she says over her shoulder. "An engagement and Grammy nominations all in one month. You win December."

I haven't even processed the Grammy nominations. The day after I asked Bristol to marry me, I found out about the three nominations. I'm proudest of "Bruise" being up for song of the year.

"Thanks, Cal." I give her a grateful smile.

"Bristol's a lucky woman," she says softly, sincerely.

"I'm a lucky man."

"Well, I want to hear all the details when Professor Killjoy isn't around," she says with a pointed glance at Iz before she leaves. "Good luck on your one exam."

"That girl," Iz mumbles, staring at the space she just vacated like she might have left an outline in the air.

There's no doubt in my mind that Iz jerks off to thoughts of Callie defending her dissertation naked. A few weeks ago, I would have given him shit about it, but things changed after that fateful conversation. Now I pretty much stick to the things we do agree on. Otherwise, I have nothing to say to him.

"She's something else," Iz says.

"Yeah, she is, but remember—you don't fuck your students," I can't resist saying.

Iz squints his irritation at me.

“I meant Bristol.”

I pause in stuffing the proposal into my saddlebag.

“Even though she’s white, you mean?” I douse the words with sarcasm.

“Look, you know I have nothing against white people.”

“Except when they date black people, right?”

“It’s just not my preference.” Exasperation cracks his calm façade. “I get to have my preferences.”

“You think I give a damn what color you prefer? Date Smurfette, go blue for all I care. It’s you somehow actually buying into the bullshit logic that me being with Bris is a disservice to our community that bothers me.”

“All right. You want the real?” He sits back and crosses thickly muscled arms over his broad chest. “I don’t think they can ever really understand us or be trusted. I’m not sure you can be white in this country and not somehow be infected by its racial history, by the collective superiority and privilege ingrained in them from birth.”

“I’m not spending my life with a collective history.” I brush my hand impatiently over the layer of hair I keep so low it’s barely there. “I’m in love with one woman, who happens to be white and has never given me reason not to trust her, at least not the way you mean.”

“And what if she slipped up and called somebody a nigger one day?” he demands. “How would you feel then?”

I remember Bristol’s dismay the day we met when Skeet used that word. It was the first of many conversations we’ve had about the things most people avoid. Even the night we got engaged, we were still having those conversations, and we’ll probably have them for the rest of our lives.

“Bristol would never use that word. If anything, she can’t believe we use it to each other. If it were up to her, it would be eradicated and no one could ever use it again.”

“Never say never. Do you expect her to truly understand the struggle of a black man in America?”

“That’s a fair question,” I reply, glad Bristol and I already discussed this. “I don’t know that I do expect her to understand everything about the struggle. I know she’ll always sympathize, but maybe there will be things she doesn’t completely get.”

“And you can live with that?” Doubt settles on his face.

“You know better than anyone how hard it can be for us.” I shake my head. “I have to ask myself when I come home, do I want someone who

completely understands the struggle? Or someone who completely understands *me*? Someone I can't wait to come home to, someone who makes me laugh on the hardest days of my life? Every single decision isn't filtered through my race. Love isn't."

Iz doesn't look away from me the whole time I'm talking, and I feel like maybe some of what I say lands. He finally clears his throat and shrugs.

"I would just always wonder if I could ever really know a white woman, if she could ever really know me." He shakes his head. "Enough to trust her with my life? With my children?"

"And did your wife really know you? I bet she didn't think you would cheat on her, but you did, and from what I can tell, you're both black."

A heavy silence follows my words, and as we sit in it, Iz slowly raises his eyes.

"I didn't cheat on her." He twists the grim line of his mouth around the words. "She cheated on me."

*Damn. Now I feel like a real asshole.*

"I'm sorry about that. I assumed . . ." I leave not-well-enough alone and press on. "I do know I don't ever have to worry about that and neither does Bristol. It's nothing to do with our race. I would never do that to her, and I know she would never do that to me. Have you never been captivated by someone so much that the rest of your life without them seems . . . empty? Not even your ex?"

For a moment, Iz's eyes stray to the door Callie recently walked through, and then he clears his throat.

"No, it wasn't like that with us." His tone remains even, but his lips twitch. "But it sounds a lot like being pussy-whipped."

Hearing that word takes me back to the debate with Clem Ford. I shift in my seat a little.

"I, um, I didn't get to thank you for helping Bris talk me down the other night."

"You mean when you almost ripped Clem Ford's throat out?" Iz asks with a mockery of calm. "Sure. Any time. At least I know you have your own money and won't need our bail fund. What the hell were you thinking?"

"He disrespected Bristol." Anger surges through my veins again at the memory.

"Well I hope she's worth going to prison for because you ever pull some shit like that again, that's exactly where you'll end up. You're lucky he didn't

press charges.”

“Oh, he has no desire to see me in jail yet.” My bark of a laugh is certain and cynical. “He’s just getting started with me and wouldn’t want to end the game this soon.”

I grab my saddlebag and motorcycle helmet, determined not to be late for my appointment with Bristol and Charm to finally figure out this book deal.

“Bristol helped me realize that I represent everything he thinks should be impossible. Based on his metrics, I shouldn’t exist, much less get to choose someone from his race to spend my life with.” I stand and level a disgusted look at him. “I guess that’s at least one thing you two agree on.”

“Who the hell do you think you are comparing me to that backwards cretin?” Iz demands, indignation pinching his strong features.

“I got a front row seat to your brand of selective progressivism,” I fire back. “And at the end of the day, you both judge people you don’t know anything about by the color of their skin.”

“If I’m such a bigot,” Iz snaps, anger darkening his eyes and hardening his jaw, “then why the hell are you still working with me?”

“Because the woman I love is wiser than both of us,” I throw back at him. “She cares enough about people who don’t even look like her to set aside the gross offense of your discrimination because she believes we can help them more working together than apart.”

A silence falls after my bellowed words, a silence teeming with the complexity of our admiration for each other, with our resentment, our shared convictions, our differences. I watch the anger melt from his face in phases, loosening feature by feature until all that’s left is a milder expression and uncertainty.

“She used my own words on me, you know,” he says, a wry grin tipping the edge of his stern mouth.

“What?” I shift my bag on my shoulder, needing to go but wanting to hear what he has to say. I keep hoping he’ll say something to demonstrate his perspective is changing.

“Your girl, Bristol. She had me sign her copy of *Virus* in a section on inherent bias.”

We share a grin because sometimes all you can do is laugh at the things Bristol does.

“She introduced herself as ‘Grip’s Bristol,’” he says, his grin deepening to a full-on smile.

*Damn right she's Grip's Bristol.*

"Oh yeah?"

"And she said if I hurt you again, I'd have to deal with her." His smile dies off, and he looks down at the mess of papers littering his desk. "I didn't mean to hurt—"

"You didn't hurt me."

It's a lie. He did hurt me, but I haven't given any man the satisfaction of truly hurting me since my dad walked away without looking back. I won't let Iz know he held that place in my life until he said those things about Bristol.

"You're just a smart guy with great ideas," I continue, stiffening the words around any emotion left over. "I thought you were something that you're not. My bad, not yours."

If I didn't know Iz better, didn't know he doesn't give a damn about anyone's opinion, I'd think that's guilt in his eyes. Whatever it is, he blinks and it's gone.

"Yeah, well, okay. Good." He takes his glasses off to polish them on the edge of his Howard University sweatshirt. "Well I'm still glad you'll continue with my organization now that the semester is over. I'm ready to get out of the classroom and back to the real grind."

"Of course. The cause is bigger than you and me."

"Right." He twists his lips around, frowns, and releases a sigh. "Look, tomorrow's the exam, and I assume you're leaving the city after."

"Yeah, though we're actually keeping our place here for another six-month lease. Bris has some Broadway stuff popping off for one of her clients, and we love the city, love our place. We'll be back and forth."

"You still want that spot on the board of directors?" he asks as if he doesn't care, but somehow I know he does.

"Yeah, sure." I shrug like I don't care, but I want on that board like nobody's business. "If you think it could work."

"My assistant will send you details about our next meeting and papers you need to sign." He hesitates before going on. "I know it's . . . well, I'm sorry I was a . . . uh, disappointment to you, Grip."

I study the regret marking his face and his words. I don't say anything that would counter because he did disappoint me, and I refuse to make it easier for him.

"But I'm . . . well I'm honored that you moved here to study with me," he mutters. "Shocked actually. It's been really cool getting to know you this

semester, and I look forward to, uh . . . well . . . what I'm trying to say is . . . fuck it."

He reaches into his desk drawer and pulls something out, something badly wrapped in plain paper.

"Merry Christmas." He practically spits the goodwill at me and extends the gift.

I just stare at it, and after a full five seconds, I accept it.

"I didn't get you anything," I mumble, tugging on the tatty ribbon.

"It's not much, believe me. Uh, you can open it later." He sits at his desk and pushes his glasses up his nose. "I'm getting ready for finals, if you could just close the door behind you."

Iz is a PhD, and he must hold at least a master's in dismissing people. I nod, suppressing the grin that tries to break past my restraint.

"A'ight," I say casually over my shoulder. "Merry Christmas."

I walk down the hall away from his office and down the stairs. In the stairwell, I drop my saddlebag and sit on the step, turning the gift over in my hands for a few moments before pulling the ribbon.

It's a book.

Iz *would* give me a book.

I trace the aged leather, the letters pressed into the weathered cover.

*Montage of a Dream Deferred* by Langston Hughes.

I flip open the front cover, and my blood stands still in my veins when I note the date—1951—and the famous poet's autograph.

A signed first edition.

I turn to the spot slotted by an index card, a crisp contrast to the worn, fragile pages. The poem is "*Harlem*," and the familiar refrain asking what happens to a dream deferred stings tears in my eyes.

I can't ever read this poem without remembering the day my cousin died in the front yard. There are some moments in life that will always haunt us, no matter how many joys follow, and that day is one of those. I'll never forget reciting this poem in my bedroom closet to keep Jade calm while one of her brothers shot the other.

Iz couldn't know its personal significance to me, but as I read the card, I understand why he chose it.

*GRIP,*



*Our brothers live so long with dreams deferred, they forget how to imagine another life. For many of them, all they know is frustration, then rage, and for too many, the violence of finally exploding. You symbolize hope, and I know you take that responsibility seriously. I hope you know I believe that, and that nothing I've said led you to think otherwise. Bristol's right—our biases are our weaknesses. Few are as patient as she is to give people time to become wiser. Thank her for me, for giving me time and for encouraging you to work with me. Together, I think we will restore the dreams of many.*

*Merry Christmas,*

*Iz*



## BRISTOL

THIS ISN'T my first Grammys, but it's the first time two of my clients have been nominated for multiple awards. Rhyson has won several in the past, of course, but tonight, Grip and Kai are up, and I think Rhyson and I are more nervous than they are.

"I'm still not sure about that lighting." Rhyson watches a video of Kai's rehearsal from earlier today on his phone. "Can we talk to the LD one more time?"

"Leave the lighting director alone," Kai says from the corner where she and her stylist are consulting about her dress for the red carpet. "Rhys, you're doing that thing again."

"What thing?" he asks absently, eyes still fixed on the video.

"The thing where you try to control the whole universe and act like a crazy person?" She stretches her eyes wide like he should know. "That thing."

He looks up, one dark brow cocked, and stops the video, setting the phone down on the table.

"It's your performance, Pep." He shrugs. "If you feel comfortable with uneven lighting for the biggest performance of your life, who am I to disagree?"

"Rhyson!" I roll my eyes at my brother. "Don't do that. The lighting was fine."

"*Fine?*" His disgust is palpable. "Fine, not perfect. She should have perfect, Bris, and you know it."

Kai and I exchange a look that says we hate it when he's right.

“Okay.” I grab my phone and bag from the dressing room table. “I’ll go talk to the lighting director.”

“It’s the blue wash,” Rhyson says with a satisfied smile. “The setting at the beginning of the second verse.”

“Right. Blue wash, got it. I’ll see you guys back at the hotel.”

I pause at the door.

“And Sarah will be with you for the red carpet tonight.”

“Oh, great.” Kai gives me a wide smile. “What are *you* wearing for your first public appearance as an engaged woman?”

“Ugh.” The sigh drags past my lips. “Don’t remind me. As if I don’t have enough to do without having to think about getting red-carpet ready.”

“It’s a big night for Grip,” Rhyson says. “I’m sure if it comes down to whether he needs his manager or his fiancée more, it would be his fiancée.”

“You mean the fiancée who’s running off to check the blue wash before the second verse?” I give him a well-meaning smirk.

Rhyson doesn’t allow himself much guilt, but I’m pretty sure that’s what flits across his face. He grabs his phone and stands.

“I’ll talk to the LD,” he says.

“No, you won’t.” I wave him back to his seat. “It’s a huge night for Grip *and* Kai—for Prodigy. Our little label is up for a grand total of six nominations. I can do my job *and* be fabulous for the red carpet.”

“You sure?” he asks, uncertainty mingling with the guilt in his expression.

“You doubt me?” I volley back with more confidence than I actually feel.

“Okay, if you say so. See you later, sis.”

I’m wrapping up my conversation with the lighting director backstage—who, at the very least, deserves a fruit basket once this is all over—when I hear a familiar voice behind me.

“No, that worked,” Qwest says. “They hit it on that last run-through. Just make sure we strike that spot onstage, or I won’t hit the mark for camera two.”

I stand perfectly still in the corner where the lighting director and I talked, hoping she’ll walk on by and I’ll go undetected.

“Bristol?”

*There goes hope.*

“Qwest, hey.” I step forward, a smile pasted on my lips that feels like it’s made of plastic. “Good to see you.”

“Hmmm.” Qwest waves her choreographer on her way. Her eyes roam over me as they usually do, like she sees several things lacking before reaching my face. “I guess I should have known you’d be here.”

As friendly greetings go, it’s not one.

“Well, congratulations on your nomination.” I give her another stiff smile and start to walk off.

“Did you lobby for Grip and me not to perform ‘Queen’?”

Her question startles me enough to turn around and face her again. Her one Grammy nomination is for collaborating with Grip on “Queen,” for best rap performance.

“No. I-I don’t remember it even coming up. The producers of the show were very clear that they wanted Grip to perform ‘Bruise.’” I meet her eyes with nothing to hide. “It’s up for song of the year, and it’s pretty standard to ask the artists nominated for that award to perform, well, the song they’re nominated for.”

Qwest looks unconvinced for a moment before resignation clears her pretty face.

“It’s fine.” She shrugs. “I’m performing one of my other songs anyway.”

“Good.” I hesitate before speaking again. “I would never meddle that way, Qwest—in Grip’s career, I mean.”

“Awwww,” she says sarcastically. “I guess that’s one of the many reasons he loves you—that and your pretty hair and golden tan.”

I don’t reply, but instead let her stew in her own petty silence. I don’t have the time or patience for this shit today.

“I’m sorry, too, about all the drama with Angie Black.” Qwest watches me closely. I know she wants a reaction I’m determined not to give her. “And that picture on Instagram. I can imagine how I’d feel if I saw my boyfriend’s ex with her hands all over him.”

“Then why did you have your hands all over him?”

*So much for not giving her a reaction.*

“*There* she is.” Her smile is immediate and knowing. “I figured your claws would come out soon enough.”

“I don’t want my claws out, Qwest. I wish you well. I know you don’t believe that, but I do.”

“Oh, spare me.” The mask falls away, and Qwest’s ire is on full display. “You wish me well because you got nothing to worry about. I’m not a threat to you, and you know it.”

“You think I don’t feel threatened by you?” My scoffing laugh bounces between us. “Many of Grip’s family, friends, and fans would dance in the streets if he dumped me for you. Do you know how many people have told him that being with me discredits the work he does for the black community? And that you ‘make sense’ and I don’t? That if he wanted to have a real impact, he would choose you?”

“But none of that is Grip,” Qwest says. “You and I both know how he feels about you, that he doesn’t give a damn what any of them thinks. All I hear in everything you’ve said is that he’s willing to tell everyone to fuck off for you, and that’s gotta make you feel as secure as hell.”

She’s right. When it comes down to it, as tired as I am of all the outside voices and influences, I don’t doubt Grip’s love for me. I’ve had moments where I let the negativity get to me, but at the center is a rock-solid faith in our love.

“Besides,” Qwest continues, a touch of malice in the look she gives me, “you saw something you wanted that wasn’t yours, and you went for it. I probably would’ve done the same thing. Game recognize game.”

I see what she’s doing—provoking me—but the thought of her claiming Grip when he was never really hers festers under my skin.

“You’re mistaken,” I say before I can talk myself out of it.

“Oh?” Qwest furrows her brow as if she’s clueless about what I mean. “How am I mistaken?”

“He was never yours.” I force myself to look into eyes that hold more knowledge of Grip than they should.

“He was mine when he was in my bed.”

“He’s been in lots of beds, but there’s only been one woman in his heart.”

“And that’s you?”

“And that’s me.” I hesitate, swallowing cruel words for kinder ones. “Look, I’m trying to be gracious here, Qwest. Don’t make me be mean.”

Her harsh laugh scratches over my ears.

“Well the next time you feeling all *gracious and shit*,” she spits through a bitter smile, “and want to lend your man’s dick out, let me know, ’cause honey, I wasn’t done with it.”

She steps closer, her perfume invading my space as quickly as her slim body.

“You may be the only one who’s ever ‘*been in his heart*,’ but I wouldn’t have known it by the way he fucked me.”

The sharp reminder of their past intimacy slides under my ribs like a stiletto and makes me draw a stilted breath.

“Like I said, game recognize game,” she says. “The next time you want to throw Grip in my face, Bristol, be absolutely certain you can handle what I’ll throw back.”

Why am I even doing this? Why engage with her this way? I know I have nothing to worry about, but I keep letting this damn possessiveness get the best of me, and I’m tired of being jealous for no reason. With a weary sigh, I scoop the hair back from my face. The arrested expression on Qwest’s face confuses me until she reaches for my hand, holding my ring finger up to the light. Hurt floods her eyes as she studies the large square canary diamond Grip placed there.

“So it’s true,” she says quietly. “He’s marrying you.”

I don’t know what to say. I just stare back at her and wait for her to drop my hand. She forces a laugh.

“Well that was fast.”

“Fast? If you call ten years in the making fast, then yeah.”

She pulls a stream of braids over her shoulder and fingers the sleek strands. Her expression says she doesn’t give a damn, but I’m not convinced, and my heart hurts. I want to hate this woman. She slept with Grip. She led a social media shade campaign against me, but it’s the hurt I see just beneath the surface that keeps me from the dislike I want to give in to.

“I’m sorry, Qwest.” I know she wouldn’t want my pity. I respect her too much for that, and the barbs we just exchanged assure me she doesn’t need it. I can’t be sorry that Grip is mine, but I am sorry she ever thought he would be hers, sorry for my part in letting her believe that even for a few months.

“You said it—you’re the only one who’s ever been in his heart, who ever got past his bed.” Qwest’s glassy eyes fix on my ring finger. “The rest of us he fucked, but doesn’t give a damn about.”

Without another word or glance, she turns on her heel and walks away.





## GRIP

OVER THE LAST FEW MONTHS, at times I've been able to forget I'm a celebrity. I've been dragging myself out of bed and going to class, sitting through lectures, turning in assignments like any other NYU student. Besides going into the studio and the occasional appearance, life has been more normal than it has the last few years. Sure, Angie Black put my life on blast and all the drama about me dating Bristol flared up again, but it's been pretty tame, considering.

Tonight, though, I'm nominated for three Grammys, including song of the year and best new artist. I walked the red carpet with Bristol at my side, answering some questions, dodging others. She didn't wear her ring, and we remained non-committal on our engagement, instead focusing on which designers we were wearing and which performances we wanted to see. Useless things like that seem so far removed from the issues I've focused on for the last few months with Iz, but in perspective, I know this is a big deal. This part of my life lends me more leverage in the others. The higher my celebrity stock goes, the more influence and resources I'll have for the things that really matter. So, I smile and answer questions and shine as brightly as I can along with all the other stars. My mama always told me to remember that every time I step out of the house, I represent those who will never have the opportunity to step onto a stage this large.

"Are you nervous?" Bristol leans over to whisper once we're in our seats and the show is underway.

I glance at her, and for a moment, forget how momentous tonight is. All I can see is how beautiful she looks. Her dark burnished hair is wild in that

intentional way that probably takes a lot of time to make look that effortless. The dress she chose is bluish-green with vibrant splashes of color, and her feathery earrings reflect the brilliant palette of her dress.

“You’re my pretty bird tonight,” I say instead of answering her question directly. I touch the hair rioting around her face. “Maybe a peacock.”

“Thanks, I think.” She rolls her eyes, but quirks the fullness of her lips into an irrepressible smile. “But don’t change the subject. Your first category is up next. Are you nervous?”

Grinding all these years, a Grammy seemed like the culmination, like winning one would be the ultimate happiness, and I won’t lie, winning would be pretty dope. But, the hardware that makes me happiest isn’t the Grammy, it’s the one Bristol left back in our hotel room. I lift her hand to my lips for a quick kiss. I was more nervous walking around with that ring in my pocket for a week than I am waiting for my first Grammy.

“Nervous?” I repeat. “Li’l bit.”

She studies me for an extra second before smiling and turning her attention back to the stage as the nominees for best rap performance are announced.

Some girl from a reality show I’ve never watched does the honors, her face animated when she opens the card.

“And the winner is,” she says, pausing to stretch out the audience’s bated breath. “‘Queen,’ Grip and Qwest.”

This moment is pretty surreal, with the applause louder than I thought it would be, the lights brighter, more cameras capturing everything from perfect angles. It feels like a dream I had as a kid that I just don’t wake up from. The only thing real in all of this is Bristol’s hand gripping mine and the tears swimming in her eyes. I lean over to kiss her cheek, and she whispers, “I’m proud of you.”

A part of me wishes I didn’t have to go onstage or make a speech. I wish I could just stay here and bask in the fact that the woman who knows me better than anyone else and has seen this journey almost from the beginning is proud of me. I squeeze her leg and lean down to kiss behind her ear, where the smell of her perfume and the scent unique to her body are strongest.

“Go.” She laughs, giving me a little push. “And don’t forget to thank your mother.”

*Like I could.*

Qwest makes it to the stage before I do, and I nod for her to take the mic

first. With her long braids twisted into a knot at the base of her neck and an evening dress sheathing all that famous ass, she looks classy and composed, powerful and regal. I'm happy for her—it's her first Grammy, too.

"Wow." She turns a bright smile on the audience, and I'm glad she gets this moment for herself. "Obviously, I need to thank my team, my manager Will, Ezra Cohen with Sound Management, my family for holding me down, all the fans, and everyone who supported me along the way."

She glances back at me, her smile wavering for just a second as the feelings I suspect she still has for me congregate in her eyes. She blinks, and that vulnerability disappears, covered with the high shine of celebrity again.

"Most of all, thank you, Grip," she says after a moment. "For putting up with my crazy ass and trusting me with such an incredible song."

I offer her a quick wink and a grin before she turns back to the crowd.

"It's an honor getting to inspire young girls to respect themselves, to carry themselves like the queens they're meant to be. If a little brown girl from Bed-Stuy can stand up here, you can stand anywhere you want!"

The applause dies down before I step to the mic. I'm determined to keep this short and simple. I still have to perform "Bruise," and the sooner I get backstage, the sooner I can start mentally preparing for that, but I don't want to cheat this moment because I'll never get it back.

"This is amazing." I look out at the crowd, peers and fans and industry professionals, taking it all in. "There's a lot of people to thank. I'll try not to screw this up. Um, where's Rhyson?"

I shield my eyes from the bright lights and search the first few rows where I remember he and Kai were supposed to be seated.

"I absolutely wouldn't be standing here without you." There are a thousand memories in the glance we exchange. With all the jubilation going on around him, his eyes remain sober. He knows what this has cost me, knows how hard I've been grinding, how hard we've been grinding since high school. He knows, probably more than anyone, what it means. "You and the Prodigy team always have my back, and I couldn't ask for a better friend. Love you, dude, like a brother. To all the fans who humble me daily, this doesn't happen without your support. Thank you so much."

I stare down at the trophy before continuing.

"A lot of people speculate about who I wrote this song for, what I'm talking about." I pause to chuckle. "My mom will tell you unequivocally that she is #GripzQueen."

The audience laughs, and I know my mom is somewhere in the Staples Center loving this.

“A lot of people think I wrote it for Qwest.” I glance at her beside me. “Writing a song like this and not having a strong woman help me perform it, give voice to it, would have been a travesty. You are an amazing representative for powerful women everywhere, Q.”

She nods and smiles, but I can tell this moment is affecting her in ways she didn’t anticipate. I hope the emotion in her eyes has more to do with the gravity of the achievement than with me and our past relationship.

“Some think it’s for black women or women in general.” I shrug, a subtle smile playing on my lips. “You’re all right. It’s for my mom, who taught me what love is, what strength looks like, how to not just survive difficult circumstances, but to thrive in them. It’s for women like Qwest, who dream big and work hard. It’s for my aunties in the neighborhood who took it upon themselves to straighten me out if my mom, working two jobs, wasn’t around when I was acting the fool. It’s for all of you girls who aren’t sure you’re worthy of respect when we, especially in hip-hop, sometimes don’t give you your due. It’s fitting that my first Grammy would be for ‘Queen’ since I wouldn’t be here if it hadn’t been for all the incredible women who kept pushing me forward.”

I find Bristol sitting where I left her, pride and love shining in the eyes that never leave my face. I can already see the *Coming to America* GIFs that will be everywhere if I call her my queen, so I force myself to stop short of that. She would be fine if I didn’t say a word about her. Hell, she’d probably prefer it after all the media shit-storms we’ve been through, but there’s no way this moment even happens without her.

“It’s for you, Bris,” I say softly, even though my words are amplified throughout Staples and in millions of homes. “You’re the best thing in my life. None of this would mean anything without you.”

Our eyes hold in an extraordinary recognition I could only share with her, of the sacrifices we’ve made and the risks we’ve taken together, all while falling in love. I want to call her my girl, my fiancée, my *wife* in front of the whole world, but we’ve agreed we don’t want our engagement to be a lightning rod or some sideshow, a hot potato people toss around to gain more followers, get more likes and retweets. So, I don’t tell these people anything that’s none of their business. I just hold up the gold statue and don’t give Black Twitter or Angie Black or any of my critics more to work with than

necessary.

“Thank you.”

I don't return to my seat because I still have to perform. Once I'm backstage, that tunnel vision that comes with such a huge performance consumes me completely, not just because it's so significant for my career, but because of the nature of the song, which has been significant for my cause. I've performed “Bruise” in larger venues, but this is the *Grammys*. It doesn't get any bigger than this, and I want to be a megaphone for this moment. It's a perfect convergence of my gifts and my passions, and I don't want to blow it.

From the first note, I know it's a special performance, a demarcation in my journey as an artist. The lights and imagery, a moody wash of black and blue, coordinate with typography of the song's most powerful lyrics onscreen. As many times as I've performed this song, the words have never felt as meaningful as they do tonight, with the names of slain black men and fallen police officers scrolling behind me.

*We all bruise,  
It's that black and blue  
A dream deferred,  
Nightmare come true  
In another man's shoes,  
Walk a mile or two  
Might learn a couple things  
I'm no different than you!*

As I'm performing, the faces of the men on that wall behind me flash through my mind on a reel, their lives cut short. I remember the day each of them died—how I heard, what I was doing, how it felt to know things this fucked up could still happen in our country. The same coalition of anger and pain and hope that led me to write the song compels me to perform it like the next life depends on it. Like this song might save somebody, even though it came too late for these men. Like my art has no limits and love has no walls.

As hard as I try, I can't keep my voice from wobbling, can't keep the hurt and the outrage from reverberating through each lyric. Despite my best

efforts, tears—fucking *tears* streak down my face, defying any show of strength. My tears are for the mothers and the sisters and fathers and wives and daughters and sons watching this *show* tonight with an empty seat at their table, watching me perform this song with a hole in their hearts. I shed tears for the tragedy of bias and the futility of revenge. None of it bears any fruit, and it could feel hopeless, except when I look out, I see the same emotion that's commanding me has command of the audience, compelling them to their feet and streaking their faces with tears, too. White, black, brown, all of them—a mosaic of the emotions warring inside of me. Though I could be cynical, though I could doubt that it means anything, that *they* mean it, in this moment, even with the hurt and the anger and the frustration, I make room in my heart for faith that one day, no matter how long it takes, we'll get it right.



## BRISTOL

“TWO OUT OF three ain’t bad.” I meet Grip’s eyes in the bathroom mirror. “You’re officially a Grammy winner now.”

“And losing best new artist to Kai is no loss at all.” He grins at me, brushing his teeth as we get ready for bed. “Least we kept it in the family.”

“Yeah, Kai had a huge night. Three trophies.” I yawn while removing the makeup from my face with a wipe. “I think Rhyson was on a higher cloud than she was.”

“He’s proud of her, and he should be.” Grip leans against the marble counter in my bathroom. “Grammys, movies, endorsements . . .”

“And Broadway,” I insert, running a brush through my unruly hair. “Just give me a little time.”

“Yeah. Kai’s on that world domination trip. She’s on the come up big time.”

“You are, too.” I lean into him, pressing my chest to his. “Song of the year’s nothing to sneeze at.”

Grip palms my head and lays a kiss in the hair at my temple without acknowledging my compliment.

“And best rap song.” I lower my lashes to study our feet, almost touching. “With Qwest.”

He tips my chin up, searching my eyes.

“Did it bother you to see us up there together?”

“It bothers me to see you with anyone who isn’t me.” A tired, self-deprecating laugh rumbles over my lips. “But I was okay.”

I hesitate, biting my lip before going on.



“She still has feelings for you, ya know.”

Grip runs his tongue over his teeth, a thoughtful frown disrupting the strong line of his eyebrows.

“Yeah, I know.”

I tip up on my toes and kiss his chin, slipping a hand to the back of his neck. He rubs my back and we appreciate the closeness of each other’s bodies for a minute, the silence swelling with a tenderness, an intimacy I can’t imagine sharing with anyone else.

“Your performance tonight . . .” My words evaporate because I can’t find the right ones to express how moved I was when he performed “Bruise.” It wasn’t just me, either—he ushered the entire crowd to another plane during that performance, and I still feel like I’m coming off a high. “I’ve seen you be amazing, but this was something else. It was on another level, from a different place.”

“It felt . . . I don’t know.” He shakes his head and shrugs, a helplessness limiting what he can say about it even now. “It was a once-in-a-lifetime moment. I couldn’t hold it together. Thinking about those guys who died and the cops who were ambushed, I just lost it.”

I don’t respond for a moment because I can’t. The same emotion that overcame me during his performance steals my words again. Seeing those names scrolling behind him, seeing the tears rolling down Grip’s cheeks, looking around and seeing that I was surrounded by wet faces and broken hearts, there was a oneness in that crowd I’ve never experienced before. What if we achieved that kind of unity without music? Without a stage? In our communities and in the streets? How would that feel?

“That was sweet, dedicating the Grammy for song of the year to your cousin Greg,” I say, clearing my throat and shifting to something I can actually articulate. “He’s a good cop.”

“And to Chaz.” Voice subdued, eyes somber, Grip wears the sadness that always accompanies thoughts of Jade’s fallen brother.

“Yeah, and to Chaz,” I slur the words as exhaustion takes its toll. The last few days have been nonstop.

Grip links our fingers, allowing our hands to dangle between us. He caresses over my hip and down my thigh before cupping my ass possessively, warming me through the silk of my nightgown. His bare torso and long, muscled legs in just briefs stir my passion, but I’m too exhausted to do anything about it.

A first for me.

My head flops against his shoulder, and I can barely keep my eyes open. There was all this press after the show, and then we must have hit every after-party Hollywood had to offer.

“Come to bed,” he whispers in my ear, ghosting kisses down my neck. “To sleep. You’re obviously too tired for anything else.”

I almost trip over my feet, stumbling behind him as he leads me to the bed. I climb in, grateful when he pulls the comforter up over my shoulders.

“Do you miss your loft?” I ask with the last of my consciousness. My eyes droop drowsily and I consider him in the light of the lamp on his side of our bed.

“Not really.” He lies on his side, tucking his pillow in the crook of his neck and shoulder. “We don’t need the place in New York and two places here in LA. The guys from Kilimanjaro subleasing the loft makes sense. Besides, I got spoiled living with you last semester, waking up with you every morning.”

He pushes my hair back and runs his thumb over my cheekbone.

“I can’t go back now.”

We share weary smiles and skim our lips in sleepy kisses until my eyelids drift closed.

“Bris.”

I start awake, barely.

“Wha . . . Huh?”

“I need to ask you something.”

“Is this something I need to actually remember tomorrow?” I murmur, eyes closed and the cool pillow soothing under my face.

“Yeah, you need to remember this.”

“Okay,” I mumble through a yawn. “Shoot.”

“When can we get married?”

My eyes pop open to find him watching me, his expression as alert as if it’s the top of the morning, not the end of an extremely exhausting, emotionally draining day.

“What?” My heart buffets my ribs, fighting against the tired body caging it. “When . . . why . . . *what?*”

“You heard me.” He chuckles, brushing a knuckle over my brow. “We said we’d set a date after the Grammys were behind us.”

“And you consider, oh, an hour ago ‘behind us’?” A tiny, tired smile tugs

at the corners of my mouth.

“Yeah, I do.” He moves forward until our heads are on the same pillow and our foreheads press together. “When will you marry me?”

It feels like rocks are tied around my arms, but I lift and link them behind his neck, scooting close enough that the heated hardness of his body absorbs mine.

“Depends,” I say, my voice weary and husky. “You want to do it tonight, or would you prefer tomorrow?”

My eyes may be barely open, but there’s no doubt in my mind they are certain, no doubt he reads complete willingness in them. If he said to me that we should drag our tired asses out of bed right now to go get married, I’d do it. He knows that; his pleased smile tells me so.

“It doesn’t have to be tonight or tomorrow.” He leaves one last kiss at the corner of my mouth. “But it will be very soon. Just making sure you’re down for very soon.”

He reaches over to turn off the lamp.

“Okay,” he says into the darkness. “Now you can go to sleep.”

With complete contentment and the promise of forever very soon, I do.



## GRIP

IT'S OUR WEDDING DAY. Finally.

I say “finally,” but it’s only been a month since the Grammy’s. After that night, Bristol and I decided we would not even publicly confirm the engagement, but would move forward with our own plans, in our own way. Nobody’s business. We’ve invited only our innermost circle of family and friends. We didn’t hire a wedding planner or anything, just made some simple arrangements, and forced vendors and those involved to sign Bristol’s NDAs.

And now the day is here, and I’m a horny groom. Does this actually come as a surprise to anyone? Probably not, but this semi-erect state I find myself in on my wedding day was completely avoidable. Bristol—who can barely spell “tradition”—decided we shouldn’t see each other the night before the wedding, other than the rehearsal dinner. Add that to the fact that we’ve barely seen each other for the last two weeks being on different coasts and . . . horny groom. My balls are a dismal shade I like to call Bristol Blue.

I sip my coffee and take in the picturesque view of the Rocky Mountains through the hotel window. The snow-capped peaks and stretches of pristine snow are breathtaking. When Bristol suggested an Aspen wedding in honor of our snowy proposal, I wasn’t sure at first, but seeing the soaring splendor of the mountains, it seems fitting. Our journey has been uphill, and in some ways, it may always be. At times, our climb has felt as insurmountable as some of those mountains. The easiest thing about being with Bristol is *being* with Bristol, and she makes all the outside pressures and criticisms worth it. So, yes, being surrounded by a line of mountains suits us perfectly.

“Are you okay?” my mom asks from across the small table in the hotel suite.

Knowing Ma, I could say, *No, I’m horny*, and she wouldn’t bat an eyelash. She’d just tell me to eat my oatmeal and be patient because I’ll be smashing before the night is over.

“I hate oatmeal,” I say instead, flashing a quick smile.

“You always did.” She swaps my oatmeal for the pastry in front of her. “I wondered why you ordered it.”

“I didn’t mean to. I didn’t even notice.”

“You’re distracted.” Ma spears a square of French toast. “It is your wedding day. You nervous?”

“Nah.” I bite into the pastry’s flaky sweetness, chewing thoughtfully. “Just ready. This has been a long time coming.”

Ma smiles, rubbing away the condensation on her glass of orange juice.

“It’s obvious you love Bristol very much.” She takes a sip, peering at me over the rim of her glass. “It’s a shame Jade couldn’t make it.”

“Couldn’t?” I scoff. “Wouldn’t is more like it. I don’t care.”

“Oh, you care.” Ma reaches over to cover my fist where it’s clenched on the table. “You just care more about your happiness than you do about Jade’s opinion, as you should. But it’s okay that it hurts, her not being here. She’ll come around eventually.”

But she hasn’t yet, and it does hurt. The last time I saw Jade, I warned her that I’d choose Bristol over her, that I wouldn’t hesitate to cut her out of my life if I had to, but I didn’t actually think it would come to that. I didn’t actually think Jade would object enough to cut *herself* out my life, or cut me out of hers. Either way, we haven’t spoken since that day in the studio. I sent her an invitation, but she didn’t respond. I want to text her middle finger emojis and let her know I don’t give a fuck, except Ma’s right—I do. It hurts, but today isn’t for regrets or recriminations. It’s for me and Bristol.

“You’re okay with it, though, right Ma?” I cast a searching glance at the woman who has been the guiding force of my life. “With Bristol and me, I mean. Now you’re okay?”

My mom looks back at me with deep affection in the eyes roaming my face before she answers my question with one of her own.

“How many men want to have breakfast with their mother on the morning of their wedding?” She sits back in her seat and crosses her legs.

I shrug. I didn’t think about it. It just feels like I’m about to turn a corner,

like the ground is about to shift beneath my feet, and my mother has always been with me for every transition, large or small. It's always been her and me against the world. Me getting married . . . it feels a little like the end of an era and the beginning of something new. Starting this day with the woman who got me where I am . . . it felt right.

"I didn't hold back my opinion when you told me you were in love with Bristol," Ma says. "You've always known I didn't want you bringing no white girls home."

My heart sinks in my chest. I'm prepared to take these next steps without the support of my friends and family, but it's bad enough not having Jade. Taking such a monumental step without Ma in my corner, especially when I thought we had come so far, it would hurt.

"But then I met *her*," Ma says. "And 'them white girls' became *Bristol*. That girl loves you, and you love yourself some Bristol."

Her humor and the relief that she does seem supportive after all coax a chuckle from my throat.

"True that," I say with a smile that lingers on my lips even after the laughter dies.

"Let me show you something." Ma bends to her purse and pulls out a small bag discreetly etched with *Chelle's*, Bristol's favorite jewelry store. She passes the bag to me, urging me to open it with a nod of her head when I just stare at it blankly. "Go on. Look."

I pull the delicate tissue from the bag, finding an ornate box inside. When I crack it open, there's a brooch tipped with a crown studded with diamonds. I'm pretty sure the brooch's stickpin is platinum, and this must have cost a small fortune.

"Read the card," Ma says, watching my face carefully for a reaction.

I find the folded card hidden in the depths of the tissue.

Ms. JAMES,

*I know it's unconventional for the bride to give her future mother-in-law a wedding gift, but I really wanted you to have this. As soon as I saw this crown, I knew it belonged to you, #GripzQueen. I want to thank you for so many things, for giving me a chance though I wasn't what you originally envisioned for your son, for making me feel like part of your family, something my own parents weren't always sure how to do. Most of all, thank*

*you for raising such a magnificent man. He is the man of my dreams. When I thought of my husband, I didn't dream in color, I dreamt in character. My own father's left much to be desired, and I only knew I wanted something different from what I saw in my parents. I have that with Grip, and it's because of the remarkable character you instilled in him. So, thank you, Grip's original queen. I would like to be a daughter to you, but I will accept friendship. Whatever we are, we both love Grip – Marlon – more than anything else in this world, and we'll always have that.*

*Thank you again,  
Bristol*

I FIGURED I would cry at some point before this day was over, but I didn't expect it to be before it has even really begun. I'm sure my mother loved this, was pleased by it, and that's great, but I read between the lines of this letter and see all the things no one else knows about Bristol. I see all the ways she's vulnerable and never lets on, all the things she ached for growing up but never received. I'm amazed by this girl's capacity to love. She learned early on to reach out first, constantly asking for love from her parents, and even from Rhyson. She was, and many times still is, the one holding her family together, even when they don't want to be. Even though my mother rejected her at first, she has been reaching out to her every chance she's gotten. I grab my mother's mimosa, knocking it back and washing away the emotion burning my throat. I'm not crying—not yet.

I kiss Ma's cheek at the door, studiously ignoring the sheen of tears in her eyes. If I look too closely, I'll see all the sacrifices she made, all the hardships she endured for me to have not just this day, but most of the other good things in my life. With promises to see her at the ceremony, I rush to the elevator, determined to see Bristol before everyone gathers at the small stacked stone chapel where we'll exchange our vows. Fuck tradition. She won't be in her wedding dress yet—is there a specific rule about seeing your bride naked before the ceremony?

No? Thought not.

I step into the elevator, stopping short when I come face to face with the last person on earth I expected to see in Aspen for my wedding . . . unless this is a weird coincidence and he's here for something else.

“Iz.” I blink stupidly at him leaning against the wall in the corner. “What



are you doing here?”

He shifts his feet, a quick frown jerking his brows together.

“Well, I . . . ” He shoves his hands into the pockets of his dark jeans. “I heard you were getting married.”

I level a knowing look on him.

“We went to a lot of trouble to make sure that no one ‘just hears’ we’re getting married, so I doubt that.”

“Maybe my invitation got lost in the mail,” Iz offers with a half-smile.

“They were digital.”

“Spam?”

“Nope.” I narrow my eyes at him. “I didn’t send you an invitation, and you know why.”

“I know you didn’t.” He glances at his boots with their light dusting of snow. “Bristol did.”

I’m completely silent while I process this information. I don’t know if I’m pleased, angry, confused, or something else altogether. While I’m figuring that out, Iz goes on.

“You’re right,” he says. “She is wiser than we are. I kept going back to that passage she highlighted and had me sign in my book. I must have read it a hundred times, seeing it through her eyes.”

“Is that so?” I lift a skeptical brow.

“Yeah, it is.” A slow smile pulls at his mouth, making him look younger, less the sober academic. “I haven’t changed my mind about why most black men who choose white women do it, but I’ve changed my mind about you and Bristol. I don’t believe a white woman can ever really understand the struggle of a black man in America, but I was married to a black woman who understood the struggle but never understood me.”

I’ll have to ask him for the full story one day. From what I’ve ascertained, there were transgressions on both sides, and definitely regret on his.

“Bristol may not understand the struggle,” he continues, “but she understands you. She loves you unconditionally—I’ve seen it—and in a world as hard as ours, unconditional love goes a long way.”

His smile melts like the snow topping the mountains that left me awestruck just minutes ago.

“I would say having Bristol makes you a very lucky man, Grip.”

The elevator dings, signaling that I’ve reached the top floor where I know Bristol’s room is.

“This is me.” I step out, but at the last minute, insert my arm to stop the doors from closing. “Hey. Thanks for coming, Iz. It, uh . . . well, thanks.”

He nods, and with one last look, I allow the doors to close. If I wanted to see her before, now the urgency to see her, to remind myself that in just a few hours, we’ll be husband and wife, burns through me. If I needed affirmation that I was doing the right thing—which I really didn’t—I’ve had it in this morning’s encounters with my mom and with Iz.

I rap my knuckles against the door a few times. When there’s no answer, I knock a little harder. Still no response. After three minutes, I’m pounding the door and saying Bristol’s name maybe a little louder than the situation warrants. The door is yanked open from inside, and my beautiful bride stands on the threshold glaring at me, her hair all around her head and her face free of makeup. A silk robe is tied at her narrow waist.

“You better have a really good reason for being here.” Though stern, her eyes and voice soften the longer we stare at each other.

I slip into the room before she can stop me.

“Grip, no.” She swats at my shoulders when I pull her into my arms. “You cannot be here. We cannot see each other.”

“Bullshit.” I bend to kiss her, my lips searching, seeking out her sweetness.

“You have to go,” she mutters against my lips, but her fingers cling to my arms.

“I miss you.” My whispered words catch fire in the air between us, and I feel her nipples bead against my chest. My fingers fumble at the tie at her waist, and I push at the shoulders of her robe.

“No!” She catches the silk lapels and pulls them tightly over her breasts, her eyes wide. “You have to go.”

“Babe, come on.” My hands slide down to her waist, the flare of her hips, the curve of her ass. “We got time. Don’t make me beg.”

“Beg?” She steps out of my arms, clenching the neck of the robe at her throat, showing me even less skin. “Yeah, right. When have you ever had to beg?”

“I used to have to beg,” I remind her. “When you wouldn’t give your boy a shot.”

Her face softens, the tousled hair around her face and shoulders tempting me to shove my fingers into the shiny strands. A smile so sweet I want to taste it teases the corners of her lips.

“That was a long time ago, and don’t remind me what a fool I was all those years.”

We share a smile, and before she kicks me out, I take her hand and press it between my palms.

“I saw the gift you gave my mom,” I say, my voice low with gratitude. “And I ran into Iz on the elevator.”

“Two of your greatest influences.” She shrugs her slim shoulders under the brightly patterned silk. “It wouldn’t be the same without them. *You* wouldn’t be the same without them, and for that I’m grateful.”

She opens the door and shoves me into the hall. The door is closing in my face when I stick my foot in to stop it. I peer around the heavy wood, needing the last word.

“The next time I see you,” I say with a smile, “you’ll be Mrs. Marlon James.”

She pauses in closing the door long enough to lean forward and drop a quick kiss on my lips.

“I can’t wait,” she whispers. “I love you.”

The door slams in my face, but if those are her last words, I’ll let her have them just this once.



## BRISTOL

I'M JUST beyond the entrance. I can see Grip. I can see in, but no one knows I'm here yet, and I take in the ethereal beauty of the small chapel. A mix of artificial snow and white roses, a juxtaposition of blooms and blizzard, sprinkles the aisle from the chapel door to the altar. Potted trees march along the wall, naked of leaves, branches adorned with snow, warmed with tiny lights. Lanterns suspended from the ceiling cast a glow over the old chapel, hallowed by years and a thousand services and ceremonies before this one, but to me, none more sacred.

I absorb all the details, happy to see the small group of people assembled, our closest friends and family. This isn't a day for selfies or pictures that will be sold to magazines. It's a day for us, for Grip, me, and the people who mean the most to us.

Well, most of them. Ms. James and Dr. Hammond are here. Rhyson stands at the altar as Grip's best man, and Jimmi is already there as my maid of honor. Amir, Shondra, Kai and Aria, Luke, Charm—all here. Jade is noticeably absent, but I won't let that cast a cloud over today, not with all these people here celebrating our love.

“Are you ready?”

My father's question draws my attention. He's handsome, and Rhyson looks more like him every day. I considered not asking him to give me away, but that thing I can never shake, that need for my family to *be* family compelled me to include my father. My brother has forgiven him. My mother is in marriage counseling with him, and seems to have set his infidelities to the side. Today is a day for steps forward, and as the first strains of “Wedding

March” herald my entrance, I answer my father with a nod and step forward with my arm through his.

The guests rise, some gasping when they see me framed in the arched entrance with my father, some teary-eyed like Ms. James and Kai, most smiling. It’s my mother’s face that almost makes my steady steps stumble. There is such pride in her eyes, like of all my accomplishments, marrying a good man—a man she didn’t necessarily see for me in the beginning but has come to respect—is my crowning achievement. When I consider what a failure her marriage has been in the past, how much pain my father has caused her, maybe me marrying for love, finding the true happiness I have with Grip is more than she knew to hope for.

Finally I allow myself to look at my groom. People always talk about that first glimpse the groom has of his bride, but no one ever mentions the first glimpse the bride has of her groom. They really should warn a bride about this. No one told me my heart would float up in my chest and hover in my throat, or that the tears would instantly gather at the corners of my eyes when I saw him.

Maybe no one else has ever had a groom like Grip.

I always think of his as the face of a king, one sketched with an artist’s skilled hands. A careful thumb smudged the sooty brows over dark eyes that see so much and can give so little away. The regal rise of bone in his cheek and the taut line of his jaw, the luxe lips generously drawn and precisely lined take my breath away. The closer I get, the more in focus his features become. I see the wedge of thick lashes, the softest thing in a face comprised of rugged planes and carefully hewn angles.

When he turns his head and our eyes meet on the threshold of forever, his jaw drops and he blinks quickly, like this first sight of me stuns him. The hours I spent searching for this dress when I should have been working were worth it. It’s not white or ivory, but the palest shade of blush ever to exist. It’s watercolor pink, so sheer a hue that it’s barely perceptible as color at all. It’s strapless, and the mermaid shape molds my curves, baring my shoulders, cupping my breasts, nipping at the waist, tapering down my hips and legs to flare just below my knees in wisps of organza as frothy as meringue.

When my father releases me to stand in front of Grip, I look up, uncovered and exposed for his inspection. Instead of a veil, I opted for a simple shoulder necklace, a string of Swarovski crystals clinging to a silver chain that drapes across my throat and collarbone, dips just shy of my

cleavage and drips between my shoulder blades. Grip's eyes wander over my face, his smile growing wider as he catalogues the details of my appearance. When he sees my shoulders, his smile falters and his eyes zip to mine, startled and awed. Along the top of one shoulder, following the narrow bone, is calligraphy sketched so delicately the letters look like flowers blooming on my skin, proclaiming that my heart broke loose on the wind.

He looks out into the audience until he finds Mateo, his friend who is the only one he trusts with his ink, and now the first person I've trusted with mine. Mateo gives him a wide grin and a thumbs up. A slash of white teeth is Grip's only answer before he turns back to me, and breaching the invisible wall between bride and groom, not asking for permission or waiting for the preacher to grant it, he touches me. His fingers trail along my shoulder, along the words Neruda penned decades ago brought to life on my skin. The words that, shared on a Ferris wheel high above the ground, unlocked a door between us that has never really closed. A smile widens on my face at the pleased look in his eyes, exactly the way I envisioned when I approached Mateo about the tattoo as a surprise. Keeping Grip away from me for the last two days so he wouldn't see it was the hardest part of planning this wedding.

I barely hear the preacher's words, barely register that a roomful of people is listening. It's not until I hear the word "vows" that I remember I have to speak and this isn't some dream where I soundlessly spectate. The things I've rehearsed for days are nowhere to be found in my mind. They're like spilled grains of sand on the shore, lost. It doesn't help that I insisted on going first, but Grip is the best writer I know—no way I'm going after him.

"I had so many things memorized," I say with a self-conscious laugh. "But I'm so overwhelmed, I can't think of them."

I glance up at Grip, who looks at me like every word coming out of my mouth, though unrehearsed, is pure gold.

"So I'll tell you all the things I didn't plan to say, but are true."

I pull in a steadying breath, willing my voice not to shake and my tears to wait until I get through this.

"Grip, I guarantee that I will disappoint you at some point in the next fifty years," I say. "I'll infuriate you. I promise you'll want to strangle me more than once."

A ripple of laughter through the audience makes me smile, makes Grip smile, too.

"But you'll be stuck with me," I say, the smile sliding off my face and the

tears pricking behind my lids. “Because I’m never letting you go. I’d be a fool to let you get away. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, the biggest heart I’ve ever known, the one who sees me when no one else does and hears me even when I don’t speak. I’m sure at some point I simply wanted you, maybe I even simply loved you, but we are well past that. Now I need you. You are as fundamental as the breath in my lungs, as much a part of me as the blood flowing through my body. To let you go would be to let go of life, and that’s how long you’ll have me. You’ll have me for a lifetime, a lifetime of laughter, disagreements, battles, triumphs. No matter what comes, know I’ll never leave your side.”

I shift the simple bouquet of blushing tulips and white roses to one hand so I can swipe at the tears streaking down my face. My voice, my words hang in my throat for a moment, crowded with emotions even deeper than the words I manage to utter.

“I vow to stand with you through every circumstance. I promise to pick you up when you fall, to cherish you beyond reason, and to love you without walls.”

When I’m done, I release a heavy breath, relieved to have gotten through it with just a few tears. With a kind smile, the preacher says a few words and encourages Grip to share his vows.

“I feel kind of silly now,” he says with an almost bashful grin, completely incongruous on his handsome face. “After that, something so obviously from your heart, I almost regret writing my vows.”

*Here goes. I’m so glad I went first.*

“But I know how much you love it when I write about you,” he teases, squeezing my fingers. “So this is my heart given to you in the words I wrote.”

His smile fades until his mouth rests in a sober line.

“My heart given to you completely,” he adds so softly, I’m not sure the congregation hears before he launches into what he has prepared.

“It’s called ‘Still.’”

*You ask me today if I love you,  
if I take you as my own to have and to hold,  
and my heart replies yes.  
Always, evermore, even after.*



*Still.*

*Not just today before a crowd,  
but when we are alone, you and I,  
through years, through pain,  
My heart will answer again and again, still.  
Ask me in a million seconds, ask me in a billion years,  
Do you love me?  
And I will say still.*

*Ask me when we toil, when we rest,  
when we fuss and fight.  
With the taste of anger burning my lips,  
I will say still.*

*Ask me when your belly is full like the moon,  
and our love has stretched your body with my child,  
leaving your skin, once flawless,  
now silvered, traced, scarred,  
I will worship you.  
My eyes will never stray.  
My heart will never wander,  
gladly leashed to you all my days.  
I am fixed on you.*

*Our love is a great river,  
the Amazon, the Nile, the river Euphrates,  
and my heart is a violent churning  
in my chest,  
swimming upstream,*

*defying every odd, accepting any dare  
To reach you.  
To rush you,  
to hold you,  
to keep you.  
You ask me if I love you?  
God, yes.  
My lover, you are the single star  
in a universe void before you came.*

*And when the years have passed,  
and we have watched a thousand sunsets,  
and we are bent,  
our bodies crooked with age  
ask me again.  
In the twilight,  
in the shadow of the life we have shared,  
ask me if I love you,  
and my heart will answer  
before my lips can part.  
My love, my life,  
my heart never left your hands.  
Always, evermore, even after.  
Still.*

BEHIND ME, I hear sniffing. I'm aware that the audience is moved by Grip's words, but they cannot feel a fraction of the emotion drowning my senses until he is the only thing I can perceive with any clarity. Every other person, every other sound and sight is mist. The power, the passion of his words

turned on me has left me undone, unraveled, a ribbon unspooled. I barely hear the words the preacher speaks, legally linking us together. It's such a formality. The words *we* spoke to one another are what joined us. *Our* words, *our* wills bind us, and even with so many looking on, clapping, cheering that we are now husband and wife, I can't make myself look away from him, and he can't tear his eyes away from me. We are caught in this most exquisite intimacy, and neither of us wants out. We want to revel in it, to revel in each other, for the rest of our days.

## **PART II**

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*“Dwell in possibility.”*  
– Emily Dickinson



## GRIP

THE DARKNESS IS SO DEEP, so dense, I can't see my hand in front of my face.

"For the record," I tell Bristol from the passenger seat of her car, "when I said we should use blindfolds, I was thinking kinkier, maybe with some cuffs . . . maybe some anal."

"Anal?" Though I can't see her face, her voice sounds horrified. "I told you your dick's too big for anal. Not happening."

"I'm gonna take that as a backhanded compliment." I laugh, reaching up to touch the thick cotton shrouding my eyes.

"Don't you dare take that blindfold off," Bristol orders. "And you can take it as a compliment, insult, I don't care, as long as we're clear that your big dick is not going in my tiny asshole."

She says that now, but over the last year of marriage, there hasn't been much I haven't been able to persuade her to do.

Except anal. It's a work in progress.

"Are we there yet?" I ask, tuning all my other senses to the environment to figure out where "there" is.

"Are you seven years old? We've been driving for a grand total of ten minutes . . . but, yes, we're almost there."

"Is this my anniversary present?" I lean back in the bucket seat of Bristol's convertible. "Because I read that year one is paper. Is this paper?"

"Um . . . in a way." The mischief in Bristol's voice tells me nothing except that she enjoys having the upper hand—for once.

We come to a stop, and my senses automatically go on higher alert. I sniff the air, wondering if we're going to a restaurant.

“You told me your mom says you have extra senses from growing up in Compton,” Bristol says, a smugness in her voice that I fully plan to fuck out of her when we get home. “How are all those extra senses serving you right about now?”

I sniff again, pulling in deeper draws of air.

“I sense that you’re wet and you want me to fuck you,” I say with a straight face. “How am I doing so far?”

The silence that follows my outrageous comment has my shoulders shaking because even though I was just joking, I know I’m totally right.

“Bastard,” Bristol mutters before I hear the driver’s door open and slam closed.

My head jerks around when my door swings open, and I do smell her. The unique clean scent that is Bristol’s invades my nostrils, and I want to sniff her like a stalker as she leads me by the arm along what I think is a sidewalk. Don’t ask me how I know, but when you grow up with so little grass and nothing but asphalt, your feet know sidewalk when they meet it. A bell dings over a door, and I’m pretty sure . . .

“I smell Mexican.”

The blindfold is wrenched from my eyes, and I come face to face with Mateo.

“You’re half right,” he says with a grin. “The other half is black, on my mama’s side. Blaxican!”

I glance around the tattoo shop where I’ve always gotten my ink. Bristol is already seated, a satisfied smirk on her face and an empanada halfway to her mouth.

“Mateo told me his dad has a taco shop around the corner,” Bristol says around a mouthful. “And I thought this would be a perfect meal for our anniversary.”

“When you said you’d handle our first anniversary dinner,” I say, sitting down in the chair beside her, “I kind of envisioned something a little more upscale.”

I shoot my friend a remorseless glance. “No offense, Matty.”

“I got you, *ese*.” He leans against the counter that holds the cash register. “But your wife knows what she wants.”

*Wife.*

Bristol has been my wife for a year. It feels like yesterday and it feels like forever, like we’re just getting started, and like we know each other more

deeply than I ever thought possible. I want to slow the hours down because it's going too fast. One day I'll wake up and be at the end of this journey, like Mrs. O'Malley, and even after a lifetime with Bristol, I'll bargain with God for one more day.

"I had an idea for an anniversary gift to each other." Bristol wipes the corners of her mouth with a paper napkin. "Something that will last all our lives."

"I'm guessing it's a tattoo," I say, looking around Matty's tattoo parlor.

"You're very astute without the blindfold. I'm almost done eating so I can go first."

I frown because she has one beautiful tattoo on her shoulder of the Neruda line that galvanized our connection years ago, and I need to sign off on anything else. I mean, I have tattoos all over, but I'm a lot more careful with Bristol's body than I am with my own.

"What kind of tattoo are you getting?"

"You mean what kind of tattoo are we getting?" She reaches into her purse and hands me a sketch. "This one."

It's a pair of hands, one masculine and one feminine. Banding each ring finger is Matty's trademark calligraphy of the word *still*. The letters wrap around each finger, sketched to look like delicate vine.

"You like it?" Bristol asks, her voice soft, uncertain.

After the wedding, she requested that I give her my vows, my poem *STILL*, in writing. I know she added it to a box where she keeps our memories—the leather book of Neruda poetry, the tarnished whistle from the carnival, and now the vows I wrote for her. I know *STILL* holds significance, but I never saw this coming.

"You want to tattoo this on our fingers?" I ask, just to make sure I'm clear. "The word *still*?"

"Yeah. I have no problem making this permanent on my skin." She smiles, but bites her bottom lip. "Unless our first year has made you reconsider forever."

As an answer, I slip my wedding band off my finger and into my pocket then turn to Matty, who's already prepping his ink and needles.

"All right, partner, do your worst."

I've gotten used to the discomfort that comes with tattooing—hell, I got my first one when I was only fourteen. Amir and I were Matty's guinea pigs, and he had to fix that first one—a sadly disfigured angel—years later, after



his skills improved. Bristol, though, has only gotten one tat, and she winces at the sharp needle pumping ink into her skin. Matty's fast, though, and as gentle as he can be. After a couple of hours, we have matching tattoo bands on our ring fingers, not huge, but present enough to see even under our wedding rings. Matty has cleaned the tats and is prepping for his next customer while we eat the last of our cold empanadas and drink flat beer in the back room that serves as kitchen, office, and occasional bedroom for Matty and his staff.

"It's not what I expected." I grin when her questioning eyes find mine. "But it's perfect."

"Good." She licks her lips and sets her bottle of beer on the small round table that's covered in drawings; the tattoo artists must use it to practice on. "I did something today that I hope you approve of. I probably should have asked you first."

"Asked me first?" There aren't too many things that fall into Bristol's *ask Grip first* category. "What'd you do?"

"I removed my birth control." She twists her lips, unaware of the freak-out she just set off with her words. "Well, technically my doctor did. It was really simple. She just—"

"Whoa." I carefully set my beer beside hers. "Back up. You said you—"

"Removed my birth control, yeah." She peeks at me from under her lashes. "Is that okay? You said whenever I was ready—"

"We could start trying, yeah." A foot-long grin stretches between my cheeks. "So you're . . . are you saying you're—"

"Ready to have a baby, yes." She worries the corner of her mouth with her teeth. "Your baby, yeah."

Being married to Bristol has made the last year of my life the best. To think of us adding children to this . . . so many emotions rocket through me. A girl, a boy—could be both. Bristol's a twin, and her father and her Uncle Grady are twins.

"We could have twins!" The words fly from my mouth before I think better of it, and I can tell it hadn't occurred to Bristol, though I don't know how that's possible.

"Two?" Her eyes stretch. "At one time?"

"Your father's a twin. You're a twin," I remind her gently. "If your mom, who has the maternal instincts of a barracuda, can do it, I'm sure you'd be fine."

“Oh, God.” Her dazed eyes fixate on the table. “Two.”

She snatches her bottle from the table, tipping it back until the last drop is gone. Without missing a beat, she grabs mine and does the same. Before she starts raiding Matty’s small refrigerator for cheap liquor, I decide to stop her.

“Baby, come here.”

I hold my arms out and wait for her to settle on my lap. The mere thought of Bristol having my baby has me horny as hell, so when she squirms to get comfortable in my lap, I’m anything but comfortable as my dick swells into the curve of her ass. I had the best intentions when I asked her to come to me. I wanted to soothe her fears, wanted to reassure her that whatever we have, however many kids we have, we’ll be fine.

But damn.

Now with her in my lap and her scent surrounding me and the satiny skin of her throat silently begging to be licked and bitten, reassuring her is the furthest thing from my mind.

I just want to fuck her.

“We have a couple of options,” I mutter into the sweet-smelling curve of her neck.

“What are they?” she asks breathlessly, tipping her head back so I can take more of her skin into my mouth. “These options, what are they?”

“I can lock that door, and we can hope no one needs to come back here to microwave a Hot Pocket.”

She pants against my lips, turning so she’s facing me, her thighs splayed over mine while she grinds her wet heat into me.

“And the other options?” She feathers kisses over my cheeks and plunges her tongue into my ear.

*Holy hell.* I’ll come in my pants like a pubescent boy if she does that shit again—and that’s a promise, not a threat.

“We can go in the alley, or maybe even the bathroom, but folks use the bathroom a lot around here.” My voice is so husky it’s scraping the bottom octave. “What we’re *not* gonna do is wait till we get home, because I can’t.”

Our eyes tangle, an electric charge in the air, breaths getting heavier the longer we feel each other, smell each other.

“Alley,” she rasps, standing and practically running toward the back exit.

“You sure?” I ask like she has a choice now, but my hand is already at my belt. I’m already calculating how much time we probably have before someone invades our quiet alley. In my head, I’m already doing a stellar job

of fucking her against that brick wall.

Small mercies, she's wearing a dress. With our eyes locked, she raises it over her thighs to show me her panties, and with slow, steady movements, she eases them over her hips and down her legs. They encircle her shoes in delicate lace and silk. She widens her stance a few inches and reaches back under the dress. I can see her hand moving at the juncture of her thighs and her eyes are still fixed on me, though they start going hazy with the pleasure of her own fingers.

"Did I tell you to touch yourself?" I ask, trailing kisses down her neck, pushing aside the collar of her dress with my chin, sucking the skin tattooed with Neruda into my mouth to make sure she is as sweet as she was this morning.

*Just as sweet.*

"You didn't want me to get started without you?" Her fingers slide up and down her slit under the silky material.

"Oh, you can get started." I slide to my knees. "As long as you know I'm the one finishing you off."

I duck under her dress and, as gently as I can with a dozen horses galloping through my veins, push her hand aside. *Get that shit outta here. Not tonight.* When she comes tonight, the first time we make love without a net, it'll be all me. As hot as it is to watch my wife touch herself, I'm holding myself personally responsible for all her orgasms tonight, kind of like a designated driver, except I'm already drunk on the smell of her and the liquid desire pouring from her pussy while I eat her out in this dark alley. The possibility of discovery heightens every second, like there's barely time to suck her clit. Barely time to get three fingers inside of her. Barely time to pull these lips into my mouth, except I do take my time. I'm thorough with this, and it's time well spent when her thighs tremble around my cheeks. She forces my mouth deeper into the V of her body, an act of pure desperation, primal instinct compelling her fingers into my scalp. She thrusts frantically against my face.

I love the scream that rips from her throat as she gushes into my mouth, and I don't even try to stifle the sound. Anyone who comes back here is getting an eyeful and an education. She starts sliding down the wall, her legs giving out, but I bracket her slim waist with my hands.

"Not yet, baby." I trap her against the wall with one hand and fumble to get my pants undone with the other. Her eyes are cloudy and sated, but when

I jerk her legs up and around my back, she blinks and lust filters back into her stare. I thrust up, deep and hard and sudden, making her breath hitch.

“Grip.” She squeezes her eyes closed, her face wreathed in pleasure. “I do need to walk tomorrow.”

“Yeah?” I press into her, holding her hostage between my body and the brick wall. “Well you should have married some other guy if you need to go around walking all the time.”

“Marry some other guy?” She breathes through a smile. “Never.”

I surge into her again and again and again, relishing the startled sound she makes, like she had no idea I could tunnel deeper into her body than the last time, but I keep making a way. She hooks her arm around my neck for leverage, taking my lips between hers and biting hard enough to sting.

Tension stiffens my back and legs, seethes in my balls as I get closer. Every time I thrust in, those slick walls cling to me, like they don’t want to let me go. Tight and perfect, even Bristol’s pussy is possessive, holding on to me, reminding me who I belong to.

“Grip,” she slurs, drunk on our love, like a shot of moonshine, wild and potent. “Oh, God.”

And then it happens. She goes first, her body clenching and shuddering. Her head drops back against the wall and her eyes slide closed on pure passion. I’m next, and it doesn’t even feel real. Every day is a fantasy with this girl, not just the sex—though . . . dayuuuum, the *fucking* sex.

But it’s more than that. It’s the depth of this feeling, not just when our bodies lock together, but with every glance, every touch, with the things we tell each other without saying a word. It’s *life* with her. I’ll never get enough of the emotion careening through my heart right now. I link our hands, pressing them into the wall so I can see the calligraphy tattooed into my ring finger.

When I make love to Bristol knowing that someday soon, she’ll have my child, the vow I spoke to her a year ago today echoes through my mind just as surely as it’s inked into my flesh.

Always.

Evermore.

Even after.

*Still.*



## BRISTOL

I'M HAVING a bad day and Grip is making it worse.

"Would you just sign the contract?" I pop an ibuprofen for the headache from hell vising my temples.

"Nope," he answers calmly, eyes fixed on the gigantic television. "I told you I don't like those dates."

With the remote aimed at the television, he flips through several channels, all of which start with ESPN. ESPN 2, ESPN News, ESPN Classic—how many ESPNs do we need? He's the picture of relaxation, feet up on the table, and that only serves to agitate the bee in my proverbial bonnet. I've been working all day *for him*, setting up show dates, speaking with college administrators about the *Contagious* tour he and Iz launch in a few months, finalizing a new headphones endorsement deal—and that's just today, and that's just him. There's also my list for Kai, Luke, Rhyson, and Jimmi, getting things set up for Kilimanjaro's release. It's a shit ton, and I'm only asking him to do this one little thing.

"Please don't give me crap on this." I stand beside the couch, trying to remain reasonable. I've been doing a good job of being reasonable lately.

"Babe, just rework the deadlines." His eyes flick briefly from the screen to my face and back, like he's making sure it's still me, his wife, and not some irate stranger. "I don't want to be writing during the holidays, and that deadline Charm is proposing would have me doing that."

"Not if you're ahead of schedule." I perch on the arm of the sofa. "Just rework some studio time and—"

"Rework studio time?" The look he gives me is an ounce of disbelief, a

quart of frustration. “But that’s when I want to focus on my next album, not some stupid book of poetry.”

“Stupid book of . . .” Words fail me. I’ve worked my ass off to secure this book deal with one of the finest publishers in the business. “Grip, this is how you diversify. This is brand expansion. This is—”

“This is getting on my last damn nerve is what this is doing. Let’s talk about it tomorrow.” He scowls, turns up the volume, and gestures to the big ass flat-screen taking up what seems to be half a wall. “It’s the game, babe. I was in the studio till two o’clock this morning and on conference calls with Iz all day. I just wanna watch the game.”

*Men. Oh, my God. They slay me with their hobbies and trivial obsessions.*

I plant myself directly in front of the television and put my hands on my hips. I know it’s the universal bitch wife move, but I find myself pulling it anyway.

“Now,” I say obstinately. “Let’s get it settled tonight so when Charm gets to the office in the morning, our signed contract is in her inbox.”

“Move.” Grip’s eyes narrow, not even attempting to look around me. “Or I’m moving you.”

I fold my arms over my chest, raising one brow to dare him. He’s on his feet in a flash, his hands lifting me by my waist, hauling me over his shoulder and stomping down the hall to our bedroom. He tosses me on the bed and walks to the door.

“How about you come out when you’re off the rag,” he snaps on his way out. “Because this shit is ridiculous.”

He doesn’t slam the door. He doesn’t even close it, but in my mind, that’s the sound of his anger: a door slamming shut between us. And the most galling thing?

He’s right.

My foul mood has nothing to do with the contract. I can get Charm to make those changes. They’re so eager to have him, they’d let him publish any time in the next century. It has nothing to do with my heavy workload, but it *does* have everything to do with my period.

I roll to sit on the floor, my back pressed against the bed and my knees up. I drop my head into my hands, and despite all the warnings I give myself not to cry, tears slip from my eyes.

*Four months.*

My period has come like clockwork the last four months. I know people

try for years before getting pregnant so I shouldn't be this discouraged after a few months, but when I woke up this morning and realized my cycle was here again, it just soured my whole day.

My head is down, my face covered, but I know as soon as Grip sits on the floor beside me. He's noiseless, and it's not even his scent that gives him away. It's that thing tucked away in my heart, hidden in my soul that responds to him every time he's near. Emotional, sensual, primal, it's a call and response that I never asked for, but it's undeniably there. It always will be.

"Hey." He pushes the hair back from my hot face. "Look at me."

I don't want to. My nose is probably red. My cheeks are wet. I've been an idiot and a bitch all day, and *again* he's the one making the first move to fix things. I don't want his kindness right now. I don't deserve it.

With gentle fingers, he pries my hands away from my face. I still don't look up when he brushes a thumb over the tears pooling under my eyes. He pulls me over to him, settling me sideways on his lap and tucking my head into his neck.

"My period came again," I mumble.

"I know." He kisses my eyelashes. "Isn't that supposed to happen? Like to keep all your girl parts working the way they should?"

"I'm a grown woman." I smile into his T-shirt, which is damp with my leftover tears. "I don't have *girl* parts."

"Grown woman, girl, I don't care—I like your parts healthy." He tips up my chin. "So, from what I understand, this is normal, healthy female stuff. So, what's the problem?"

"I'm disappointed." I sigh and trace the calligraphy peeping out from under his wedding band. "I was hoping this month . . . well, you know, that my cycle would *not* come."

I swallow fresh tears. Rationally, I know it hasn't been long. I know there's sometimes a delay when you get off birth control. I have no idea if I'll be a good mother, but I want to try. With him, for him, I want to try. There was a time when I saw marriage as just a formality. We had everything else: we lived together, we made love, we shared every aspect of our lives. Really, what could a piece of paper add to what we already had?

But it did.

It does.

Marrying Grip transformed our love, anchored our commitment in a way



I hadn't understood and could not have anticipated. I couldn't imagine a deeper devotion than what we shared before we married, but marriage to him uncovered fathoms. Instinctively, I know having his children, raising them together will do the same. It will test us in ways, stretch us in ways, *bind* us in ways I want to explore. I'll seek out anything that will grow our love.

"I wanna give you a baby, Grip."

Even in the inky depths of his eyes, my comment sparks light. An answering desire glows back at me. The intensity is magnetic, drawing me in and holding me captive. He wants it, too, but I can tell he deliberately tamps it down.

"You're just planning to push it out and drop it off?" Grip's smile lures me even further out of my funk. "What do you mean give *me* a baby? Are you not sticking around for the next eighteen years?"

"Shut up." I snuggle deeper into the corrugated plane of his chest and abs. "You know what I mean."

"This is for us, Bris." He pulls back only far enough for me to see his face. He's teasing me into a better mood, but his eyes are serious. "A baby would add to what we already have, yeah, but what we already have is *amazing*. It's more than most people ever get because I'm completely content with just you. Do you know how hard it is to be content, to be satisfied in this life? And I found someone who is more than enough to make me happy forever."

I nod, convinced, but still shaking off the vestiges of my disappointment.

"I don't want you feeling pressure." He holds my chin steady between his thumb and finger. "There's no pressure. I don't care if you're not pregnant next month or next year. It's you and me. Do I want kids? With you? You know I want to see your eyes and my nose and my lips and your whatever all mixed up in beautiful babies."

My bones, my heart, my muscles—like candles of wax, they melt under the tender heat in his words, the warmth of his stare.

"But if it never happens, I have you," he says. "Do you understand? You're it, period—no pun intended."

He does this every time. He untangles my snarls, uncoils me when I'm tightly wound. Not even five minutes ago, I was teary and sullen, rigid in my hurt and disappointment. Now I'm soft as butter oozing into bread. I'm clinging to him.

"I guess another month, another period." I hazard a grin when we stand to

face each other. “And you’re right, it’s okay.”

“And since you got your period, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

We offer our very different responses at the same time.

“Ice cream.”

“Anal.”

“Well, this is awkward,” Grip says with an unabashed grin.

“Did you say anal?” An astonished, confused laugh pops out of my mouth. “My period comes on, and you go straight to anal? Why?”

“It’s a different . . . door, baby. It’s the back door.” His hand works down my spine, over the curve of my ass, his middle finger slipping into the divide down the middle of my butt. “This month gave us lemons. I’m just making lemonade.”

“In my ass? You’re making lemonade in my ass? That’s your metaphor?”

“More like a segue. I think your period is a great *segue* into anal. Lots of people do it as a monthly alternative.”

“Um . . . that’s above my lay grade,” I joke. “We’re not doing that.”

“Like never? You don’t want to do anal *ever*?” Horrified panic extinguishes the teasing light in his eyes. “But I’ve put my thumb in your ass.”

“So?”

“So that was a step to ease you in. Step one, thumb. Step two, cock. My thumb in your ass is like one hard sneeze away from anal.”

I snort, skeptical and unladylike.

“It would take more than a sneeze to get your dick in there.”

“Bris,” he says, patience in his tone and expression. “What’s the difference between my thumb and my dick?”

“Um . . . several inches in sheer girth actually. You are not putting that thing in my ass. You like anal that much?”

“That’s like asking do I like cherry Kool-Aid.”

“Ew! You like cherry Kool-Aid?”

“Okay, it’s like asking if you like Cookie Dough ice cream.”

I would have Cookie Dough ice cream delivered in crates if I could. My anus clenches in protest.

“Oh, God,” I whisper. “You *love* it.”

“Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.”

“I didn’t say I haven’t tried it.”

“You’ve done anal?” Displeasure darkens his eyes. “Who the hell’d you

do anal with?”

“Excuse me.” I tilt my head and rest a fist on my hip. “Did I ask who you’ve done anal with?”

“You’re right, we don’t wanna go there.” He shakes his head and turns his lips down at the corners. “You didn’t like it?”

“It was messy and it hurt.”

“Well, yeah, it can be messy, but he probably didn’t do it right.”

“He definitely didn’t do *something* right.”

“I promise you I’ll do it right.” He cups my ass and squeezes, his pinky fingers delving into the slit of space separating the cheeks. “Can I tell you how I would make it better for you?”

*Resist. Resist. Resist.*

The chant in my head grows fainter the more his hands explore my body, seeking all my needy places. It’s not just the curve of my breast or the plane of my belly where he’s seducing butterflies, but my heart still feels unreasonably bruised by something as silly as menses.

“Not that I’m open to it,” I say, my voice slightly lust-rough. “But if I were to—”

“First I’d get you really wet,” he cuts in, eyes and voice a little too eager to be merely hypothetical.

If he continues, I will be ass-full of Grip by the end of the night.

“Um, forget I asked.” I laugh when his face falls. “I’m just saying . . . what about the game?”

“Game? There’s a game?” His lips ghost the ink on my shoulder, licking at the delicately sketched letters. “Do you *bathe* in sugar? Damn, you always taste good.”

“I can’t get through a shower without you barging in and violating me against the wall, so I think you would know if I bathed in sugar.”

“Is that a complaint?” He steps back like he’s abandoning the hunt, and I’m not quite ready to end the chase. I pull him back to me, slipping my arms up and over his shoulders, linking my wrists behind his neck to caress the smooth skin there.

“Definitely not.” I kiss his chin. “I personally can’t think of a better way to start the day than wet sex against a wall.”

“Mmmmmmm.” The hungry rumble vibrates into my chest. “Keep it up and I’m knocking on that back door tonight.”

We laugh into a kiss that starts soft and sweet, surges to hot and urgent,

and settles into tender longing. He always knows how to get me back, how to pull me back from the brink, and I hope I do the same for him.

“Better?” he asks in between nips of my lips.

“Much.” I rest my forehead against his chin. “I’m sorry about the bitchiness earlier.”

“Don’t even think about it. We both know I can be an asshole,” he says, a rueful twist to his lips. “I’m sorry I called the poetry deal stupid.”

“I can change the dates with Barrow.” I look up to meet his eyes. “Can we chock it all up to the hormones?”

“Sure, but what’s your excuse the other three weeks of the month?” The twinkle in his eye saves him from a junk punch.

“You’re pushing it, Grip.”

“Oh, I can push it, all right.” His playful hip thrust has me giggling like a schoolgirl and shoving him toward the door.

“Go watch your game. I’m gonna take a nice hot bath and then drown my hormones in ice cream.”

I head to the bathroom, already peeling off my tank top when his voice stops me.

“We don’t have to go through this every month, Bris.”

He’s got one hand on his hip, an arm stretched up as he grabs hold of the doorjamb overhead. His T-shirt lifts to peekaboo soft-as-velvet skin stretched over a slab of granite abs. The humor has faded from his voice, from his eyes. All that’s left is lingering concern and unconditional love.

“I’m telling you there’s no pressure,” Grip says. “I’m gonna be ecstatic and obnoxious when you get pregnant, you already know that, but until then I’m ridiculously happy with just you.”

My words are stolen again by his consideration. I’m the luckiest woman on the planet. Minutes later, Grip’s in the living room cursing and yelling at the television while I sink into almost unbearably hot water and mile-high suds to soothe my cramping stomach muscles, wearing nothing but a grin because I’m ridiculously happy with just him, too.



## GRIP

“I THINK I’ll run to the drugstore.”

Bristol’s standing at the door of our office. Technically, it’s Bristol’s office in her cottage. My place a few miles away is occupied by a couple of the Kilimanjaro guys, and our place in New York isn’t actually ours. It’s Mrs. O’Malley’s, but we’re still leasing it. Lately I keep thinking about getting a bigger house here, a place that’s *ours*, hers and mine, a place big enough for us and our kids. *Dammit*. As much as I keep telling myself not to think about our kids, I do. I meant it when I told Bristol there was no pressure. There absolutely isn’t, but man do I want to meet these kids we’ll have one day.

I check the time on the piece-of-shit watch I can’t bring myself to get rid of. When I took it to the watch repair shop, they looked at me like the screws in the watch might not be the only ones loose. Bristol won it at a carnival over a decade ago, for God’s sake. We never even paid for it, but I paid the shop to make it work again.

“It’s late, babe,” I mumble around a yawn. “Lemme go for you.”

“No, you have that assignment to finish.” Bristol comes into the office and sits on the edge of the desk. “It was due two days ago, right?”

“Don’t remind me.” I scowl at my laptop and the assignment on criminal justice reform legislation. “The professor gave me an extension, but I’m on the verge of missing this deadline, too, if I don’t buckle down.”

“It’s been a lot the last few months.” She steps behind me and sinks her fingers into the muscles along my neck, the shoulders locked with tension. “School, working on your next album, all the stuff for Qwest’s single.”

“I had no idea that song would do what it’s doing.” I cover her hand with

mine, running my finger along her tattoo and wedding ring. “You never know what people will respond to.”

“They always seem to respond to the two of you together,” Bristol says easily.

I poke around in the air, searching for agitation in Bristol’s statement. She’s possessive on the best of days, but with Qwest, it’s on another level. I’m pleased to report clear skies, from what I can tell.

“Well the video’s in the can, the single’s out, and the first round of performances is behind me,” I say. “Now I can focus on . . . everything else.”

Like the book of poetry I haven’t even started. I won’t mention that, because if Bristol says the words “brand expansion” again, I’m going through my eye with a selfie stick.

“You have knots in your neck,” Bristol whispers, slipping her tongue inside my ear. She knows what that does to me. She must be prepared to face the consequences. I reach around and snatch her off her feet and onto my lap.

“No!” She squeals and laughs, but doesn’t budge. “I told you I have to go to the drugstore.”

“And I told you,” I say, trailing kisses over her collarbone, “that I’ll go. I don’t want you out this late.”

“It’s only ten o’clock.”

I shrug and keep kissing the hollow at the base of her throat.

“I thought guys hated buying things like tampons,” she says, pausing significantly. “And pregnancy tests.”

“I’ll buy whatever the hell I . . .”

My voice evaporates as her words sink in, and I gulp down the hope that immediately springs up in my chest. I’ve been careful not to make Bristol feel any pressure. I meant every word I said—if we never had a kid, I’d be disappointed, heartbroken, but any man who’s not satisfied with Bristol alone doesn’t deserve her.

“Pregnancy tests?” I search her eyes, finding teasing and hope and trace amounts of fear.

“I’m late.”

“How late?”

“Three weeks.”

“Three . . .” I run my free hand over the back of my neck. She thought it was tight before; my neck’s a bowstring now. “Why’d you wait this long?”

“I dunno.” Bristol lifts and drops one shoulder. “I think I was scared to

get excited. It could be stress making me late.”

*Or you could be pregnant.*

“But now I have to know.” She laughs nervously. “I’m going to the drugstore because I can’t sleep tonight until I know for sure. We can even go together if that makes you feel better.”

“I don’t think we’ll have to go at all actually.” I shift her off my lap and head out of the office, calling over my shoulder, “Gimme a sec.”

Maybe thirty seconds later, Bristol looks from my face to the items I laid out on the desk with wide eyes.

“You just happen to have a pregnancy test?” Bristol lifts one of them and an eyebrow. “Or six? When did you get these?”

“Um . . . March?” I pretend to have to think about it. “Yeah, March.”

“March, as in, our anniversary when I told you I was ready to have kids, March?” A knowing smile spreads across her face.

“I didn’t buy six pregnancy tests that day. That would be weird.”

“Right.”

“I bought one each month.”

“Which is even weirder.” She laughs. “But okay.”

“I know.” I can’t believe I’m embarrassed about this. “It was some kind of ritual or something. That first day of your period when you realized you weren’t pregnant, you would always be kind of . . .”

“Psychotic?”

“Your words, not mine.” *Though . . . nailed it.* “Maybe it was a hope thing, but I would go out and buy one of these. Don’t ask me why.”

I nod to them, a smile pressing through.

“But now we need them. I think ‘thank you, Grip’ is the phrase you’re looking for, and you’re welcome.”

“Well, no time like the present.” Bristol scoops up all six of the tests and heads for the bathroom.

I meet her there with a glass of water.

“I’m not thirsty, but thanks,” she says, pushing the door as if to close it.

I stick my foot in to stop her.

“That’s a lot of tests, and a lot of pee.” I slide fully into the bathroom, hand her the water, and hop onto the bathroom counter. “Drink up.”

Bristol circuits a glance from me to the door to the glass of water in her hand a few times.

“Get out.” She takes a few gulps of the water and narrows her eyes at me.



“You aren’t watching me pee.”

“So, I can eat you out but I can’t watch you pee? That makes sense.”

“Get out,” she repeats, pointing to the door. “And give me some privacy to do my business.”

I blow out an exasperated breath, head for the bedroom, and hover outside the closed bathroom door. I’m being an idiot, I know it, but I can barely breathe I’m so excited. The possibility of this actually happening, of my DNA and her DNA making something unique to us has me tripping.

After an eternity . . . or ten minutes . . . the door opens, and Bristol gestures me inside the bathroom. She has all six tests lined up on the counter. I don’t even glance at them, but search her expression for the verdict. Her face is blank, downright miserly, it’s giving away so little.

“So?” I hop back up onto the counter, still not looking at the little pissy sticks. “What we got?”

Bristol leans one hip against the counter to face me.

“You bought the first test in March, right?” she asks instead of getting on with it.

“Yeah.” I give a jerky nod, hoping she doesn’t make me feel like even more of a sentimental pussy than I already do.

“Your March test says . . .” A grin, infinitesimal in width but huge in impact on my heartbeat, quirks her lips. “I’m pregnant.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds, the moment swelling with all the possibilities. It could be a fluke. The other tests could negate that one.

“Your April test says I’m pregnant, too,” she says. “And your May and June tests agree.”

She slides three more sticks to me. I glance down to see four tests confirming what I’m almost afraid to believe in various shades of pink and plus signs.

“Apparently, July and August concur.” She pushes the last two tests to join the others, six sticks all saying the same thing.

“You’re pregnant.” My smile feels like it’s spilling over the sides of my face. “It’s definite.”

“I’d like to have a doctor confirm,” she says as mischief, awe, and tenderness swirl in the look she gives me. “But six tests probably don’t lie.”

I was determined to show restraint until we knew for sure. If she wasn’t pregnant, if even half those tests read negative, I would have maintained some kind of reserve, but she’s right—six tests don’t lie, and my resolve goes

to hell. I eliminate all the space between us and scoop her right up off her feet. Her legs lock behind me, and a peal of laughter slips free, echoing in the bathroom.

“Is that your bird laugh again?” I smile my way into a kiss against her lips.

“It seems to pop out when I’m happier than anyone has a right to be.” Her cheeks are as wet as my eyes, and she presses our foreheads together. “We’re having a baby, Grip. I can’t even tell you what I’m feeling right now.”

For once, I’m in the same boat. Words are my business, but the feeling taking over every part of me leaves me speechless.



## BRISTOL

“IT’S SNOWING IN NEW YORK.”

Grip’s low-voiced comment from beside me at the dinner table makes me smile. Christmas in LA is not Christmas in New York. I’ve done it on both coasts, and a balmy Christmas doesn’t quite feel the same. Our friends and family are here, though, and we’re eating dinner with Ms. James then heading to Rhys and Kai’s. That first awful time I came here for dinner, I never would have imagined that this place would feel like a haven and my brother’s house would feel like hell, but Rhyson has invited my parents over for Christmas.

*Armageddon, people. Armageddon.*

This is something I’ve wished for and worked toward for a long time. I should feel less dread now that my parents and my brother will be at the same Christmas table again. The last time that happened, Uncle Grady, my father’s twin brother, hosted what I like to call Bloody Christmas and they nearly came to blows. Rhyson stormed off to spend the holidays with Kai, as if he needed motivation to abandon the family

Christmas dinner with Grip’s family couldn’t be more different from the stiff affairs our holidays always proved to be. There is warmth and affection, an ease as everyone goes around the table sharing the highlight of their year.

“Let’s tell them,” Grip whispers, passing me the yams.

I freeze, my fingers tightening on the platter.

“Today?” The word glides quietly from the corner of my mouth.

“Why not today?” Grip shrugs, but that light that never seems to leave his eyes since he found out I’m pregnant gets even brighter. “My mom and Amir already know. We’re out of the danger zone, in the second trimester. This is

the highlight of my year and I want to share it, babe.”

I glance down the table, past Amir and his mother, past Shon and all the other family and friends I’ve managed to win over since we married, until my eyes settle on the one holdout. Across a spread of turkey, stuffing, chicken, peas, collard greens, and a variety of foods I’ll have to work off tomorrow, Jade’s gaze locks with mine. Though she doesn’t roll her eyes, she still manages to convey her derision. The tracks she wrote for Qwest’s album did well, and that’s opened other doors for her; I hate that she and Grip haven’t been able to celebrate together. When she didn’t show up for the wedding, it strained things between them even more. Now on Christmas, tucked in my belly and under my heart, is a secret that could further divide—or maybe unite.

“Okay.” I muster an answering smile to the flash of white-toothed excitement on his face. “Go for it.”

Grip clears his throat when it’s his turn to share.

“It’s been another crazy year.” Anticipation sizzles around him, an irrepressible smile on his face. “You’ve all been there for every phase of my life, loved and supported me unconditionally.”

Grip’s eyes drift over each face, the friends, family, and neighbors, the people he grew up with, who have been his anchor on an unlikely adventure of fortune and fame. The people at this table helped shape him into the man I love, a man whose talent propels him to soar with stars while his feet remain firmly on the ground.

“Over the years,” he continues, “when we came to this part of Christmas, I’ve had some pretty amazing highlights—my first recording contract, a double platinum album, Grammys.”

When he looks to me, all the improbable dreams I had about happiness, about love, stare back at me.

“A wife,” he says softly. “This year, many great things have happened, including my first book deal.”

Those around the table cheer and clap. I even hear a few *Thank you, Jesus-es*. I haven’t visited the church where Grip grew up and that his mom still faithfully attends, but I am fully anticipating a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

“But the thing I’m most excited about this year, the absolute highlight”—Grip’s grin is like a horizon, bright and wide—“is our baby. Bristol’s pregnant.”

The room erupts with good wishes, high fives, pats on the back, even some tears. Their goodwill, their love for Grip—and by extension, for me—crashes over me like a wave, and for just that moment of impact, I can't breathe. My throat constricts around happy tears, around joy. I coveted this growing up. I didn't have a tribe, a unit of people surrounding me, cheering me on every step, but Grip did. Though I had a rough start with some, fraught with mistrust and confusion, and yeah, in some cases, prejudice, they've embraced me. Their warmth is as sure and as solid as arms around me.

I didn't grow up dreaming of stardom, of making my mark on the world the way Grip and Rhyson and Kai and Luke and Jimmi did. All my friends ate a constant diet of ambition, and even today, I still feed that appetite. Those weren't my dreams though. No, I dreamt of a home, of people who loved me whether we had a little or a lot, who were *there*. For a girl who grew up in big houses with empty rooms, this was my dream. Grip has tried to buy his mother a huge house, but she refuses to leave this one. I wondered why, but now I know. She is planted at the center of a garden with roots that go so deep, she wouldn't think of pulling them up, of leaving this neighborhood, this nucleus of people. Maybe this was her dream, too, and I find that seeing it come true for me through those who love Grip makes me a blubbering mess. I don't know if it's hope or hormones or a little of both, but it's too much. As soon as I've been congratulated, squeezed, and teased by so many I lose count, I slip off into the kitchen.

I'm facing the sink when the door swings open behind me. A soft touch on my shoulder has me swinging around with a bright smile pinned to my face.

"You okay, Bristol?" Ms. James asks, her wise eyes searching me.

"Of course." I return the gentle pressure when she squeezes my hand. "I just . . . I'm . . ."

To my mortification, I lose it. Sobs shake my body as a release of emotion I thought I had under control spills messily over my face, down my neck, and all over my mother-in-law. Her arms go around me, her hand moving in reassuring slides over my back, the maternal monosyllables I never heard as a child breaking me into little pieces. When Grip enters the kitchen, his mother is still putting me back together.

"What's wrong?" The smile on his face vanishes little by little until it's gone altogether. Concern radiates from him, worry in his eyes when he sees me in his mother's arms.

“Nothing wrong, baby.” Ms. James pulls away enough to swipe my tears, the kind smile in her eyes matched by the one on her face. “This is an emotional time for us mamas.”

“Hormones?” Grip glances between us bravely, like he needs to gird his loins if it’s hormones.

Ms. James and I look at each other, roll our eyes, and promptly laugh at him.

“What?” Grip tries to look indignant, but his lips are twitching. “I can handle hormones.”

“Crisis averted.” I sniff and wipe away the last traces of wetness from my cheeks. “Hormones are in check.”

Relief and love mix in the look he divides between his mother and me.

“Okay, if you say so.” With one last lingering glance to make sure I’m okay, he shifts his attention to his mother. “Ma, Ms. Green’s son is here. He says you wanted to take her a plate or something.”

“Yes!” Her face lights up, but then falls. “Marlon, she ain’t doing good. She’s on oxygen and been in and out of the hospital.”

“Man, sorry to hear that.” Grip’s brows bunch. “Does she need anything? Help with medical bills or something?”

She looks thoughtful for a moment before grabbing his chin.

“My sweet boy,” she says. “What would do her wonders is to see your face. She asks about you all the time. She used to keep you when I got called in to work. It’s just up the street, won’t take long.”

“Sure. I’ll come.” Grip checks my face, looking for signs of distress. “You wanna roll with us or—”

“No.” I lean up to kiss his cheek, making sure my eyes are clear so he feels good about leaving me. “You go on. I’m gonna sneak a piece of sweet potato pie and just rest a little.”

“If you need to lie down, just go in my old room.” Grip brushes the hair from my face and looks at his mom. “She sleeps all the time.”

“A situation I need to change,” I say with a laugh. “I can’t get all my work done sleeping like normal people do.”

“Normal people do not sleep as much as you been sleeping,” Grip says, his grin teasing me.

He drops to his knees in front of me and whispers to my stomach, laying a quick kiss on the barely perceptible roundness that is the only visible sign of my pregnancy. He does this all the time, and though I’ve asked him more

than once what he's saying, he always tells me it's between him and his baby.

He stands, looping an arm around his mother, who barely reaches his shoulder.

"Ready, Ma?"

She nods briskly, balancing two plates covered with aluminum foil.

"We'll be back in a little bit, babe."

When I have the kitchen to myself again, I blow out a long breath. With my emotions once again under control, I really do want that slice of pie. The door swings open as I'm taking my first bite, and I almost choke when I see Jade. The last time we stood in this kitchen, she revealed just how much resentment she still harbored about my relationship with Grip. I'm sure she blames me for how things have been between them.

"What's up?" She flicks her chin like she would to a stranger on the street, not like we're family—because I guess we aren't. I smile a little uneasily as a reply.

She makes a direct line for the sweet potato pie I just sliced into, and it's silent in the kitchen while she plates one for herself. She's on her way out, plate balanced in one hand, back to the door pressing it open when she pauses and looks at me from under the brim of her baseball cap. Even today she still wears her typical uniform of baggy jeans and Raiders gear.

"I guess you got him now." A bitter twist of her lips accompanies the words.

"What?" Confusion stills my chewing mid-bite. "I don't know what you mean."

She takes a few steps back into the room and looks me over, dislike plain in her eyes.

"Once you got a kid with a man, you're linked to him forever," she says. "Can't fault you for that, I guess. Well played."

"Wait a minute." I set my fork, loaded with a hunk of sweet potato pie, back onto my plate. "You're saying you think me getting pregnant is strategic somehow? So I can stay in Grip's life even if we—"

"When you break up, yeah."

I cling to the fraying strands of my patience with the tips of my fingers.

"You can be such a bitch." It's not what reasonable Bristol had planned to say, but she left the building as soon as Jade started spouting this nonsense, and I can't for the life of me get her back.

Vodka could get her back.



I need a drink badly, and that is one thing I can't have in my current condition.

"What'd you say to me?" Jade's expression shifts from disdain to outrage.

"What I should have said a long time ago." I stand to face her eye to eye. "I've been patient. I've bitten my tongue when you've said rude, judgmental shit to me, all because I know what you mean to Grip, but you won't get away with accusing me of trapping my own husband."

"I didn't say trap." She grimaces, looking as close to contrite as I can expect. "I just meant—"

"I know damn well what you meant." My voice elevates with the emotions still close to the surface. I swallow some of my indignation and try to rein my temper. I will gouge my tear ducts before Jade sees tears from me.

"I'm not, nor have I ever been, afraid of or intimidated by you," I say. "In case you were wondering if your bullying tactics work on me, they don't. The only thing I was afraid of was coming between you and Grip."

We stare at each other unblinkingly, perpetrating the same war of wills that began the day we met.

"He loves you." My voice is softer because I know it's the truth. My husband has a soft spot for his cousin. He lets her get away with things no one else would, but I was the line he drew in the sand, and things haven't been the same between them since she crossed it. "He hates it when there's distance between you."

"He doesn't hate it that much." She shoves her hands in her pockets. "He said he would choose you, would cut me out of his life if he had to."

Her throat moves with a gulp of emotion.

"And he did that," she says, glancing down to her Chuck Taylors. "He showed me."

"He doesn't want this any more than you do, Jade, especially now when you both have great things going on. Don't you want to share it?"

"So, what?" She cocks one skeptical brow. "You want me to try for the sake of the baby?"

"No, I want you to try for the sake of *trying*." I haul in a frustrated breath. "Try because maybe you're wrong about me. Maybe your preconceived notions about me are just that—*notions*, not even true. I love Grip more than anything. If we have nothing else in common, we have *him* in common."

Jade shifts from one foot to the other, the same look on her face that Grip

gets when he's wrapping his mind around something new.

"I guess." She gives a subtle shrug and meets my eyes with lingering ire. "It'll be easier if you ain't one of them white folks raising black kids who don't know where they come from, who don't understand their own culture and can't even stand to be with their own people."

I toss an arm toward the kitchen door, where on the other side is a houseful of people Grip has known all his life.

"Does Grip seem like he's forgotten where he came from?" I demand, fire licking under my words. "Like he doesn't understand his culture? Like he's running from it?"

Her lips part to reply, but I don't even wait for her answer, because what can she say but no?

"Well, all right then," I barrel ahead. "Our kids won't be that way either. I haven't once tried to take Grip away. If anything, I'm constantly trying to get in. Can't you see how much that matters to me?"

I pause, hesitant to say my next thought, but I press on since I'm already in the deep end.

"And by the way, our first black president is half white."

"Huh?" Confusion puckers her expression. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that his mother was a white woman from Kansas, but who would know that looking at him? He looks like any other black man, and there's a good chance that my children will too. They'll probably have to navigate this world as black people, and you know what that means a lot better than I do."

I pause while my words settle in the air and hopefully change her mind.

"Instead of criticizing me for mistakes I haven't even made yet, waiting for me to fail at raising black children, why not help me get it right?" I ask. "They'll be your family, Jade, just like Grip is. You may not think of me as your family, but they certainly are."

She doesn't get the chance to respond because the door swings open and Grip walks through. Stopping short at the threshold, his eyes do a slow sweep between the two of us, like we've probably been fighting and he's checking for bruises and bald spots.

"Uh, hey," he says with deceptive ease. "All good?"

I bend an inquiring look on Jade, asking her silently if we are indeed all good or not. She sighs, adjusts her cap, and tips her head in a nod.

“We good.” The cousins hold a stare for a few seconds before relinquishing grins simultaneously. Grip walks over and hooks his elbow around Jade’s neck, stealing the cap from her head and playing keep-away for a few laughing seconds.

“I’m hearing good things about you,” he says, his smile lingering and wide.

Jade shrugs and replaces the cap, playfully swatting at his head when he tries to kiss her face.

“Well I’m doing good things.” She laughs at her own cocksure response and huddles deeper into his chest.

“I missed you, girl.” A serious inflection strips some of the humor from his voice.

“I missed you, too.” An impish twinkle leaps in Jade’s eyes. “We gon’ exchange recipes or some shit next? Bristol got you so whapped you talking like a chick now?”

Hearing my name in the context of a joke, of her teasing him, jolts me into the conversation. It’s an olive branch of sorts, the first she’s ever extended to me.

“Don’t blame me.” I lean against the sink, folding my arms over my chest and laughing. “He came to me like that.”

“I came like what?” Grip asks, trying to appear affronted.

*Sweet. Considerate. Kind. Thoughtful.*

All the things I’m thinking, I see reflected in Jade’s eyes, too, as she looks up at her cousin, still tucked into his side.

Yes, we both love him. We have him in common, and maybe one day, it will be enough.



## BRISTOL

WEAK LIGHT FILTERS through a gap in the drawn drapes, illuminating a sliver in our darkened bedroom. Dawn bathes the room in gray. There's no color in the sky yet, no brightness. Hundreds of mornings like this already stretch behind me, with Grip asleep at my back, folded around my body in protection, in possession, and I can only hope for a million like it to come. Some of those mornings, I'll hear banging on our bedroom door. I'll see little legs flying across the room and feel little bodies sliding between us under the covers. Having Grip's children and sharing his life is a privilege that, years ago, I never imagined I could have, and now every morning I wake up envisioning it.

"You awake?" Lingered slumber roughens Grip's voice, deepening the timber.

"Yeah, a little," I slur sleepily.

His chuckling breath skitters over my neck, waking up parts of my body moments ago at rest.

"What's 'a little' awake?"

"I'm awake, but I'm trying not to be."

"Oh." Disappointment coats his whisper. "Go back to sleep then."

I roll over to face him, picking out the planes of his handsome face hidden in the shadows of half-light.

"What is it?" I ask. "You wanna talk?"

"No." The smile I can't see is easily heard, and a warm hand traverses the curve of my hip. "I wanna fuck."

I'm immediately ready, my nipples tightening and my toes curling at the

crude answer. I wrap my hand around the stiff length between his legs.

“Is that a yes?” He feathers kisses over my shoulder, licking at the ink he can’t see but knows by heart is there.

“Whatever you want,” I whisper, my hand setting a steady, tugging pace.

“Ooooooh.” Grip’s breath mists my nipples. “Even anal?”

My hand stops abruptly, apparently striking into him fear that I will abandon the mission.

“Just kidding, just kidding,” he says hastily, laughing over a nipple. He suckles vigorously then languorously, the varied pace driving me wet and crazy. “You’re gonna breastfeed, right?”

I gasp when his teeth lightly graze the sensitive underside of my breast.

“Is that really what you want to talk about right now?” I ask breathlessly. “My breasts as a source of nourishment?”

“I’m down to talk about these breasts twenty-four seven.”

His tongue flicks over my ribs, and he slides lower until all I can make out is the shape of his head under the covers. He licks into and then blows over my belly button, and I feel his breath whispering over my stomach. He’s having a conversation with the baby again, but before I can demand to know what he’s saying, he lavishes open-mouth kisses over the small mound above my pelvis. He scoots even farther down, gently lifting my legs over his shoulders and opening me up, pressing his face into the weeping center of my body.

I hear him draw a long sniff. I stopped being self-conscious about that a long time ago. Now it just turns me on that he loves the way I smell. His big hands cup my ass and he brings me to his mouth, tasting me with lazy laps of his tongue like a big cat and I’m his sugar-rimmed saucer. My hands wander up to my breasts, circling my palms, massaging them the way he does. The darts of pleasure radiating from my nipples in harmony with the unbearable pleasure of my pussy make me drip. The stubble coating his jaw, an erotic scrape, leaves an illicit burn. He moans against me, hastening the pace of my hips. He flattens his tongue on my clit, spreading the wetness all along the slit, dipping lower to lick that tiny puckered hole. His tongue there sets fire to nerve endings that have been cloistered away, sensations I’ve never felt. One thick thumb slides in and I lock up, unsure of what he’s about to do.

“Relax,” he whispers, raining kisses across the lips. “I got you.”

Before I can think more of it, his thumb starts moving in tandem with his lips and teeth feeding on my clit.

“God!” All the air whooshes from my body and I buck, my torso and hips lifting under the covers. He ruthlessly lays an arm over my waist, keeping me in place while his thumb and mouth conspire, driving me to madness, a mindless creature gnawing on her fist, clawing at the sheets, and wailing into the dawn. His thumb works its way into some heretofore undiscovered inner sanctum, and the pleasure is pyrotechnic. It explodes, its wick burning through my belly, up my back, and lighting up the muscles of my thighs. Just like a firework, once ignited, I streak across the sky, bright and flaring, then land motionless . . . still . . . spent.

He handles me tenderly, turning me to my side, enveloping me, chest pressed to my back. He palms the shallow valley between my breasts, sandwiching us together until there’s room for nothing. Only love could slip into a space this small. He lifts my leg and passes his dick between the cheeks of my ass and over my pussy repeatedly, a sensuous prelude that elicits moans from my throat, tight with unshed tears.

“Grip, please.” I’m literally panting, begging, reaching behind me, grasping at his neck and head, desperately reaching for something to anchor me. I don’t care which hole he’s about to fuck, I just need him inside. The space between us throbs with need. My nerves are stretched to gossamer, the anticipation blazing through my patience, and I’m pressing my ass into him. I thrust back in a rolling rhythm meant to tempt him, meant to hurry him, but when he finally slides inside, it’s slow and measured. He’s feeding himself to my body in stiff inches, in short pumps, agitating me.

“Faster.” I twine my fingers with his between my breasts. “Please go fast. I need it fast.”

He doesn’t answer, just maintains the steady pace, and my body clamps around him with each withdrawal, afraid he won’t come back. I’m a seaside fire he’s methodically building, taking his time with. Soon I’m a roaring bonfire, flames tossed by the wind and licking high into the air. My moans and whimpers dance with his grunts and groans in the early morning quiet.

His lips coast over my nape as his other hand cups my small belly.

“Bris, you have no idea,” he whispers into my hair. “The thought of you, the sight of you pregnant . . . I’m hard all the time. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I don’t want to be rough, but—”

“You can be,” I insist, pressing back into him, luring him deeper into my body. I contract my inner muscles around him, a deliberate provocation.

“Shit, Bris.” His forehead pushes into the base of my skull.

I've pulled a lever within him and he turns fast, his tempo feverish. Every time I think he must be almost done, he changes the angle, setting off another constellation of stars behind my eyelids. He's in full heat, full rut, the instincts of his body dictating every thrust and moan. Light creeps through the drapes, and the vibrant colors of sunrise quietly invade our room while sweat runs freely over our skin, adorning his chest and my back, a wet, sensuous slide that our bodies lap up. I've lost count of my orgasms. I'm limp, my muscles and bones loose and liquid even as he still hammers into me.

"Are you okay?" His words are staccato, punctuating between heavy breaths.

"Yes. Baby, don't stop." My words are sloppy in my mouth. I'm pillaged.

"I'm close . . . I'm gonna . . . *dammit*, Bris."

His growl quakes through my back as he releases. I work my hips, struggling to keep up with the heavy, frenetic piston of his body until he stiffens behind me, rigid as pleasure conquers him. Our breaths fill the air in symphony, his and mine. We come down slowly, his possessive grip on my hip easing, our heartbeats pounding in unison, neither of us wanting to stop. Our bodies still rock as the tumult of the waves gradually gentle. By the time our breathing regulates, light fully intrudes, introducing another morning.

"I really did want to talk," he says with a husky laugh, walking his fingers down my arm to caress my fingers.

"Hmmm?" The day is fully lit, but my alarm must have another hour left. Our lovemaking has left me speechless and exhausted before the day has begun.

"I had something to ask you."

"Ask," I mutter, eyes half-closed.

"Are you nervous?" he asks. "About today, I mean? Finding out."

"Are we finding out?" Even half-dead and listless, I manage a wicked smile. Grip wouldn't be able to hold out. He told me from the beginning, even if I didn't want to know if we're having a boy or girl, he would have to.

"Bris, we already talked about—"

"Just kidding," I cut in with a wisp of a laugh. "No, I'm not nervous. Excited, but not nervous."

He rests his hand on my hip, fingers twined with mine, and presses kisses between my shoulder blades.

"Dwell in possibility," he says between kisses.



“Hmmm?” I turn my head the slightest bit, not enough to see him, just enough to hear him better.

“That’s what I whisper to our baby, to your belly. It’s from a poem.”

“Neruda?”

“Dickinson. It’s a poem called *I dwell in Possibility*.” He pauses, giving me space to ask questions that I don’t pose because I know he’ll keep going. “I want our kids to grow up believing in possibilities, not because we have money or the advantages that come with it, but because of *themselves*. They can chase possibilities with nothing stopping them. If my mom hadn’t made me feel that way, like if I could dream it and would work hard, it could be mine, there’s no telling where I’d be today. I don’t want other people’s biases and this country’s broken systems and roadblocks to get in their way.”

Passion, conviction, and cynicism mingle in his voice.

“Hell, it didn’t get in my way, and I had nothing. I want them to be way-makers, Bris, people who explore this world, never thinking it can’t be theirs. That’s what I tell him . . . or her.”

I close my eyes, not to sleep, but to relish this man, this wonderful man who is the epicenter of my world.

“You’re gonna be an amazing father.” I drop my head back to rest in the curve of his neck and shoulder.

“I want to be,” he says. “My dad sucked.”

I don’t hear any pain or bitterness. I’ve never seen holes in Grip that his father should have filled.

“When I was little, I did wonder sometimes why my father didn’t stick around,” he continues, as if answering a question he heard my mind forming. “But my mom didn’t give me time to personalize it. She didn’t keep it a secret or avoid talking about it. She just always made it about him, not a reflection of me. She used to say, ‘Poor thing. That damn fool is missing out on you. Oh well, his loss. More Marlon for me.’”

I lift our hands to my lips, smiling and kissing them.

“She’d say he was gonna look up one day and see a star in the sky that was so far out of his reach, and he’d know that was his son, that could have been his. She assumed from the beginning I’d be something great.”

His takes our hands, still linked, and rests them over the small protrusion of my belly.

“Dwell in possibility,” I whisper, understanding it better now.

Grip’s mouth curves into a smile against my neck as he speaks.

“There was never any doubt.”



## GRIP

I THINK I BROKE HER.

Bristol fell asleep almost as soon as she climbed onto this examination table in the doctor's office, and she hasn't even twitched. Me and my randy ass, hard before the sun was even up, wanting to have sex instead of letting her sleep.

We didn't use the main entrance, but arranged to enter through the back and come in here instead of the waiting room, but we still have to wait like everybody else for Dr. Wagner, Bristol's OB-GYN, to finish with the patient before us. While we wait, Bristol sleeps. I'm mentally lecturing me and my dick on being more considerate in the future when Darla the ultrasound technician comes in.

She's spreading some kind of clear jelly on our little baby bump. Bristol's eyes pop open for a second, but then she drifts right back into deep sleep.

"She's really out, huh?" Darla asks with a smile.

"Yeah." I crook my mouth into a grin. "I've never known her to sleep this much. She usually works around the clock, but can barely get through the day without a nap now."

"Not unusual." Darla rolls the wand over Bristol's belly, eyes trained on the screen. "Most mothers . . ."

Her words and her smile dissolve, her gaze sharpening on the ultrasound.

"Everything okay?" I ask, unease crawling over my skin.

"Um, sure." Darla blinks a few times and shoots me a farce of a smile. She reaches up and presses a button that takes the screen dark. "I'll be right back."

“What’s going on?” I demand, keeping my voice low, not wanting to disturb Bristol, but she wakes anyway.

“What’d I miss?” she asks drowsily, rubbing her eyes and sitting up. Darla gently presses Bristol’s shoulder back until she’s lying down again.

“Nothing yet. I just need to check on one thing. I’ll be right back.” She stands and crosses over to the door. “We’ll wake you when it’s time.”

And she’s gone.

*The hell.*

“Is everything okay?” Bristol is now fully alert, her eyes darting from my face to the door Darla closed behind her. I’m up on my feet and at the door, too. “Where are you going?”

“Piss break.” I glance at her over my shoulder, ordering my face at ease. “I’m gonna drain the snake before Darla gets back.”

She rolls her eyes, but her brows bend with lingering concern.

“You sure everything’s okay?”

“Yeah, babe. I’ll be back.”

I walk swiftly up the hall, stopping when I see Darla and our doctor talking outside what I assume is her office or another examining room.

“Hey,” I say, walking up on them. “What’s going on?”

Two startled faces turn to me.

“Mr. James,” Dr. Wagner says, pulling a guard over her eyes, but not before I see the deep concern. “You should go back to the examination room. I’ll be with you shortly. Sorry for the delay.”

“Don’t bullshit me.” I don’t have time to be polite, to apologize for the shock I put on their faces. “Darla, your face changed when you looked at that ultrasound. Is something wrong with our baby?”

Darla blinks at me stupidly, a swallow moving her throat.

“Mr. James, I don’t—”

“Don’t lie to me.” My voice cracks like a whip into the tight air of the hallway. “If something . . .”

I draw a calming breath, blowing out anxiety and fear.

“If there’s something wrong with our baby, I want to know.”

“I’ll join you and Bristol in a moment,” Dr. Wagner says evenly. “I’ll talk to you together.”

She doesn’t deny that there’s a problem, and that fact cuts through my protests like a shard of glass.

“Wait . . . I . . . okay. If we could just . . .” The possibility of something

being wrong with our child has me stumbling. “If you could just tell me first.”

“Mr. James.” Dr. Wagner’s reservations come to life on her face. “I’d prefer to discuss everything with you and your wife together.”

I want to be the first line of defense for Bris. I’ve always been protective of her, but the shit that went down with Parker ramped up my need to shield her from danger, from pain. Anything wrong with our baby is pain like I can’t imagine. A premonition of it skims across my nerves. It’s times like these I hate those extra senses Ma says growing up street gives us, the ones that dig between Dr. Wagner’s words, the things she says, into all the things she doesn’t.

“I’ll be there shortly,” she says, finality in her voice. “Thank you, Mr. James.”

Darla’s biting her lip, anxiety in the eyes she slides between Dr. Wagner and me. If I had one minute alone with Darla, I’d get it out of her, but with Dr. Wagner standing guard over whatever secret they’re keeping, I’m getting nothing. Resigned, I head back to the examination room. I open the door tentatively, not sure how I’ll handle Bristol’s questions on the other side.

But there aren’t questions—she’s fallen asleep again. Between the sleep her pregnancy demands and me interrupting her sleep this morning, she’s exhausted. Her head droops to the side, her long lashes shadowing her cheeks. Her hand rests over the small bump, even in sleep, protecting our baby. I slide the chair beside the exam table and dip my head to kiss the baby through Bris’s clothes. I do what I’ve been doing ever since we found out, and the ritual gives me some comfort. These words about what’s possible ease my mind as I wait to hear what left Dr. Wagner’s eyes so grave.

“Dwell in possibility, baby.”



## BRISTOL

SOMETHING'S WRONG.

If Grip's abrupt departure and lame excuse didn't give it away, Dr. Wagner's expression does, even though she tries to hide it beneath a mask of professionalism when she enters the room without the ultrasound technician. She goes through the same process Darla did, running the wand over my belly and studying the screen. She turns the ultrasound away to look at it, her mouth firming into a grim line.

She indicates that I can leave the examination table and take a seat beside Grip.

"Okay. What's going on?" Grip asks. "We'd like to find out the sex of our baby. Is there a problem?"

A brochure of some kind rests face down in Dr. Wagner's lap. Anxiety ratchets up, plucking at my nerves. I just want her to blurt it out if there's a problem. This delay only stirs fear inside of me.

"When Darla looked at the ultrasound," Dr. Wagner finally says, "she noticed something about the fetus."

"What?" Grip demands. "What did she notice?"

"Based on what we see," Dr. Wagner says, her voice careful, like she's measuring the words out in a recipe that has to be exact, precise portions of brutal honesty and compassion. "We suspect anencephaly."

Should that mean something to me? For all I know, that could be anything from a rash to . . . I can't play that all the way out. This baby isn't even born and I haven't seen the 3D ultrasound, but I've felt flutters under my heart. My shape is changing and my body is working overtime to grow



this baby. Anything that endangers my baby's life could cleave me into un-mendable pieces.

"Ance-what?" Grip's eyes don't leave Dr. Wagner's face, but his hand bridges the small space between us until our fingers twist into a knot of solidarity. "What is that? How do we fix it?"

"An-en-sef-uh-lee," Dr. Wagner sounds out slowly. Her face still wears that impassive mask, but her hands clutch the brochure like she's steeling herself to say what needs to be said. "And you don't . . . well, you don't fix it. Anencephaly is a terminal diagnosis. I'm so sorry."

The word "terminal" multiplies, flying around my brain over and over until my mind is a hive of bees swarming, stinging. I struggle to pluck one lucid thought from the buzzing in my head.

"But . . . but how can you know?" My voice emerges from its hiding place high and thin. "You just look at the screen and hand down a terminal diagnosis? That can't be right. There have to be tests or—"

"Yes, we'll run an amniocentesis as a . . ." Discomfort crinkles Dr. Wagner's face. "As a formality, but I'm certain, Bristol. It's apparent even in the ultrasound."

I can't even cry. My arms clasp my little belly protectively and my hands shake. My extremities have frozen like I'm in shock. How could I not be in shock when she just ripped the rug, the floor—the *earth* from under my feet? I don't have a leg to stand on.

"What exactly is this condition?" Grip's voice doesn't sound like it belongs to him. He has one of those voices, so warm it draws you in, but right now, there's distance, distance and desperation. "You said it's terminal, but we don't know anything about it yet."

"Yes, of course." Dr. Wagner allows sympathy into her eyes. "Anencephaly is a serious birth defect in which a baby is born without parts of the brain and skull. Normally, as the neural tube forms and closes, it helps form the baby's brain, skull, spinal cord, and backbone. Anencephaly occurs if the upper part of the neural tube does not close all the way, thus leaving parts of the brain permanently unformed."

The compassion deepens in Dr. Wagner eyes and she licks her lips, presses them together before continuing.

"This often results in a fetus being born without the front part of the brain, the forebrain, and the thinking and coordinating part of the brain, the cerebrum. The remaining parts of the brain are often not covered by bone or

skin.”

“Not covered by skin and bone?” The words forcibly eject from my mouth. “What does that mean?”

“It’s why we can tell from the ultrasound that the fetus has anencephaly. Let me show you,” Dr. Wagner says, turning the screen around for us to see. “Here, we can see that the top of the head and the brain are . . . missing, and there is only a thin membrane covering that portion, no skull or scalp.”

A moan slices into her explanation, and I’m startled to realize it came from me. I cover my mouth, but I can’t cover my heart. I can’t silence the scream ricocheting in the chambers of my soul. It’s piercing. It’s painful.

“Many are stillborn.” Dr. Wagner presses on despite flicking a concerned look my way. “Those who are delivered as live births will live minutes or hours, in rare cases, a few days.”

“No,” I mutter under my breath. “This can’t be right. A test—there has to be a test, a second opinion.”

“Yeah,” Grip pipes in. “A real test, not just a blurry picture telling us our baby *might* have this condition.”

“Like I said, we’ll perform the amniocentesis, certainly,” Dr. Wagner agrees.

Her pause drops heavily into the waiting quiet.

“I know this is a lot to take in,” Dr. Wagner says. “But we’ll need to discuss your options.”

“We have options?” I ask, a harsh laugh cutting the inside of my jaw.

“Yes, options.” Dr. Wagner looks from Grip to me and back again. “Decisions.”

The word “decisions” sends a chill up my spine. *Oh, God, no.* She can’t seriously be asking me to do that.

“More than ninety percent of parents with this diagnosis terminate the pregnancy,” Dr. Wagner says quietly. “I know that’s hard to process, but the fetus—”

“Stop saying fetus,” Grip snaps. “It’s our baby. Call it our baby.”

Dr. Wagner nods, meeting the frustration and naked pain in Grip’s eyes head on.

“I understand,” she says, her tone simultaneously soft and firm. “But you will have to deal with these decisions sooner rather than later. We are . . . well, certain options are time-sensitive.”

My fingers are numb. Tears swim in my eyes, suspended but refusing to

fall, frozen there by the chill creeping into my bones and through every cell of my body.

“We’ll take the amniotic fluid today to test,” Dr. Wagner says briskly, standing. “And discuss . . . next steps once we have those results. It typically takes about ten days for NTDs, neural tube defects.”

She’s moving on, and I’m still dazed, shaken, shocked.

“Is the . . .” The word “fetus” stings the tip of my tongue. “Our baby, what is it?”

Dr. Wagner frowns, shaking her head.

“Until you decide how you want to move forward,” she says, “I think knowing the gender will only make it more difficult.”

“Let me get this straight.” Grip tilts his head and runs his tongue over his teeth in that way that means he’s nearing the end of his tether. “You give us a death sentence for our child—”

“Mr. James—”

“No, I get it,” he cuts in. “It’s not your fault. You’re just doing your job, but if you think us knowing whether it’s a girl or a boy is going to make this decision any harder, you’re wrong.”

“It . . . humanizes the decision in a way that only complicates it for the parents.”

“You think the semantics of this situation complicate our decision?” I ask hoarsely. “They don’t. What complicates our decision is that we love this baby as if he or she is already here, already ours. What complicates it is the roomful of nursery furniture we’ve bought, every piece chosen with . . .”

My voice breaks, tears dampening my words.

“With love,” I resume. “What complicates it is that I feel flutters in my stomach, and I’ve been waiting any day now for them to be kicks. This is our *baby*, and it’s been the center of our world for months, and now you say I may have to end its life or carry it to term and then watch it die in my arms. Please. Just tell us.”

I raise my eyes to her, and a tiny portion of my torture is reflected in her stare. She nods, resignation on her face when she says, “It’s a girl.”

Grip’s sharply drawn breath matches mine, and my eyes, my hands, my heart—every part of me seeks any part of him I can get to. With our fingers tangled together in my lap, we just nod, both of us too cut up to speak, the moment so raw we hemorrhage in the silence.

In a daze, I submit to the needle slowly drawing fluid from my belly. I

don't even hear the things Dr. Wagner and her staff say from then on. Agony unimaginable rises over my head, disbelief muffling all the words around me, muting my responses. My lungs constrict painfully as I go under over and over, drowning but unable to die.

And I want to die. I think I could die without complaint if it meant avoiding these "decisions," accepting one of these impossible options, if it meant not breathing and living for the next four months growing this child only to watch it die before it's ever even lived, a manifestation of our malformed hopes.

When we get to the car, Grip and I just sit there for a moment, steeping in hot water, boiling alive in our suffering.

"Fuck," Grip finally mutters. I glance at him from the passenger seat, unable to even curse. I *am* a curse. I *feel* cursed—how can I not with the things the doctor said?

"Fuck," Grip repeats, slamming his hand on the steering wheel again and again and again. I flinch at the percussion of his fist into the unyielding leather and plastic, flinch every time he strikes it.

"It can't be . . . we can't . . ." He stops abruptly, and one tear streaks down his handsome face, the face I dreamt would stare back at me in a little boy or a little girl.

"It's a girl," I whisper.

Agony ripples between us where our fingers intertwine, and Grip brings our hands to his lips.

"We can't give up yet, Bris. There's still the test. Maybe she's mistaken. Anything's possible," he says, his mouth settling into that firm line I've seen every time he's faced and conquered a challenge.

But this isn't a tough industry, a ladder to climb. It's not bias based on the color of his skin. If the tests confirm what Dr. Wagner suspects, this is insurmountable. There's no climbing out of it or working our way around the impossible choices we'll have to make.

I can't help but think of how this day began, with the heat of our lovemaking, with our dreams and speculations about this baby whispered as dawn broke. We were sure it would be just as we wanted, that anything was possible.

*Dwell in possibility.*

I can't think of what's possible as I replay the conversation with Dr. Wagner like a horror movie I can't un-watch, the word "terminal" clanging

like a bell over and over in my head.

Possible? Not when all that is weighing on me, waiting for me, is death.

Bitterness pools in my heart, a fast-filling well of poison choking me. I don't speak for the rest of the ride home. I think about how certain Dr. Wagner seemed, how she called the test Grip is pinning so much on a formality. I stew in my fear and anger and frustration until it runs over, leaving little room for hope.



## GRIP

THE NURSERY IS DOUSED in shadows. The only light comes from Bristol's phone, illuminating a small sphere in the dark, showing her high cheekbones, stark in the diminished light, and the full curve of her mouth pulled thin with tension. She's sitting on the floor, her dark brows contorting into a frown as she scrolls down the screen with her index finger.

The last ten days of waiting for the test results have been harder than anything I've ever experienced, but not harder than what lies ahead.

Our baby will die.

Whether because we terminate the pregnancy or decide to let it run its course, her death is an inevitability for which I have no idea how to prepare. I can't, and I have no idea how to help Bristol because I can't help myself. I thought I could protect her from anything, from anyone. I called myself her first line of defense but I'm blindsided, never suspecting that the enemy—death—had already breached our gates.

We always talk about everything, Bristol and I, but a heavy silence hung over us on the way home, like a rain cloud poised to pour. We were silent as if our words would trigger the storm, and the deliberate, unnatural quiet followed us across our threshold. Maybe by unspoken mutual agreement, we decided it isn't real until we talk about it, until we weigh our shitty options and are forced to make impossible choices.

"Couldn't sleep?" I ask from the door, my voice scratchy from lack of use. I've barely spoken since we left the doctor's office.

At my question, Bristol's head jerks up, her attention wrested from the phone. With a click of her finger, she turns it off, losing the light and

plunging the room into darkness. The overhead light would show too much, would be too bright. I step carefully in the general direction of the lamp on a table in the corner. I fumble under the shade until I find the little button that will show me Bristol's face, but not much else. Her thoughts will remain a mystery until she's ready to talk, and as much as I don't want to, as much as I've avoided it for the last few hours, we have to talk.

The soft, lambent light shows me the broken heart in her eyes, killing me at a glance. They aren't teary or red-rimmed or puffy. There are no telltale signs of distress, but that secret joy that lit her eyes to precious-metal silver for the last few months has been snuffed out. They're dulled to pewter, an alloy of pain and grief, a mixture of mourning.

I take a tentative step, only to freeze when I spot the things flanking her on the floor. To her right sits a tub of her favorite Cookie Dough ice cream. The lid is off, and a large serving spoon spears the creamy, untouched surface. To her left is a half-full bottle of her favorite liquor, vodka. No glass, so I assume she'll be taking it to the head, if she hasn't already. My heart thuds behind my ribs because that must be a sign. Bristol hasn't touched a drop of alcohol since she found out she was pregnant. She would never endanger our baby, unless the point is moot, unless she has already decided something I thought we would decide together. My heart painfully draws its own conclusions, even though I can't make myself ask her the question.

*What do you want to do?*

Each word of the unspoken inquiry is like a drop of acid burning through my tongue. I can't ask. I haven't even gotten up the nerve to ask myself. I poured my pain and anger and frustration out on the only place that ever seems to offer me any relief, besides Bristol—on paper. I wrote an embittered manifesto that no one will ever read, but I haven't asked myself what I *want*. I'm afraid I already know, and if Bristol wants something different, that's what we'll do.

And it will kill me.

It's Bristol's body. *She* would have to carry and nurture this unspeakable tragedy to its inevitable end, not me. I know I have a voice in this, but I can't ask that of her. I've been afraid all afternoon to ask myself if I even want to. There are no right answers. Everything is wrong. We have door number one and door number two, and they both lead to hell, one just faster than the other.

I settle beside her on the floor, mirroring her posture—knees pulled to the



chest, back to the wall. The half-empty bottle of vodka draws a line of libation between us. She blinks, still not meeting my eyes, tracing patterns on the darkened screen of her phone before placing it carefully on the floor.

“Your ice cream is melting.”

“Yeah.” Her voice scrapes into the quiet, giving me nothing. “I don’t need it anyway.”

She always says that before she eats half the pint.

“And the vodka?” I keep my voice even, free of condemnation.

“That I need.” She flicks a side glance to me, searching my face for judgment, I assume. “I need a drink, and I’ve been sitting here wondering if it matters anymore if I have one.”

“Did you have it? The drink, I mean?”

I’m asking more than this. She knows it, and her slim shoulders stiffen.

“Not yet.” She shakes her head, bites her lip. “Does it matter if I do?”

I’m still not ready.

“What were you looking at on your phone?” I dodge her question, avoid my answer.

Her eyes are windows with bars. Showing me just slices of what she’s feeling before she tucks it away behind her lowered lashes. One shoulder lifts and falls. I grab her phone from the floor beneath the arch of her knees and press the home button, bringing up the last thing she saw.

“Grip, don’t look—”

“Shit.” The strangled curse garrotes my throat. I blink over and over, but the images don’t disappear. Stubbornly, they barely blur as the first tears sting my eyes. It’s a page of horrors: bulging eyeballs straining from babies’ faces, rounded backs and the exposed gray matter coils of brains, heads half gone, tiny bodies twisted into a mangle of flesh and bone.

“This is how she’ll be?”

They aren’t my words. It’s not my question, but it takes over and barges past my lips. It uses my voice. It possesses me, this demon question I hope she won’t answer.

“Maybe.” Bristol swallows audibly, her mouth unsteady before she disciplines it into a straight line. “Probably.”

There is nothing I’ve ever experienced that prepares me for these images, for the possibility that this will be my daughter and then she will die. Looking at these pictures, I can’t help but ask if death would be a mercy. Am I merciful? Am I selfish? Shallow? Weak? These are just words, assigning no

value to the emotions rioting inside of me. I am under siege. Terror, rage, and hurt are a fevered mob, torches lit and setting my heart on fire. It's not fair. All my life I've been tuned in to injustices, to inequities, but at this moment, they all fade to nothing. They are dust compared to this. This . . . *this* is not fair, that a baby, not even fully formed, has a death sentence waiting for her, that this world is already tuning its instruments for a dirge, a requiem for her life before it begins.

This is injustice.

"What do you want?" Bristol finally asks.

And there it is. She's braver than I am. She asked me the question I came to ask her but haven't been able to. It's the same question she asked me before I moved to New York, when I wanted her with me but didn't want to pressure her. I find myself once again possessing power I don't want to use.

"Bris, you have to decide that."

"This is just as much your baby as it is mine." Her voice is a thin line that wavers then draws taut. "Don't abdicate this to me. Don't do that."

"I'm not abdicating."

"We have to decide together."

"We will. I just . . . you heard what Dr. Wagner said."

She said Bristol's body will keep preparing for what's supposed to happen. It doesn't know to stop. Her pelvic bones will still stretch. Her ankles will still swell. Her milk will come in. Her body will ready itself for a child whose death is a foregone conclusion. No matter what course of action we choose, she won't live. If she does come into the world, these pictures on Bristol's phone, heavy in my hand, are her short-lived destiny.

"It's your body, Bris." I grit my teeth, but the words escape and I prepare myself for whatever she decides. "I want you to . . ."

The words hang in my throat, choked and unsaid.

"What do you want to do, Grip?" She moves quickly, settling on my lap, facing me with her knees on either side of my legs. I stare down at the little mound of baby taking up the small space between us.

*Dwell in possibility.*

It's a practical joke now.

"What do you want?" Bristol dips her head to catch my eyes in the weak light.

"Dr. Wagner—"

"Is not my husband." Bristol's words cut over mine. "Tell me what you

want.”

“This decision—”

“Is ours, not just mine.” She leans forward until our foreheads press together, the contact reminding me of who we were before this thing took over our lives, reminding me of our honesty, our intimacy that transcended flesh.

“Please tell me, Grip,” she whispers, her cool breath fanning over my lips like a kiss, begging for entry.

“I want her.”

The words fly from my mouth like arrows, aiming for Bristol’s heart. If she wants to know what I’m feeling, I’ll tell her and hope that she feels it, too.

“I want to meet her and hold her.” Tears flood my throat and then spill hot down my cheeks. “I don’t give a damn if she’s here three minutes, three hours, three days. I want her to know that as long as she is in this world, her parents love her unconditionally, that we loved her so much, we *had* to have her . . . even if we knew it couldn’t last, even though we knew it would kill us to lose her, we had to have her.”

I immediately regret saying it. I understand the power Bristol has over me, that what she wants, I want to give her, and I hold that same power over her. If she goes through with this because of what I just said, and it’s too much . . .

“Yes.” For the first time, Bristol meets my eyes squarely. A new fire has burned away the haze. They’re lit again, lit with determination and the fierce love few are capable of. “I want that, too.”

“Are you sure, Bris?” My question is a raggedy-roped bridge between us. One wrong step and it could fall—we could fall.

“I’m sure.” She shifts until she’s no longer straddling me, and presses her shoulder into my chest. Her head tucks under my chin. “I can’t terminate, Grip. I wouldn’t judge another woman who did—I’ve always been pro-choice, you know that.”

She looks up, her lashes damp, her lips stung and swollen from her teeth. God, she’s breaking my heart. I thought Dr. Wagner’s diagnosis drove a stake through me, but seeing Bristol suffer through this is a level of agony I can’t even put into words.

“But this *is* my choice,” she says, eyes locked with mine, searching mine. “This is our baby, and I want to have her.”

I can't resist rubbing the subtle roundness of her belly, twin shafts of pain and joy coursing through me at the contact. *Our little girl*. If we do this, every moment of joy will be shadowed by pending pain. Can we do that? Endure that?

"Bris, this isn't something you can un-decide later." I push unruly tendrils of her hair back, needing to see her face clearly. The eyes that stare back at me are clearer than I've seen them since Dr. Wagner first told us what she suspected. Bristol's backbone is reinforced with steel, and I see evidence of it in her eyes: a steely determination, a certainty I can't argue with.

"I understand what this means," she says, closing her eyes briefly. "That once she's born, there'll be more pain than we can fully comprehend right now. I'm going into this with my eyes wide open."

Stretching to grab her phone from the floor, she opens a new browser window, quickly bypassing the photos that disturbed me when I first came in.

"Tell me again what you used to whisper to her," Bristol says.

The words "used to" grab me by the throat. Ever since we found out Bristol was pregnant, I talked to our baby every day, several times a day, every time I got the chance. For the last ten days, I haven't said a word to the baby. It's like I was preparing myself for the fact that she was already gone, or that she would never come. Shame spears me.

"Um, I used to say . . ." I lick my lips. "I tell her to dwell in possibility."

"What's possible, Grip?" Bristol asks. "I mean, we know what won't happen."

The fierce light that has entered Bristol's eyes dims for a moment.

"She won't live a long life," she says softly. "She may not even live at all outside of my body. We know what isn't possible, but what is?"

"I don't know, Bris," I confess. Our options seem narrow. Our choices are crap. I'm the guy who defied every odd to achieve the things I have, to build the life I have, but I've finally met a mountain I can't conquer. "What's possible?"

"Life," she whispers. "Maybe not for our little girl, but for someone else's. For someone else, she could save a life. She could do a lot of good whether she's here for a moment or for . . ."

Bristol looks down at the phone in her hand and shows me the screen.

It's a website dedicated to neonatal organ donation. I read through the information, shocked to see the organization was founded by parents who lost their baby to anencephaly.

“This is possibility.” Bristol cups my jaw and lays her head against my face. Her damp lashes blink on my cheek. “I can’t terminate this pregnancy. I can’t make myself do it, and I need to feel that it’s not in vain.”

I get it. I feel the same way, and this route feels like the only thing close to possibility in this scenario, but it will carry a heavy price, one we can’t even begin to calculate.

I hope we don’t regret it.



## BRISTOL

I'VE LIVED A PRETTY privileged life.

I know that. I get it.

Beyond the top-percenter privilege my family's wealth afforded, there's that layer of privilege that's almost become a buzzword: white privilege.

Confession.

Honestly, I used to get defensive about this somewhere inside. I didn't ask to be born white, or for the intrinsic advantages that come with it living in this country. Hell, at first I didn't want to believe it was real. It's much easier to believe you *don't* have these immense advantages through accident of birth than to figure out how you can balance the scales.

Grip and I managed to get beyond labels like "privilege" or "minority" or even black and white. Beneath the labels, we found who the other person really is and how they'll love you in good times and bad. Unconditional love, by definition, doesn't give a damn about those labels.

Life is the grand equalizer. It has a way of stripping those privileges, rendering them inconsequential. Black, white, rich, poor—when it rains, we all get wet. When it rains, it pours, and sometimes, there is no shelter. I'm in the storm of my life, or rather a storm is in me, brewing in me, growing in me . . . a storm of heartache and tragedy for which there is no privilege, no escape. Not my family's money. Not my husband's fame. Not my expensive education or my ambition. The hardest things in life have no escape, no workaround. There is no *around*, only *through*. We trudge *through* those storms. They toss us to and fro. They drench us and change us and strip us of the protection we thought privilege allowed, only to find in the end that we

all bleed. We all suffer. We all die.

*God, I'm morbid.*

And philosophical.

In short, I'm a bore.

But so is this guy droning on for the last forty-five minutes. It makes me appreciate how gifted an orator Dr. Hammond is to make prisons and criminal justice reform sound fascinating, because this guy doesn't.

Dr. Hammond leans over to whisper in my ear, "Glad I'm not the only one struggling."

I snap my head around to meet the amusement in his eyes with a chagrined smile.

"Was I that obvious?" I whisper back. "I thought I looked engaged."

"If that's engaged," he says with a grin, "I'd hate to see checked out."

I pretend to wince.

"I need to work on my fakery. I'm not very good at phony, never have been."

Grip leans over to see me and Dr. Hammond, who sits to my right.

"What the hell are you two talking about?" he asks. "You *do* realize this banquet is to honor *us*, right, Iz?"

"Do you feel honored?" His dark brows crest over the rims of his glasses. "If you honor me by holding me hostage to a bad speech for an hour and serving me rubber chicken, I'll pass."

A laugh, along with a little water, snorts through my nose. Grip does his damndest to chastise me with a look, but he can't hold back his smile. It's brighter than I've seen in weeks. We needed this—to get out of LA, away from home. We can't escape the pain. I carry that with me. Even the little joys, like feeling the first kick, will be overshadowed by the inevitable outcome, but something about packing a bag and flying out here to DC lightened things for us some.

Grip and Dr. Hammond are being honored for their work with community bail funds. I wasn't going to come, but I haven't seen Dr. Hammond—he keeps telling me to call him Iz, but I'm not quite there yet—in such a long time, only a few times since the wedding. He and Grip haven't really revisited his views on interracial relationships, but it's obvious that his perspective has evolved, at least as far as Grip and I are concerned.

An hour later, the three of us are in the hotel suite Grip and I booked. Iz does the honors behind the bar because apparently he put himself through



college bartending. He makes a Godfather for him and a vodka martini for Grip. Meanwhile, I'm sipping yet another water.

I miss liquor. I mean, liquor has been good to me in hard times.

*Hello, vodka, my old friend.*

I take a deep inhale from the bottle behind the bar, and Grip looks at me like *Don't even think about it.*

"Just sniffing." I laugh and reluctantly replace the bottle.

"Since you can't drink, did you at least make Grip give up weed?" Iz asks from the leather couch in the suite's sitting room.

"I volunteered, thank you very much." Grip settles onto the couch facing Iz with his drink in hand. "No easy task in my line of work where you get high walking into every studio."

"Well Bris has the hardest part." Iz offers a sympathetic smile. "And then even after delivery you still can't drink for a while. I assume you'll breastfeed? Hope it's not awkward, but I'm in the daddy club. Ain't no going back after being in the delivery room."

He chuckles, not noticing that my smile and Grip's have slowly faded to ash, burned by reality crashing back in on us. I won't breastfeed. My breasts are the biggest they've ever been, and my milk will come in . . . then dry up. It will come and go, just like this baby.

"I'm gonna . . . um . . ." I stand, adjusting the neckline and the hem of the dress I wore to the banquet, keeping my hands busy while my heart recovers. "I'll be back. Just need to . . ."

I can't. I speed walk faster than a woman six months pregnant probably should, going back to the bedroom and flopping onto the bed, spread out like a starfish on the luxurious comforter. I stare up at the ceiling, hot tears flowing freely from my eyes and puddling in my ears. The sadness hovers over me. I've never lived with a constant promise of heartbreak, and many days, it's too much. I often slip away to indulge in something my mother-in-law encouraged me to do when she first heard the news about the baby's fate.

I count my blessings.

It is a well-documented fact that I'm not religious—never have been, and probably never will be, but I understand why some turn to it. I see why it is such a shaping force in Kai's life. Believing there is something bigger than you must be comforting when you feel small, dwarfed by circumstances out of your control.

Blessing number one: Grip

Blessing number two: Grip.

*He's so good, he counts twice.*

Blessing number three: friends and family who love me. Rhyson and Kai and Amir and Shon and Ms. James and even my parents—all have been a source of comfort for us. My mother didn't understand my decision and urged me to terminate. At first I thought it was the automatic feminist response, that she assumed I was keeping the baby for reasons that I'm not. Pro-choice is just that: I get to choose. It's my body, which I've chosen to share with Grip, and we get to choose. Yes, the path we're on is painful. To some, unnecessarily painful, but it's what we've decided to do with this body. We have our reasons, and they're just that: ours. I kept wondering how my mother could be so cold about her own granddaughter. Of course, it took Grip pointing out my mother's fear for me to understand, noting that her concern for me far outweighed her feelings for this baby. She sees how hard it will be and doesn't want me to go through what's ahead.

"You and me, both, Mother," I mutter.

The ceiling hasn't changed, but my perspective has . . . some, enough to gather my emotions and go back out. I don't get to see Dr. Hammond much, and I don't want to spend the rest of the night in here brooding.

"I'm back." I settle beside Grip, huddling under his shoulder and taking in his scent. When neither of them responds, I feel the heaviness weighing the air and note their somber faces. I know what they discussed while I was gone.

"You told him?" I ask Grip, vulnerability softening my voice.

We don't tell everyone. It's bad enough this shit cloud hangs over the next three months and dampens so many moments that should be reasons to celebrate. We don't want to field everyone's awkward questions and responses the whole time, and we also don't trust everyone to understand.

"Yeah." Grip scatters a few kisses along my hairline and squeezes my shoulder.

"I'm sorry this happened to you guys." Iz grimaces. "Dammit, that came out wrong. I can't believe I'm one of those awkward people who says stupid things at a time like this."

"It's okay," I say. "We'll be okay."

I muster a smile to make him feel more at ease, something I find myself doing all the time lately once people know. I didn't realize how much time and energy you expend making others feel better about how bad things are for you. Things are heavy enough without the burden of their discomfort and

pity.

“I know you will. The two of you . . . you guys have something most people never find. My ex and I certainly didn’t have it.” Iz drops his eyes to his drink, rolling the tumbler between his palms before looking back up to split a glance between us. “I’ve never apologized for my views before you married, for the things I thought.”

A gruff laugh struggles past his lips. “The things I *said* to you, Grip.”

He shakes his head, self-derision twisting his expression.

“I thought I knew. I . . . assumed, I guess, assumed things about you, Bristol. You, too, Grip. You were right. I was no better than the people we call bigots, and I’m sorry. No one could look at the two of you and think your love is based on anything but . . . each other.”

It’s quiet for a moment. In that slice of silent space, I add Iz to my blessings column. That someone so set against us, after seeing us and knowing us, had a change of heart—that’s a little bit of a miracle, and right now, I’ll take every miracle I can get.

“Apology accepted.” Grip takes a sip of his drink. “I just have one question.”

“Sure. Go for it.” A degree of wariness enters Iz’s eyes, like Grip might challenge him on his past beliefs and the way he insulted us before, even if he didn’t think of it that way.

“Well now that you believe a black man could legit fall for a woman who isn’t black,” Grip says, “you gonna break Callie off or what?”

Iz’s eyes stretch wide and then crinkle at the corners with his smile and the laugh that booms from his throat.

“Motherfucker!” He slams his drink down on the glass table. “Technically, Callie is a woman of color, and what I tell you about sticking your nose in my bedroom?”

“As little action as you get, brother,” Grip says, a crooked smile on his full lips, “ain’t nothing to see in there.”

I sip my water and laugh while they rib each other mercilessly for the next hour, until sleep takes me hostage, like it always seems to these days. I don’t even stir until Grip removes my dress and panties. Even walking through this difficult time, Grip manages to make me feel sexy, wanted. He loves my body pregnant, and hides my nightgowns. He is my brightest spot, my greatest blessing. Even now he leans on one elbow, hovering over me protectively, searching my face for sadness, for distress, for anything he can

fix in a sea of things he cannot.

“Sorry I fell asleep.” I grab his wrist to look at the crappy watch I won for him years ago. “It’s late. What time does our flight—”

“I delayed it.” He brushes my unruly hair, which started the night in a neat twist, out of my face. “I want you to sleep in. You need rest.”

He disappears under the covers, and I feel his breath, his lips whispering to our daughter. I’ve never asked if he still whispers to her of hope, of possibility. I have no idea how he can when most days I can’t find enough hope for me, much less anyone else.

And then it happens.

A kick. From inside my belly, a jolt, a sign of life.

Grip and I gasp together, a set of startled breaths and broken hearts finding a moment of joy to share. He pulls the comforter back to show the rising curve of my stomach, clearly seen even in the dim light.

“Did you feel that?” His voice is hushed with awe dipped in sorrow.

“Yeah.” I swallow the tears I’m tired of shedding. I don’t want them falling on this moment. I want this one thing we have that couples always want to be free of the shadow of what’s to come.

“It’s incredible.” Grip’s smile, wide and beautiful like a stretch of morning sky, takes my breath. “You’re incredible.”

He bends his head, ghosting his lips over my nose, my eyes, my lips.

“Thank you, Bristol.” His voice comes rougher with emotion.

“Thank me for what?” I caress the warm skin of his neck, the sleek slope of his shoulders, the strength of his arms.

“For carrying our child. I know men say that all the time to their wives, but this . . .” He swallows, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. “God, if it’s too much for you, Bris, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“No.” I shake my head, overcome that he feels guilty, responsible for where we are, between this rock and impossible place. “Grip, no. I wanted this. I mean, of course, not *this*, not this way, but presented with our choices, this is what I choose. It’s right for us. Baby, please don’t . . .”

When words fail me, I lift my head to kiss him, opening up just enough to sample his love, to savor his concern. I want him to know we’re in this together of my volition. He returns the kiss with a begging passion that flares into the solace we find only in each other—not the storm we’re walking through, but the one we make with our love. It’s an extravagant intimacy reserved for this bed and these bodies, and like I have many nights before, I

fall asleep in his arms with the taste of him on my lips. It's enough.  
In the eye of the storm, it's a blessing.



## GRIP

“SURPRISE!”

Bristol wide-eyes the cluster of women at our front door even as a smile overtakes her face. At eight months pregnant, she’s bigger than I’ve ever seen her.

And more beautiful.

This pregnancy is unusual, atypical in most ways, but that legendary glow women supposedly have—Bristol has it in spades. I beat her to the door when the knock came because I knew who was on the other side. Kai came to me weeks ago about a shower for Bristol—not a traditional shower, obviously, with gifts for the baby and all the items we would need if this was happening as it should. Kai wanted to do something for Bristol to express the support from the women in her life, to show that they love her and want to walk with her through the hard part lies ahead.

I hug each of them as they file in. There’s Jimmi and Kai, Shon and Charm, who flew in from New York, and my mom and Jade.

“Jade?” I don’t try to hide my surprise. “Wow. I mean, it’s good to see you.”

Things have improved between us and thawed some between Jade and Bristol, but she’s not exactly a fixture in our lives. I told her about the diagnosis soon after we found out, but we haven’t talked much about it. I don’t think she knew what to say. Most people don’t.

“I wasn’t gonna miss this girly shit.” She adjusts her Raiders cap and scoffs. “You know they actually doing pedicures and facials up in here?”

“Yeah, well I heard girls like that kind of thing.” I shrug carelessly. “I’m

watching the game in the other room if you need to get outta dodge.”

“I’ll be in there by halftime.” Jade’s smile disappears and her eyes sober. “How you holding up?”

“We’re all right.” I look over at Bristol, surrounded by laughing women and nail polish and Cards Against Humanity and overpriced cupcakes. “I hope it’s not too much for her.”

I haven’t said that aloud to hardly anyone, but Jade’s not just anyone. We bonded around the hardest times of our childhood. The day that cop violated her on the playground. The day one of her brothers killed the other in my front yard. We stood witness to each other’s worst moments; we share the intimacy of tragedy. Our relationship has always been a pendulum that swings from reticent to confessional.

“She’ll be cool. You were right—that girl’s ride or die. She’s a fighter.” Jade tips her head back to study my face. “It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Me?” I touch my chest and shake my head. “I’ll be fine. I mean, it’s gonna hurt to the white meat, but I’ll hold as long as she’s okay. If this breaks Bristol . . .”

My words disintegrate. Our love is a tensile thread, stretched beyond even the bounds I thought possible. It connects us in a way that may be invisible, but is more real to me than anything I can touch or taste. I told her once that if I break her heart, I break mine, and it’s true. Our hearts are wrapped around one another, joined. I honestly believe I can survive anything if Bristol is by my side. It’s the closest thing to faith I have, and I cling to it. I cling to her. She thinks I’m the one holding us up, but my strength is tangled in her. If I lost Bris . . . not physically, but what we have, it has to stay intact. It’s my cornerstone, and from what I’ve read, the hardest thing for a couple to survive is losing a child.

Kai walks up and says a few words to Jade before my cousin drifts off. Not sure how long she’ll be able to stay in here with the estrogen as thick as it is.

“Thanks for letting us do this, Grip.” Sadness shadows Kai’s eyes, but a smile rests obstinately on her lips. “We’re with you guys. I know this is unimaginably hard, but you’re not alone.”

“Thanks for letting me stay,” I say. “For understanding.”

This whole thing is sweet, and I’m glad Kai wanted to do it, but it, like everything in this pregnancy, has a bitter side, and I want to be close if things take a turn and Bristol needs me.



“Well you can stay, but you did agree to be out of sight, so . . .” She waves a slim hand toward the living room and the mammoth flat-screen television waiting for me. “Off you go.”

“I’m going,” I fake grumble. All this nail polish and tarts and shit is actually starting to make me itch.

On my way out, I stop to kiss Bristol’s cheek.

“You knew about this.” She narrows her eyes, but a smile breaks through. “A co-conspirator.”

“You can punish me later.”

“Oh, I plan to.” She tips up to whisper in my ear, “We can have beached whale sex when everyone leaves.”

“My new favorite position,” I joke. “However I can get it in.”

“Ugh.” She scowls and smiles at the same time. “You’re awful.”

“I’m in love.” I cradle her face in my hands.

“So am I.” She puts her hands over mine, her eyes locking on me. “Thank you for this.”

I nod and bend to kiss her belly, no longer just a bump. Now that we’re at the end, she can’t see her toes anymore. I’m gonna miss this belly, and a sudden pain harpoons me at the thought, nearly taking my breath. Once this belly is gone, so is our little girl.

Over the next hour, I try to lose myself in the soccer match, but I keep finding my ears straining to hear what they’re doing in there. I figure I can ask Jade when she joins me, but she never does, and that’s got me curious. I pad down the hall and surreptitiously poke my head around the corner. Jade’s still there. Matter of fact, she’s adding her words to all the other pen markings covering Bristol’s belly. Right across the middle is scrawled the name we chose for the baby.

Zoe.

It means life. That’s what’s possible: that Zoe’s life and death will save someone else. Bristol laughs and squirms as Jade puts the finishing touches on what looks like a baby panda.

“It tickles!” Bristol screeches, tossing her head back, her dark hair swinging behind her.

She’s so beautiful and so happy. I want to freeze this moment and store it in a time capsule, bury it for safekeeping, for posterity, to show the other children we’ll have a picture of their mother fierce enough to find joy in the most difficult time of her life.

What feels like days later but is only a few hours, the cupcakes are gone, the games are stowed away, the facials are done. These well-meaning women have taken Bristol from me all day, and as much as I love them, I want her back. I want her to myself. There's a strength we draw from one another that comes in the quiet at the end of the day, holding each other, talking about everything, reassuring each other. It's not much, but it seems to be the only thing that truly soothes the ache that's grounded itself immovably in my heart.

I wander into the kitchen, hoping maybe one cupcake survived, only to stop at the door. My mother and Bristol are huddled together against the sink, a tangle of arms and tears and grief and strength. Every primal instinct in my body blares for me to protect the two most important women in my life, to stop whatever is hurting them, but reason filters in and I feel more helpless than I ever have. It's just life, just death, an inexorable cycle that has shattered my illusion of control, and there is truly nothing I can do to stop the pain.

Bristol glances up from their weepy embrace, a subtle curve tweaking her lips.

"Hey babe." Her voice, husky and raspy from tears, strangles in her throat. "I was just telling your mom Zoe's middle name."

It's Millicent, Ma's name. Everyone calls her Mittie, but that's because Jade couldn't say Millicent and started calling her Aunt Mittie. It stuck, and we all adopted it, but her given name is Millicent, and like a precious heirloom, we're passing it on to Zoe.

My mom has talked so much about grandkids in the past, I'm sure these weren't the circumstances into which she envisioned her first one being born. I insinuate myself into their tight circle, enveloping them both in my arms and trying to give them strength from my depleted reserves.

"I love you," Ma whispers, pulling back to put her right hand on my cheek and her left on Bristol's. "Both of you. We'll get through this. God'll get us through it. Y'all got my prayers."

My mama might love her bottle of Ace of Spades and I may have even seen her toke a couple of times growing up when things got hard, but she never misses a Sunday. I know it bothers her that the faith she tried to cultivate for years when I was younger holds no real place in my life anymore.

"Thank you for that. We can use all the prayers we can get," Bristol

replies, shocking the hell out of me. Since when did she care if somebody was praying? I guess tough times can do that to you.

I walk Ma to the door, nodding while she prattles, assuring her that I'll make sure Bristol gets some rest and promising we'll eat the food she left in the refrigerator for us.

"Marlon, look at me." She reaches up to grasp my chin, holding my eyes with an intensity I've never seen before. "Bristol is a survivor, we both know that, but she's not ready for this."

"She'll be—"

"Neither are you," she cuts in, her throat muscles working to hold back tears. "I know you're trying to brace yourself for it, but I want you to accept that you can't be prepared for this kind of pain, even when you know it's coming."

I stop trying to talk, to defend, to reassure, and instead just absorb her wisdom.

"It's obvious how much you love your wife and how she adores you, but this will change things." Ma's brows gather over troubled eyes. "You don't come out of this kind of battle without some scars, and as much as it's gonna hurt you, it's Bristol who has carried Zoe all this time, felt her move and shared her very body with her. Just remember when the time comes that it's a little different for her, maybe a little deeper, even closer to the bone. Fathers don't like to hear that, but listen to your mama, Marlon."

I don't trust my voice, but just nod. Mama is the last to leave, and I lean against the cottage door for a minute, letting the sudden silence sink into my overworked senses. I understand what my mom meant about not being ready even when I think I am, but I'm glad I at least have the next month to try.

They say God laughs when we make plans. When I go back to Bristol in the kitchen, I think that must be true. She's at the sink, right where I left her, eyes wide and red-rimmed, cheeks tear-streaked, hair rioting in thick dark and dappled waves down her back. It's not how she looks that brings that proverb to mind, it's what she says on a startled gasp of breath.

"My water broke."



## **GRIP & BRISTOL**

### *Birth Plan for Zoe Millicent James*

OUR BABY GIRL has been diagnosed with anencephaly. However imperfect she appears to some, she is ours, and we already love her deeply and will treasure any time we have with her.

Please call her by her name, Zoe. Please ask us how we feel, if she has been active, and other things we've experienced that make this pregnancy special. This validates and honors Zoe's life.

We understand that after the birth, situations may arise that were not anticipated and decisions will need to be made. Please keep us informed so we can participate in the decisions. Please take no intervention without our approval, other than what is outlined below. We trust you will respect our wishes.

In the delivery room, we would like Zoe's father, Marlon, to be present, and the doctor who will be delivering Zoe. Other family members and visitors will wait in the waiting area.

I, Bristol (mother), would like to give birth vaginally, unless strongly advised for a C-section.

We would like to receive a birth certificate and death certificate for Zoe.

We would like her footprints and handprints.

We do not wish any testing to be done on Zoe.

If our baby's heart stops prior to delivery, we do want to be informed.

We do not want the birth videotaped, but we want plenty of photos afterward.

Any drugs given to Zoe should be approved by the parents and should be given in doses to provide maximum comfort while allowing her to be alert to meet her family and visitors while she can.

Zoe's father will cut the umbilical cord.

We would like oral and nasal suctioning for Zoe's comfort only and no intubation without our permission.

After Zoe is born, we ask that she be wiped, suctioned (if needed), wrapped in a blanket, and whether alive or stillborn, handed to us.

We would also like to give Zoe her first bath.

Please hand her first to her father Marlon, as we wish to cuddle our baby immediately. We ask that vital signs, weight, medications, and labs be postponed, if possible.

If Zoe has fewer problems than expected, please discuss all possible testing and treatment options with us.

Other than routine post-delivery care, we wish for private time with our baby. We will discuss any exceptions that should be made. We want Zoe to be with us in the room at all times.

Zoe's grandmother Millicent James will serve as liaison with family and friends, periodically providing updates and managing the flow of people that she escorts into our room, at our request only, and will help us with phone calls.

We have reserved a section of the maternity wing, and only authorized personnel and approved friends and family are allowed access. Under no circumstances should members of the press be allowed access to the area.

Memorial/funeral plans have been made for Zoe at La Casa Memorial Gardens and Funeral Home.

We wish to hold Zoe as she is dying or after she has died. Zoe will be donating her organs for transplant. Based on the circumstances of her birth and death, she may be capable of donating heart valves, corneas (both tissue donation), and possibly kidneys and liver cells. As soon as she passes, Zoe will be taken directly to recovery surgery in preparation for organ donation. A burial garment will be provided.

We would like to keep the following items as keepsakes: lock of hair, ID bracelet, crib card, handprints and footprints (molds if possible), weight card, hat, blanket, clothes, family handprints, and photographs, both color and black and white. We have a memory box to store any items collected.

We do not want an autopsy done.

Thank you for helping us make this bittersweet time as bearable and memorable as possible.

BRISTOL & Marlon James





## GRIP

“WE NEED TO ADJUST THE PLAN.”

Dr. Wagner’s words are not the ones I wanted to hear. It feels like the plan is already adjusted enough since we’re delivering a month earlier than we’re supposed to.

“She doesn’t want a C-section.” I keep my voice low enough for just the doctor to hear. “You know how important that is to her.”

I hazard a glance to where Bristol rests between contractions. She scraped her hair back from her face, but tendrils have insisted on loosening from the restraint and cling to her face. Her hospital gown is drenched, and her head flops to the side in exhaustion. I’ve lost track of how long she’s been in labor, but apparently, Dr. Wagner thinks it’s been long enough.

“Her labor isn’t progressing.” Dr. Wagner’s eyes soften with compassion, but her jaw sets with resolve. “The baby’s heart rate is dropping. Given that you wanted as easy a passage for Zoe and as much time with her as possible, we need to adjust, and *now*. I can tell Bristol or—”

“No.” I shake my head decisively. “It needs to be me. I’ll tell her.”

“Good.” She signals to a nurse hovering nearby. “We need to start prepping her for surgery. I’ll give you a minute to explain the situation.”

Dr. Wagner, in a rare lowering of her professional guard, grabs my hand and squeezes.

“You’ve come this far, Grip,” she says, her eyes sympathetic and grave. “You and Bristol set this course that most can’t or don’t follow. It’s time to see it through to the end.”

I rein in fear and frustration and rage and helplessness, trying not to panic

while a propeller spins out of control in my chest. I never had a father to teach me what it means to be a man, how to lead a household, support a family, love a wife. Most of what I know about love and about leading, a woman taught me. My mother taught me, and every lesson, every bit of advice, everything she tried to impart to me, I'm grappling for, struggling to remember as I approach the hardest thing I've ever done and will probably ever do.

"Bris," I whisper, brushing the wet strands from her forehead. "Hey babe."

Her eyes open and roll a little with fatigue and the medication she's been given for pain before she focuses on my face.

"What's wrong?" she asks, her voice thinned by the long hours. "The baby—"

"She's fine. You're doing great, but we . . ."

I hate to do this knowing how badly Bristol wanted to deliver naturally. It's one more thing from this experience that won't be as we wanted it, one more thing I have to take away from her.

"We need to do a C-section, Bris." I watch her face, and my heart contracts when a solitary tear streaks over her cheekbone.

"No, Grip, I . . ." She swipes at the tear impatiently and compresses her lips. "Why?"

"Your labor isn't progressing. It's been too long. We were hoping it would happen quickly, naturally, but if we want Zoe to have the easiest passage, want time with her, we need to do it now."

"Now?" Her eyes widen and she saws at her lip with her teeth. "I . . . now."

"Yeah." I glance over my shoulder as Dr. Wagner and her team enter the room. "They want to start prepping you."

She grabs my hand, squeezing it hard enough to draw blood.

"Grip, I'm scared." Tears swim over the terror in her silvery eyes. "I . . . I can't do this."

I can count on one hand the number of times Bristol has told me she feared anything. We hadn't really talked about surgery much because we weren't planning on it, but I know enough to ease her mind, and anything I don't know, Dr. Wagner can fill in.

"It's a simple surgery," I reassure her. "They'll just—"

"No, not the surgery." She squeezes her eyes shut. "I mean . . . what

comes after the surgery.”

She looks back at me, fear obscuring the confidence, the fearlessness I’m used to seeing.

“I can’t do this.” Her lips tremble as her nails slice into my skin. “I don’t think I can let her go.”

*Fuck.*

I don’t think I can do this either, but we have to. The team is hovering, and Dr. Wagner’s urgency is quickly becoming impatience, breathing down the back of my neck.

“Bris, it’s gonna be . . .” The word “okay” congeals in my mouth. Bristol and I don’t lie, not to each other. Our relationship is built on uncomfortable conversations, shitty odds and, in Bristol’s words, love without walls. I’m not erecting walls between us now with anything less than the truth.

“I don’t know if it’s gonna be okay,” I admit quietly.

Her weary eyes spark and latch onto my confession, to my unexpected honesty.

“I’ve never made you promises I can’t keep, Bris, and I’m not gonna start bullshitting you now.”

I gulp back the trepidation that would keep me from saying what has to be said before they make the cut that will bring Zoe to us, for minutes, hours, or days.

“Shit’s about to get real,” I say. “And the only thing I can promise you is that I will love you for the rest of my life, and I truly believe we can survive anything together. Do you believe that?”

I’ll never forget this moment when, through the abject fear and despair and exhaustion saturating her eyes, I glimpse her trust in me. It’s the greatest gift I’ve ever received.

“Yes.” Her voice comes out frail, but that steel that reinforces her character. It’s there. It defies the shit-storm we’re flying into. I like to think it defies it because we are flying into it together. I’m not God—I can’t promise her miracles, and as badly as I wish I could, I can’t save Zoe. When it’s time to let her go, I’ll be as shredded as Bristol. I am her husband, though, and she’s the only woman I’ve ever loved. All I *can* promise is that through everything, we’ll have each other.



## BRISTOL

I WAKE UP DISORIENTED and numb in some places, vaguely aching in others. My last lucid memory is the concern etching lines into Grip's face as he promised me everything would be okay.

*No, that's not right.*

He didn't promise everything would be okay during the C-section or afterward. He promised to love me, and I know he still does.

But *is* everything okay?

"Grip?" Briars clot my throat and make my voice rough.

"Hey." He comes into view, and my heart pounds at the sight of him and then stops when I see him holding a tiny swaddled bundle. "You're back."

I remember now. My mind fights through the haze of drugs and exhaustion. I remember struggling to stay awake. Between the drugs and fatigue, I just needed to hear her cry. There was an incredible pressure below the curtain that blocked the lower half of my body, and then a sharp cry. Then, as if my body had held out as long as it possibly could, as soon as I heard that cry, everything went dark.

"Is she . . ."

*Alive? Still here? Did I miss her? Is she already gone?*

The questions clamor for first place in my head, muddling my thoughts. Tears aren't far behind, burning my eyes and making my lips tremor.

"She's right here." I can't figure out if Grip's eyes are more tender when he looks down at our baby girl or back to me. "You wanna hold her?"

Syllables and sounds jumble in my throat, and something close to a whimper then an uncertain nod is all I can manage.

“Zoe,” Grip says, leaning down to the bed with his little bundle. “Meet your beautiful mama.”

He transfers the sweet weight to my arms, leaving a kiss in my hair, which I’m sure is mangled and matted all over my head, but he doesn’t seem to care. If anything, his lips linger.

The tip of a tiny hat peeks from beneath the striped blanket. I hesitate, knowing when I pull the blanket back, when I see her, there’s no going back. I slowly peel the cover away. My heart was braced for something gruesome. The pictures I found online promised nothing like what I’m holding. Her eyes may bulge a little more than typical, but they’re the same gray that stares back at me each morning in the mirror, and her little mouth, even at this stage, bears the wide fullness and sculpted lines of her father’s. I know what Dr. Wagner told me, what all the research says—that she has no cognitive function. How could she, missing most of her brain? I know any movement is just instinctual twitches, reflexes, not responses to stimuli. Maybe my heart just wants to fool itself into thinking there’s an awareness simmering in her eyes, that somehow she knows I’m her mother. I faced the fires of hell to meet her, to have her, even for just minutes or hours, and Grip and I have risked our hearts to hold her.

*She was worth it.*

I know it’s unwise and I’ll pay for it soon, but I open my heart to this little girl, and like a flood, she rushes in. She squeezes herself into every inch, pervading any available space until a pressure builds in my chest and explodes in a sob.

“Oh, God.” Tears sluice down my cheeks, imprinting joy on my face. “She’s beautiful.”

I look up to find Grip looking at me the way I must be looking at her—like she’s a miracle I’m going to hold on to as long as I can.

“Beautiful,” he agrees, the tips of his long lashes damp with tears.

“I can’t believe I passed out.” I look back to Zoe, determined to absorb as much of her as I can while I have her.

“Between the drugs and the fatigue, I’m surprised you weren’t out longer. It was just for a few minutes, not long at all.” Grip eases himself down on the bed beside me, sheltering us with his arm over our heads on the pillow. “The nurses said it happens.”

“You cut the cord?” I pry my eyes away from her long enough to catch my husband’s smile, pride shining from every pore.

“Yeah, I did,” he says softly. “It was amazing.”

“Good.”

We both turn when the door opens. Dr. Wagner enters, her face a careful mask of polite concern. A nurse follows closely behind.

“How are we doing?” Dr. Wagner asks, picking up the chart hanging at the end of my bed.

“Okay.” I meet her eyes frankly, gratefully. “I know you weren’t sure we made the right decision, but thank you for getting her here.”

“It wasn’t that, Bristol.” A smile breaks through her professional façade. “That decision can only lie with the parents. It’s my job to make sure you have all the facts and know exactly what a decision entails.”

I glance back down at Zoe and then to Grip. The reality presses in on us. We can’t hide from the end that looms somewhere in the distance, though we don’t know how close.

“With that said,” Dr. Wagner continues, “you know time is short.”

Her words, though true, puncture the joy I managed to find holding Zoe. Some part of me wants to pretend this is a normal birth, that any minute now, my baby will start rooting around, searching for my breasts, already heavy with milk. I want to believe we need to scramble to get a car seat because she came a month early and we were caught off guard and now we have to take her home, but we won’t get to take her home.

“I know your family is outside waiting. As soon as you’re comfortable, if there’s anyone you want to meet Zoe,” Dr. Wagner says gently, “you should bring them in soon.”

“We will.” Grip brushes a thumb across the plump curve of Zoe’s cheek. “Thanks, doc.”

“She’s beautiful,” the doctor says, her eyes on Zoe. “I better go make my rounds. If you need anything, let me know.”

When she leaves, I notice a purple feather on the door.

“What’s the feather for?” I ask the nurse checking Zoe’s vitals.

“Pardon?” Her eyes flick from me to Grip in that carefully calm way that tells me she knows who we are, or rather who Grip is. Nobody cares who I am, and that’s fine by me. We secured this whole section of the wing to ourselves, and there are no other patients nearby. This day is hard enough without the threat of cameras or other patients stumbling into our privacy.

“The feather,” I repeat, pointing to the one hanging on the knob. “Does it mean anything?”

The nurse shifts her feet and her eyes, avoiding the probing look and the question.

“It’s just something we do so the staff knows how to conduct themselves,” she says evasively.

“Knows what?” Grip asks. “I walked the halls some earlier and didn’t see it on any of the other doors.”

She glances at Zoe before answering.

“We hang a purple feather on the door when the baby is a demise so the staff all remain sensitive to the situation,” she says, her voice soft with sympathy.

A demise.

It sounds cold and final, when my baby is anything but as she lies in my arms. She feels warm and alive. It feels like the whole world is waiting for a *demise* when I’m begging for a miracle.

“So would you like to start bringing in family and friends?” she asks, obviously wanting to move past the awkward moment that still has me squirming painfully like a deer caught in a sharp-toothed trap.

“Hold on one second,” I say. “I want to do something first.”

With a glance at Grip, I gently lift the cap away from Zoe’s head. I don’t hide my flaws from Grip, and he loves me unconditionally. He doesn’t hide his from me because he knows I love him with the same immutable heart. Our daughter, for as long as she’s here with us, deserves no less.

I want to see her flaws because I know I’ll love her just the same.

It’s hard to look. Without the hat, the illusion that she’s like every other newborn disappears with a cruel sleight of hand and confirms what the ultrasound showed us months ago. There are parts of her missing. A thin membrane covers the parts of her brain that developed, but it’s not pretty.

Even so, she’s ours.

“You okay?” Grip asks, his shoulders tight as if he’s braced for a blow.

“Yeah.” I pull the little cap back into place, even though I’ll never forget what lies beneath. “She is beautiful, isn’t she?”

Relief loosens the muscles in his neck and shoulders, loosens the frown from his face.

“She is.” He drops a kiss on the little cap on Zoe’s head. “Now let’s introduce her to everybody.”

It’s not everybody, but it’s that nucleus of people who have supported us. It’s Ms. James, of course, Rhys, Kai, Amir, Jimmi, Luke, and even Jade. The



nurse takes pictures of them all holding Zoe, some wearing tear-dampened smiles.

When my parents come, Rhyson stiffly greets them before stepping out of the room. Christmas dinner was okay. He and our father are doing better; he and our mother . . . better. The family counseling sessions have helped, but there is enough tension in the room without their unresolved issues adding to it.

My mother watches the door close behind Rhyson and sighs before turning her attention to me.

“How are you?” she asks, her eyes dry and steady on my face.

“As well as can be expected.” I shrug, running a self-conscious hand over my nest of hair, licking my lips and wishing for a little color. An army of friends, family, nurses, and doctors have come through and I haven’t thought twice, but without a word, this one woman reminds me that I’m probably not presentable. She’s flawless as usual.

“You want to hold her, Angela?” Grip asks. “Your husband just took his picture.”

“Where is he?” Mother looks around the room.

“He went to talk to Rhyson.” Grip clears his throat when my mother’s face falls. It’s a sore spot for her that Rhyson has extended forgiveness to my father but still barely tolerates her. Of the two, she cracked the whip hardest when Rhyson was a child. She gave him prescription drugs to cope with his anxiety, and when he was addicted, she delayed getting him help because she didn’t understand how serious it was.

“Yes, let’s get the picture.” She takes Zoe, and at first her arms are wooden, her posture arrow straight. Then, when she looks down at her granddaughter for the first time, maybe for the last, her face softens and her mouth quivers. Her body curves protectively around the little blanketed bundle. I’m astounded to see a tear skate over her powdered cheek. Then my mother does what no one else has dared to do. She inches the hat back to see Zoe just as she is. She looks up at me, and tears spring to my eyes at what I see on her face—not the agony I’ve seen with some, not the shadow of death, but awe.

“She’s wonderful, Bristol,” she says, blinking rapidly against more tears. “And of all the things you’ve done, I’ve never been prouder of you than I am right now.”

I can only nod because my throat is clogged, my lips sealed. My mother

is flawed, but I stopped my running tally of her mistakes long ago. The list got too long and just became a record of my bitterness. Despite all of that and as much as we've clashed through the years, I am an offshoot of this tree. I hope I grew straighter and that my roots have gone deeper. I hope my branches will reach wider, offering shelter that my mother often withheld, but if I ever have the breadth of a sequoia or the strength of a sycamore, watching her study my daughter with unflinching love, I know Angela Gray is the tree where I began.

The nurse patiently takes more pictures with everyone while they hold Zoe and some with Grip and me.

"We'll put these in Zoe's memory box," she says when the room is empty of everyone except Ms. James, Rhyson, and Kai.

"Thank you." An ache fists my heart in an ironclad grasp as I take Zoe from Ms. James. A sharp, deeply drawn breath lifts Zoe's chest, and everyone in the room goes completely still.

"Is she okay?" I ask the nurse, fear icicling my blood. "What was that?"

"It's what we call an agonal gasp." She steps closer, pressing a stethoscope to Zoe's tiny chest. "It's not out of the ordinary."

Agonal? How can it be considered ordinary for an infant to be in agony?

"Can I listen?" I ask, eyeing the stethoscope.

She hesitates before nodding and passing the instrument to me. I put one ear piece in my ear and Grip grabs the other, with the chest piece resting on Zoe's tiny torso. We listen to her heart in stereo, our eyes meeting in shared awe that we made her together, in shared fear that, any minute now, she'll be taken as quickly as she came. We fear that this little mallet in her chest pounding a steady rhythm is the only thing standing between our happiness and complete destruction.

The defiant little *thump thump thump* of Zoe's heartbeat caresses my ears. It's the sound of her life persisting, surprisingly strong, but I know how fragile she is. It's written on the nurse's face in lines of sympathy.

"You said . . ." My courage falters, but I gather it between my lips again and force myself to ask the question plaguing me. "You called it an agonal gasp. Is she in . . . well, is she in pain?"

As if we're one, I feel Grip holding his breath just like me as I wait for her response. If Zoe's in pain, I did this. If she's in pain, was I selfish to want her? To want to meet her? To hold her?

"Research tells us that an anencephalic infant feels no pain because the

part of the brain that communicates pain isn't developed," the nurse replies, stowing the camera on a side table and turning to face us. "Doctors will tell you they are just reflexive, vegetative, and feel nothing at all."

She leans forward, looking around like she's about to share a secret. "But I don't believe that," she whispers.

"You don't?" Grip's question is covered in the same dread that lines my insides as we wait. "You think they feel?"

"I know they do." She smiles even as tears fill her eyes. "They feel your love."

Grip looks down at me, a slow smile flowing from his eyes to his lips, and nods to her.

"Thank you," he says.

"If everyone has seen her," the nurse continues, her tone pivoting back to kind professionalism. "I need to ask if you want . . ."

Her words stall, but then she takes a deep breath and goes on.

"Do you have a family priest or minister? Your birth plan didn't reference one, but I thought I'd ask." Her face is gentle but deliberately blank. "Do you want last rites?"

*Oh, God. I can't do this.*

The realization pounds from inside my head, slamming against my temples, pushing against my chest, banging at my lips from the dry interior of my mouth. The words want *out*. They want all these people who think I'm capable of letting my baby go to know it's a lie.

*I cannot.*

Who the hell did I think I was? Why did I assume I was strong enough for this? I'm contemplating how exactly to let them know I can't do this, that we need to find a way to stop this spiral. I need off this ride, out of this nightmare. I need to wake up in a cold sweat beside my husband in our bed, pregnant. This bad dream can't be my life because I won't survive it.

"Um, we don't really have a minister, per se," Grip responds to the nurse. He glances at me, and even though his voice remains even, the same panic rises in his eyes, unvoiced. "We . . . I guess we could . . ."

"I'm sure there's a hospital chaplain," Kai speaks up, reminding me we're not alone. She, Rhyson, and Ms. James watch us carefully, like we might blow at any minute.

"I could call Pastor Robinson," Ms. James volunteers. "He baptized you, Grip, when you were a little boy."

Grip looks uncertain, wrestling for a moment and then looking to me.

“What do you think, Bris?” He searches my face, eyes tortured and voice low. “What do you want?”

We painstakingly crafted that birth plan, taking every step and every minute into account, but neither of us really have any faith. Last rites never occurred to us, and it never came up. I haven’t given much thought to what happens when you die. You die, you’re gone. But as I look into Zoe’s eyes, the exact color of mine, and as I see my DNA mingled with Grip’s in this little girl, that’s inadequate.

I search the circle of faces waiting for me to express something I’m not sure of, until my eyes land on Kai. I don’t have faith. I’ve never pretended I did, but today, I need to believe in something. I need to believe this isn’t the end for my baby girl, that when she breathes her last and she’s lain in the ground, she doesn’t just go to dust.

“What do you think happens next, Kai?” I ask, my eyes locked onto hers for any sign of doubt. “What do you think happens if Zoe dies today?”

Her eyes widen, but never waver, and I realize how easy it is to underestimate her. I know she has soaring ambition, of course; I’m her manager. I know her drive would put anyone to shame; I’ve seen her work ethic in action. What I didn’t realize until right now is what drew my brother to her, beyond the talent and her beautiful face. At her core, there’s something unshakeable, something that if tested, holds, and I need it right now.

“I think she goes to heaven,” Kai says, her voice strong and sure.

“Your daddy told you that?” I ask, lifting one brow. “You said he taught you most of what you believe about God.”

“Yeah, he did.” She looks at the floor and then up to the ceiling, exasperation twisting her lips before she returns to me. “He may not have lived everything he preached, but I never doubted that he believed it, and I do, too.”

“What did he say . . . I mean, well, did he have anything to say about babies like Zoe?”

Kai’s eyes don’t leave my face, but I can tell her mind turns back, back to some memory.

“When I was a kid, my best friend’s little sister only lived for a day.” Kai bites her lip before continuing. “We were so excited all those months her mama was carrying her, and for days I cried after the baby passed away.”

I glance down at Zoe, noting how still she's gotten, how shallow her breaths have become, and my heart rests on the jagged edge of Kai's faith, on her next words . . . borrowed faith for a little girl on borrowed time.

"Daddy told me this world is dark and dirty and hard." She huffs a laugh comprised of cynicism and grudging admiration. "That's how he talked to me, a little girl, about faith. He was ruthlessly honest about it, and he said these babies were the purest thing God had to offer. They never got tainted by this world. They're here just long enough to give us a glimpse of heaven, a glimpse of glory. He called them glory babies."

Tears slide into the corners of my mouth, drowning the sad smile. The nurse's lips purse and her eyes pinch with the effort to keep her face neutral, but I know. I don't need her stethoscope to tell me what my heart already knows: Zoe's leaving me.

I huddle deeper into Grip's shoulder. Beneath my head he's solid ground, but his chest quakes with a tremor and his tears dampen my hair when he buries his face in my neck. He always says he can't take my tears, but the sound of the sobs he's restraining, trying to protect me from his own heartbreak, rends my soul.

We're a mess.

And I suspect this is just the beginning. We got her here, but I'm not strong enough to live in the empty space she'll leave behind.

"Glory babies," I whisper, sniffing and pulling Zoe's little cap back and off, not caring if Ms. James or my brother or Kai aren't prepared for what lies beneath. Her last moments on this earth will be in my arms just as she is, in her purity, in her glory. As she came into this world, that's how she'll leave. She has nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to hide.

*Our glory baby.*

"Would you say the last rites, Kai?" The words cling to the inside of my throat, fighting against being spoken.

"I'm not a . . . well, that's to say, I can't . . ." She looks over her shoulder at Rhyson, whose eyes are as wet and tortured as ours. He nods his encouragement, but Kai's expression remains helpless when she turns back to face us. "I'm not a priest, Bristol."

"I don't want a priest," I snap, the fierce response rearing from my weariness. "I want someone who believes what they're saying. Do you or do you not believe my baby is going to heaven? To glory?"

Kai firms her chin, high color painting her tear-streaked cheeks.

“I do.” She says it like a vow, and her faith shines, a beam I grab hold of as darkness approaches.

Ms. James, Rhyson, and the nurse encircle the bed when Kai steps close to lay her hand on Zoe’s forehead. There’s no squeamishness, no revulsion or disgust on Kai’s face when she touches that most unappealing part of my baby girl. With face solemn, her hand steady, and her words sure, Kai whispers to Zoe of glory, of divinity and perfect peace. She tells her that the God who sent her with His hand is waiting for her return with arms wide open. Kai’s words breathe serenity, but when Zoe’s little chest rises and falls with a final gasp, my heart revolts and I shatter into infinite pieces. I will never be the same. I’ll never be smooth again. I’ll be cracked in all the places Zoe touched in the few hours I had with her. I’ll have to make myself all over with ragged bits of soul and flesh and heart, and as Kai whispers the last words to send Zoe on her way, all I can do is weep and wail and wish I was going, too.



## GRIP

*“I don’t want so much misery.”*  
– *Walking Around*, Pablo Neruda

## GRIP

THE LINE from Neruda’s poem *Walking Around* is a daily refrain. I wake up with it threading my thoughts like a needle, beaming through my windows with the morning sun. It has been nearly two weeks since Zoe came and went, and the grief is unrelenting, a deluge of despair. It’s the rainy season, a monsoon that never lets up. Like drenched clothes, I’m heavy and dripping everywhere I go.

But at least I go.

Not much, not many places, but I’ve left the house. Bristol can’t. She won’t, and she won’t see anyone. She’s turned away Kai, Jimmi, my mother, calls from Charm. No one has gotten through, and everyone’s worried about her . . . about us.

And they should be.

I keep telling myself this is to be expected, but it freezes my blood when I look into Bristol’s eyes that have always shone with vibrancy and spirit and find them lifeless.

I prop the door to our bedroom open with my back, balancing a tray in my hands. I can’t remember the last time I saw Bristol eat. Knowing she loves this lemon coconut French toast from a place up the street, I grabbed an order of it, hoping I can tempt her to at least try. I set the tray down on the



bench at the foot of our bed and settle beside her with my back against the headboard. I placed the huge bouquet of flowers Mrs. O'Malley sent beside the bed, but even that hasn't coaxed a response from her.

We didn't tell many people what we were dealing with during Bristol's pregnancy, but we released a statement later. The pregnancy was common knowledge. We walked red carpets together, were photographed out walking, living. People assumed everything was normal, which at the time, was simpler for us. Now nothing is simple, and awkward questions about how we're doing with our newborn will only make recovering harder. So, everyone knows what happened, but no one can really know what we're going through.

I bend to the pillow where her head rests and push the tumble of hair back from her face, surprised to find her eyes wide open and tearless, staring vacantly as she lies on her side.

"Hey babe." I touch her chin, waiting for her eyes to meet mine. "I brought you some breakfast."

She shakes her head, her eyes drifting away from my face again.

"Not hungry." She rolls over, giving me her back and huddling under the comforter.

"You should eat."

"Said I'm not hungry." She pulls the pillow over her head. "Could you close the blinds on your way out?"

I stuff my frustration and general rage at the world down another inch. I'm afraid of what else is down there, buried beneath the thin flooring of my civility. It feels like some wild animal will leap out roaring and clawing and baring its teeth when I least expect it. There's a pack of feral beasts caged in my belly, in my chest, and I'm not sure how much longer they'll stay stuffed away before they come out raging.

"I'm not closing the blinds, Bris. Some sun would do you good. It's spring."

Her head makes a slow rotation until she's looking at me over her shoulder.

"It's spring?" Her eyes spark with the first emotion I've seen since the hospital. "Well whoop dee fucking doo, Grip. Now all's right with the world because it's *spring*. Who do I look like? Fucking Mary Poppins?"

I wanted emotions, yeah, but not the bitchy ones.

"Okay, Bris," I say as patiently as I can. "I'm hurting too, but—"

“Are you?” The naked misery in her eyes breaks my heart in places I assumed were already broken. “Yet you somehow manage to go for long walks and zip to grab breakfast and eat food? And tolerate *light*?”

“I won’t let this happen, Bristol,” I say. “You know I won’t. It’s been ten days and—”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She snaps to a sitting position, the T-shirt she slept in bunching up with the covers, her hair tangled and matted and disorderly. “Has it been ten days already? Am I late? Was I supposed to be all better by now?”

“I get it. The only thing that drags me out of bed every morning is *you*.” I lean over to cup her cheek. “I love you too much to let this go on. Ten days is no time in the grand scheme of things, but you can’t *not eat*.”

I lean closer, catching a whiff of my T-shirt she’s wearing, which could probably launder itself by now.

“Damn, babe.” I screw my nose up, hoping she’ll allow me to tease her some. “You can’t not *bathe* for ten days either.”

Her lips don’t twitch. Her eyes don’t glimmer with humor or interest or life. She just stares at me unblinkingly.

“I can’t do this, Grip,” she whispers, her anger fading as quickly as it came. She presses her cheek deeper into my palm. “You keep thinking I can do this, that I’m stronger than I am, but . . .”

She shakes her head, helplessness loosening a tear from her lashes and spilling it over her cheek.

“I’m not strong enough either, baby.” I dip to press my forehead to hers. “Not by myself, but remember what I promised you?”

“What?” she asks.

She doesn’t remember? I console myself with the reminder that she was exhausted and on drugs before her C-section, but my heart still winces that she doesn’t remember what I promised.

“I said—”

“That you would love me for the rest of your life,” she whispers, eyes closed. “And that you believed we could survive anything together.”

There’s my girl. Hope flares in this dark room that is our life right now. It’s the smallest thing, her remembering those moments, our hardest, but it’s the only thing I have.

“Yeah, that’s it. The only way we get through this is together.” This one thing encourages me to broach a topic I know we need to address. “I, uh . . .”

was talking to Dr. Wagner.”

Her eyes narrow.

“I just had the checkup and was okay,” she says, slowing her words as if she needs to process them. “I’m not due back until my six-week appointment.”

“I know.” I nod my agreement. “But I called her office and we talked—”

“About me?” Her words come fast and outraged. “Without me?”

“Bris, just listen.” I sigh, dreading this. “She thinks you should reconsider the prescription she suggested.”

“For the milk?”

Dr. Wagner mentioned a prescription that would expedite the milk drying up, but Bristol refused. I wish she would take it. Nature is cruel, preparing Bristol’s body to nurse and nurture even though her arms are empty. It’s a constant reminder of what we’ve lost burgeoning in her body.

“No, not those.” I clear my throat unnecessarily. “The, um . . . the antidepressant.”

“I don’t want that.” Bristol tosses the comforter back, throwing her legs over the side with more energy than I’ve seen. It’s a shame the only thing that seems to enliven her is anger. “It hasn’t even been two weeks.”

“True, but not only do you have the . . . grief,” I say, the word getting snagged in my throat. “But all the hormonal changes that come with having a baby, too. When Dr. Wagner heard you weren’t eating and were sleeping all day—”

“And she ‘heard’ this during your secret conversation about me behind my back, right?” Bristol stands and faces me, arms folded under her breasts.

“I’m not going to watch you get worse. Don’t ask me not to help, Bris.”

“You can’t fix this. Pills won’t fix this.”

“Neither will not eating or lying in bed all day with the curtains closed.” My voice comes out sharper than I intended, but those are the words I meant to say, ones I’m not taking back. I notice for the first time that she’s wearing my Dave Chappelle T-shirt, *HABITUAL LINE STEPPER*. I can’t help but think about that night, years ago, when she wore it while we ate on the roof, before we made love. My eyes wander over the long legs and tangled hair. Even grimy, bitchy, depressed, and despondent, she’s the only woman I want.

“Is that why you want to fix me, Grip?” she asks, scorn curling her lip as she watches me watch her. “You wanna fuck? Is that what this is about? Popping some pills in me so I’ll be in the mood to suck your dick again?”

“Dammit, Bris!” The words combust in my mouth, and I roll off the bed to face her, a king-size sea of ruffled, unwashed sheets separating us, a chasm of shared pain somehow keeping us apart. “How could you . . . why would you say that to me? You know it’s not true. Are you *trying* to push me away?”

“If that’s what it takes for you to stop poking and prodding and trying to medicate me out of this, then yeah, I’ll push you away.”

She drops her head forward, the mass of dark waves obscuring her face and rioting past slumped shoulders.

“You can’t fix this,” she moans, twisting her head from side to side and cradling her waist with folded arms. “None of that will bring her back. You can’t bring her back.”

I can’t stay away from her. I never could, and her pain, her tears draw me, the same way her vitality and her beauty always have. There is nothing about her that repels me, even when she tries her best to push me away. I step close, cautiously slipping my arms around her, resting my hands at the small of her back. She’s stiff, resistant to any comfort I offer, but after a few moments of stroking her back, she goes limp against my chest, almost pliant. This is the closest we’ve been since Zoe died, and I don’t want to shatter it by bringing up the meds, or the support group or the grief counseling—all things Dr. Wagner says will help us—but I can’t let this go on. It’s not good for either of us.

The ringing phone in my pocket intrudes on the words I need to say. Bristol stiffens and pulls away, the guard dropping back into place over her expression. She retrieves it from my pocket, studies the screen, and hands it to me.

“You should take it,” she says hastily, grabbing the excuse to get out of this conversation. “It’s Charm. Your book is due soon.”

“It can wait. We need to finish this.”

“Let’s make a deal.” She forces a smile that she probably thinks fools me. “You answer the phone, I’ll go shower. How’s that?”

Does she honestly think she can fool me? Hold me off? Shut me out? No way in hell I waited eight years for her only to settle for some imitation of intimacy, some facsimile of the woman I know she should be.

“I’ll take her call,” I say, pressing accept. “But you better be in the shower when I’m done.”

Her smile looks awkward, like her mouth forgot how to do it, but she

takes a few steps toward the bathroom. I feel a momentary sense of accomplishment. She's out of bed, headed toward the shower, but I know the real problems won't wash away. The anguish Bristol's waking up with every day is subterranean, deep below the surface. It's infected the very core of who she is. I can say that for sure because mine goes just as deep.



## BRISTOL

THE DARKNESS IS HEAVY. It's tangible, like a weighted blanket trapping me beneath my stale sheets. It's a living darkness, thick with blood, wet with tears. Deep, so very deep. It's a ravine, and I'm at the very bottom. It's toxic, and I breathe great lungfuls of it, like a miner in a cave with no light, no air. Every morning I promise myself I'll do better. I'll get better. I'll eat. I'll shower. I'll be kinder to my husband. I won't take this pain out on him. As soon as my mind surfaces from fitful sleep, though, I hear Zoe's heartbeat again, trapped in her chest like infant fists banging against the fragile cage of her ribs, longing to be free.

*Thump, thump, thump.*

A drum in the thicket of dense forest, her heartbeat reaches my ears, drawing me—an auditory illusion, I know, but it's the only real thing I can find in the dark to hold on to. I run toward it, desperate to see her, to hold her one more time. Branches bite my face, rocks shred my feet as I follow the sound of that heartbeat, the drum in the jungle. I stumble and fall face first into an empty clearing. It's deserted, desolate, and every morning, bamboozled by that sound, I pull the covers over my head again.

Even my body plays tricks on me. It betrays me. My breasts surge with life, engorged and ready to feed, but it's a joke in bad taste because no one eats from me. I'm unessential. No one needs me to survive, and what I need, I can't find.

My body is a haunted house. Those who lived here are dead and gone, and my soul is riddled with ghosts. Phantoms travel the halls, walk the rooms, raising the hairs on my body, but when I look, there's no one there.

As I face myself in the bathroom mirror, I feel guilty about the things I said to Grip. I'm aching with the memory of what we should have, but lost. When I meet my reflection, I see a shell of myself, a husk of who I used to be. Living with this dense darkness, this haunted house, this abandoned womb, I don't think I can be that girl again.





## GRIP

“OKAY, I’m actually done with the first draft.” I sit on the unmade bed and press the phone to my ear while I talk to Charm. “I finished all but one before Zoe . . .”

I was going to say before Zoe came, but all Charm or anyone who knows our situation would hear is before Zoe died. I let the words dissolve in my mouth. That’s what she is to others: an epitaph with no dashes, not a year she was born and a year she passed away, but a solitary day, mere hours.

“Okay,” Charm says, that hesitation in her voice like everyone else’s, like she’s not sure it’s safe to talk to me yet. “Look, Grip, we can delay this again if we need to.”

“No, it’s fine. Your production team has been really patient, and I appreciate that.” I glance at the stack of printed pages splayed on the bed. “All the poems are finished. I was just doing a final read-through.”

“If you’re sure,” Charm says, a bit of relief in her voice. “That’s great. Just email it.”

“Cool.”

Silence pools on the line, and I’m not sure if she has more to say or if she’s waiting for me to go.

“Um, how’s Bristol?” Charm asks. “I called her, but it went to voicemail. I haven’t heard back, but I figure she’ll call when she’s ready. I don’t want to bother her.”

I didn’t want to bother her either, the first day, the second, the third . . . but we’re at day ten, and I think it’s time someone bothered her and shook her out of this. I’m probably the only one who can reach her, but who’s

gonna reach me? I run a hand over my head. I need a haircut, a shave. Have *I* showered today? Have *I* eaten? I'm as bad off as Bristol is, but afraid to express it, to let her know. This kind of grief, it's impossible to bear, but this, what Bristol is allowing, what she's doing to herself—it's unsustainable. I love her too much to let it go on.

"Grip?" Charm prompts. "Bristol? How is she?"

"Oh, well, not great." A heavy sigh falls between us over the phone. "I mean, we're not great, but I guess that's to be expected. We'll get through it, but it'll take time."

*And I'm not sure how.*

"I've known Bristol a long time," Charm says. "Longer than you have, actually, and I've never seen her the way she is with you. She's almost unrecognizable, honestly. As long as I've known her, she was great at putting up walls, keeping people out, but she doesn't have that defense with you. Just don't give up on her."

I let her words wash over me, cleanse my discouragement away, and renew my commitment to reaching my wife.

"Giving up on Bristol is not an option," I say, swallowing my doubts. "But thanks for the encouragement."

"And how are *you* holding up?" she asks, her voice a little lighter. "Who's going to take care of you?"

"Bristol will," I reply. "We take care of each other."

My response comes before I even have time to think about it. I wondered who would reach me if I'm occupied with reaching Bristol, who would take care of me if I'm taking care of her, but that's the answer: we take care of each other. We always have, and if we meant our vows, we always will.

"Charm, I need to go." I consider the closed bathroom door. I don't hear water running or any movement.

"Of course. I'll be on the lookout for your email. This book is going to be amazing, Grip."

I don't give a damn and don't even bother responding, just hang up. Charm will cut me some slack for my rudeness. Being around people is hard because there are all these rules, all these things you have to do, and the only thing I want to do right now is hurt, hurt and hold my girl and *heal*.

When I enter the bathroom, the shower's not running and there's no steam fogging the mirror. Bristol's on the floor, her long legs stretched out flat along the tiles, her back to the tub. She cups her breasts where two huge

wet spots show through the T-shirt. Her head is bowed and tears run unchecked down her face. I rush over to squat beside her.

“Baby,” I whisper, gently moving her hands away. “It’s okay.”

It’s not fucking okay. I’m an imbecile saying asinine shit. My inadequacy overwhelms me in the face of her brokenness, in the reality of mine. She gulps in air like she’s drowning, going under. I want to be her lifeline, but I’m sinking, too.

“My milk is drying up.” She squeezes her breasts, pressing her eyes shut and cutting into her bottom lip with her teeth. “Soon it’ll all be gone and I’ll have nothing. It’ll be like I never carried her . . . like she was never here.”

She opens her eyes, meeting mine with dark humor, her lips tilted to a bitter angle.

“You know I don’t even have stretch marks.” She tugs the shirt up and the edge of her panties down. “Except these.”

She lovingly caresses a small patch of faint stripes at her hip. Her fingers drift to the relatively small but still-red scar from her C-section. “And this.”

I was there for that scar. I watched them reach in and pull Zoe out. I’ll never forget cutting the cord, hearing that first squawk confirming that our mission was accomplished, that Zoe had made it.

“I wish I’d seen that,” Bristol says, watching me with watery eyes. “Seen you cut the cord.”

Only now do I realize I spoke my thoughts out loud. I didn’t mean to; I try to keep my pain to myself. Some days I can barely stand under the weight of it, but I look over at Bristol, hear her crying in her sleep, and I muzzle my own misery. She carries so much already. The last thing she needs is me being a pussy, weeping all over her. I want to be strong for her and more than anything, to protect her. I’m supposed to be her first line of defense, and watching her sobbing on the floor, caressing her scars, and clinging to her grief, I can’t help but think I’m failing colossally.

“Let’s get you cleaned up.” It’s not really what I want to say. I just want to join her on the floor and weep, but one of us has to be strong. I tug at the hem of the shirt but she folds into herself, keeping the shirt in place.

“No, I don’t want to get cleaned up.” Her head drops back to rest on the lip of the tub.

“Well I’m not letting you sit on the floor all day in a sour T-shirt and . . .” My voice fails.

“And what?” she demands. “Cry? Wallow? Why not?”

“This situation—”

“This situation is grief.” Her strident voice ricochets off the bathroom walls. “Stop trying to fix me.”

“I don’t need to *fix* you,” I bellow back, my restraints snapping. “I *need* you, Bristol.”

“What?” she whispers, uncertainty shadowing her face. Did she think I wasn’t suffering? I know I protected her from the worst of it, but she has to realize I’m as gutted as she is.

“Fucking newsflash: Zoe was mine, too. I’m her father. I’m broken.” Tears set my throat on fire, and these words are the match. “It’s killing me that she’s gone, and it’s killing me that you won’t let me in.”

“I don’t know how.” Tears paint her cheeks. “I’m in the dark.”

“So am I.” I grab her hands between mine. “You’re my light. I’m your light. We only get through this together, Bris.”

“I just feel so . . . alone.” The word comes out on a gasp of desperate air, a hammer falling on my heart.

“Alone?” I bow my head, momentarily squeezing my eyes shut against the sight of her loneliness. “God, Bris, you’re killing me. You feel alone? When I’m right here?”

“I didn’t mean it like that, Grip.” She shakes her head and tries to catch the tears sliding over her cheeks, but they’re too many and too fast. “I meant—”

“This,” I interrupt her, holding her ring finger up between us. “Means something to me.”

I caress the word *Matty* inked into our skin. *Still*.

“*When we are alone, you and I, through years, through pain,*” I say, quoting my vows, my voice wilting and wet. “*My heart will answer again and again, still.*”

She looks at me, her eyes wide and wounded, my words seemingly having no effect on her. I can’t do this, not right now. The only thing that hurts more than Zoe being gone is Bristol not sharing this burden with me, not letting me in.

“Fuck it.” I heave myself off the floor, avoiding the pain in her eyes that I obviously can’t comfort. “I’m, uh . . . going to get a haircut and a shave. I just need to get out. I’ll be back.”

“Grip, wait.”

“I can’t. Just . . .” I walk to the door, tossing words over my shoulder.

“I’ll be back.”

Before I make an even bigger fool of myself, I get out of the bathroom, out of our bedroom, but I can’t make it to the front door. I collapse onto the couch, drop my head in my hands, and cry like a damn baby, an ocean’s worth of salty tears. I was counting on those vows. That she meant them the way I meant them was my only hope of surviving this. In the hospital, I told her I believed the only way we could survive this was together. If she won’t let me in, I’m out here on my own. I hoped she would trust me with her pain because she’s the only person I trust with mine. If I don’t have Bristol, I ain’t surviving shit.



## BRISTOL

*When we are alone, you and I,  
through years, through pain,  
my heart will answer again and again, still.*

OUR VOWS DROWN out the tortured thoughts that have crowded my head for days, finally penetrating my consciousness the way nothing else has since Zoe passed. Grip wants me to let him in, but stumbling in the dark, I can't even find my way to the door and its slippery knob. I've never told Grip about my nightmare, waking up with our daughter's heartbeat in my ears. I'm covered in the hot breath of horror every morning and I've never told him. The panic that assaults me when I think about the first time I'll see a mother out with her newborn—at a coffee shop or the grocery store or the park—he doesn't know.

The hurt in Grip's eyes, it wasn't because Zoe's gone, it was because I'm gone. He misses Zoe, too. As I pull my head out of my own ass for the first time since we came home, I see that, but the hurt I just saw wasn't about her. It was about me.

I drag myself off the floor, standing as straight as I can. I can't seem to pull my spine straight anymore. I lean, I bow, my body reflecting my bent spirit. When I step into our bedroom, he isn't there. He did say he was going out. I'll at least shower and change these sheets. I've negotiated eight-figure deals with ease, but now these two simple tasks daunt me.

When I pull the sheets from the bed, papers go flying in the air. I hadn't noticed them, and now they're all over the floor. I bend to collect them, jarred



when my daughter's name catches my eye.

*For Zoe, our glory baby.*

“What is this?” I ask the empty room, my breath seizing at the dedication. I shuffle through a few more pages before I realize it's Grip's poetry book for Barrow. Maybe I'll read through them when I'm feeling more myself. Right now, I'm not in the mood for beautiful words skillfully strung together, not even from Grip. I'm stuffing the pages in the drawer of the table on his side of the bed when I see my name.

Not my actual name, but the title I know was inspired by me.

*Pretty Bird*

That's what he called me, how he teased me when I said my laugh sounded like a bird. That day, years ago, I had no idea how fragile joy is, that in a moment, with just a few words, everything can capsize. You can sink. One day the wind is in your sails then in no time you're the *Titanic*. I sit on the bed and read the poem attached to that distant memory.

*My pretty bird,  
Like a peacock, spread yourself for me.  
Awe me with your plumage.  
We're birds of a feather, you and I.  
I hear your cry, do you hear mine?  
A mating call before you fall,  
your holla never heard.  
My moaning bird,  
One by one, I'll count your feathers.  
Let me try to make it better.  
Can I kiss your scars?  
I want to give you what you're needing*

*Use my heart to staunch the bleeding  
And for your broken wing,  
my arms will be the sling  
Where you go, I go, even due south  
Borrow my breath, mouth to mouth  
Resuscitation  
A flock to ourselves, a murmuration  
Just us two in our love nest  
Hide in my love, take your rest  
Till you're ready to fly again  
Fly into my arms,  
A safe arrival,  
a sure survival,  
a glorious revival  
Then we'll leave this nest together  
Two birds, we'll soar above  
the past behind us  
A path we can't un-fly  
A death we can't un-die  
But we ain't at death's door  
Nah, it's time to leave.  
Our hearts can do the impossible  
Do you believe?  
Then fly, my love! Soar!  
My pretty bird, fly with me  
and cry no more.*

I READ it again and then again. Each time through, the words find spots inside me that need soothing. I finish storing the other pages in the drawer, but can't

make myself let *Pretty Bird* go. The sheer vulnerability of it, the need and love infuse every line. I'm about to call Grip, to ask him to come home, when I hear a muffled sound from the living room. I let the sound lead me, and my heart finds new ways to break when I see my husband, seated on the floor, back to the couch with his head in his hands, shaking with sobs.

*I hear your cry, do you hear mine?*

I haven't. I've been so consumed with my own grief, turned inside out in my pain, I didn't see his. I didn't hear his cry.

"Grip," I say in a voice I can barely hear myself but that grabs his attention immediately.

He stiffens, his head jerking up as if he's been caught. When our eyes connect, he tries to pull it together, tries to pull his strength back in place, but it fails him like a broken gate hanging off its hinge—the same way mine fails me every morning when I wake up and roll back over, unable to face the day. His rugged features crumple, a broken dam of tears running over his face.

"God, Bris." His voice falls apart like wet tissue. "I need you, baby. I wish I could do this without you, for you, but I meant it: we don't survive this unless we're together. If we're together, I know we can."

"Our love can do the impossible," I quote from *Pretty Bird*. "Do you believe?"

His eyes narrow, recognition of his own words sinking in. Before he can ask, I answer.

"Your poem was on the bed." I sink to the floor beside him, reach for his hand, linking our fingers and placing them in my lap. "I hope it's okay that I read it."

His glance shifts away from me, eyes squeeze closed, long lashes wet against his cheeks. His cocksure bravado, the confidence he wore like skin drew me before. His vulnerability woos me now.

"I've never felt this lost," he confesses, his broad shoulders shrugging helplessly. "You said I want to fix you. In some ways you're right, but not to make it easier for me. I'd do anything to stop your pain, but I can't seem to find the solution. I only know that if we're together, there is one. Grief counseling, therapy, whatever it takes—I just need to know at the end, we'll still have each other."

I blink, swiping uselessly at my own tears. I've been looking for light, and it's been right here the whole time.

"You can start by just holding me," I whisper.

“God, yes.” He breathes into my hair and pulls me across his lap, long legs stretched out over the floor. I huddle into the breadth and strength of his chest. How could I have forsaken, forgotten this comfort all along? For long moments, we just hang on to each other, both crying, grieving what we’ve lost and clinging to what we still have. There with my head against his chest, I hear it.

*Thump, thump, thump.*

His heartbeat. Every day the sound of Zoe’s heartbeat lured me deeper into darkness, but as I wrap my arms around him, the percussive rhythm of his love and devotion and unwavering commitment beating into my ears, I know it’s Grip’s heart that will lead me out.



## GRIP

“CAN you get carpal tunnel from severe masturbation?”

Amir glances up from whatever game he’s playing on his phone.

“I don’t want to know this,” he answers distractedly.

“No, it’s a real question. I’m gonna WebMD that shit.” I pull out my phone and lean against the kitchen counter in our Tribeca apartment. “It’s like this sharp pain in my wrist whenever I—”

“Man, you broke my concentration.” He scowls down at his phone. “Asking me dumb questions.”

“Remember that Dave Chappelle episode when he was teaching the kids about STDs?” I ask him.

He looks up to catch my eyes, already laughing over the infamous episode.

“I’ll beat my dick like it owes me money,” we quote together.

The laughter dies down, but I’m not done teasing him.

“I figure if anybody would know about jerking off too much, it would be you,” I say, shrugging casually, fighting back a grin. “You know, since you never get any.”

“Not that it’s any of your *damn* business,” Amir says smugly, “but I’m getting plenty, and Shon ain’t complaining.”

“I just threw up.” I point to my mouth. “In here a little bit.”

“You told me about the stuff you and Bristol did all the time.”

“Yeah, but I’m me, and you’re you.” I grab an energy drink from the refrigerator and toss it to him. “You see the difference?”

We both laugh, and it feels good. I laugh less than I used to, not gonna

lie. The last month has been the hardest of my life, certainly of my marriage. That day when Bristol cracked the door to let me in, when she read my poem, it was a turning point, but it was just a beginning. It feels like we begin something new every week. Bristol started taking the prescription Dr. Wagner suggested, and her moods stabilized and her hormones evened out some. We've been seeing a grief counselor and attending a support group for bereaved parents. Now that we're back in New York, we'll have to start with a new group since we'll be here for the next few months. Another new start—Kai's starring in her first Broadway show. Bristol is just getting back into the swing of things, and she wanted to base here for a little bit.

"Your little problem should be over soon, right?" Amir raises his brows, gulping down the energy drink.

"My little . . ." Realization hits me, and I offer a frown instead of the smirk he probably expects. "Oh, yeah."

He knows Bristol had her six-week checkup yesterday, right before we flew to New York, clearing us for takeoff, you could say. I never thought I could go six weeks without sex, but that's been the least of my problems. I mean, I had to jerk off *a lot* to function in polite society, but I didn't mind. I waited years to have Bristol, and I have the rest of my life with her. Six weeks is a drop in the bucket. Do I want her? Hell yeah. Maybe it's different for guys, or maybe just different for me, but grief doesn't suppress my sex drive. The fucking Jolly Green Giant could sit on my sex drive and it wouldn't be suppressed, but it's been different for Bristol. She's not the same. She may never be. We may never be.

I feel it, too, that tectonic shift in the fundamental structure of who I am. My very nature rearranged to accommodate Zoe, and even though she's gone, that space I made for her in my heart, it won't ever close. It's a wound that's nowhere near healing—if it ever will—but life has a way of herding us back into its fold, of returning us to the flow of things that keep us moving forward. Bristol's just getting back to work. Between Kai's stint on Broadway and deals she's working for Jimmi—who's here in New York, too—her work pace is as demanding as it's ever been. I think she needs that to distract her from some of the real shit we probably aren't ready to face.

I'm finalizing my next album, starting promo for the book of poetry with Barrow, and have a few dates left on the *Contagious* tour with Iz.

Speak of the devil—my phone buzzes, and Iz's name pops up.

"Dude." I walk through to the living room with Amir and flop onto the

couch. “What’s good?”

“You’re coming tonight?” Iz asks without preamble, a rare urgency in his voice.

“Yeah, I . . .”

My next thought leaves my head when Bristol comes down the steps looking rather scrumptious. She’s been pretty low key over the last six weeks, but tonight she’s got a dinner engagement with Jimmi and she’s pulled out all the stops. Her hair grew longer when she was pregnant and falls to the middle of her back, dark, streaked, wild. The dress is simple, relying on the shape of her body for its provocation and seduction, and let’s just say Bristol’s snap back game is on point. Between the grief starvation diet and her previously active life, you’d never know she just had a baby six weeks ago. The dress is white and strapless, clinging to all the curves that are riper now. The milk is gone, but I know her breasts by heart—and by hand—and they’re fuller than before. I love Bristol any way I can get her, but I’m not gonna complain about bigger breasts.

*Not never.*

“Grip?” Iz prompts, voice still anxious. “You *are* coming to the town hall?”

“Sorry. Yeah.” I drag my eyes away from Bristol as she smiles at Amir, greeting him with a kiss on the cheek. “I’m coming. I wouldn’t miss you taking down Clem Ford.”

Bristol’s head jerks around at the mention of that man. Her eyes meet mine, and I can tell she’s on high alert.

“My daughter’s been in an accident,” Iz says abruptly.

I sit up from my indolent slouch on the couch, elbows to my knees and the phone pressed tightly to my ear.

“Man, Iz. I’m sorry to hear that. Is she all right?”

“Yeah. I mean, I think so.” His heavy sigh raises my level of concern. “I don’t know. She’s in Philly, I’m here. My ex was in a hurry and didn’t give a lot of details. She would have told me if it was life-threatening but . . . I just feel like I should be there.”

“Of course. How can I help?”

“Debate Clem Ford.”

*What you talking ’bout, Willis?*

“You want *me* to debate Clem Ford?” I glance up at Bristol, who now stands right beside me, her brows knit into a frown. “I’m not . . . you. I’m not



qualified for that.”

“The hell you’re not.” He sounds a helluva lot more confident than I feel.  
“You got this, Grip.”

His urgency and my doubt wrestle in the silence between us.

“Please,” he says, and with his pride, I know what that costs him.

I run a weary hand over my face.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you need, of course. Is there anything I should know?”

For the next few minutes I jot down contacts and details the organizers sent him. By the time I hang up and let him go to his daughter, the initial panic has passed. I’m feeling slightly better.

“It’s on you?” Amir asks, the game abandoned on the couch beside him.

“Looks like.” I glance at my watch, a quick smile quirking my lips that the piece of shit is still telling time after all these years. “It’s not far, but let’s take a car. We need to roll soon.”

I stand, bringing my body just inches from Bristol’s.

“You look beautiful.” I forego her lips, careful not to smear the vivid line of her lipstick, and opting to kiss Neruda’s scripted words running along her shoulder instead. I lift the gold bar necklace hanging between her breasts bearing the same inscription.

“Is Dr. Hammond’s daughter okay?” Worry pinches her expression.

“I think so.” I caution myself to keep it casual. Any talk of danger to a kid hits too close to home, brings up too many things we’re trying to get past. “He didn’t have all the information and was on his way to Philly.”

The longer we stand here together, the less I think about anything but us. I hope Iz’s daughter is okay, and I’m nervous about debating Ford, but Bristol’s scent, her proximity make everything else fade. We haven’t even talked about what the doctor said at her six-week. It was such a whirlwind getting out of LA and arriving here, and now we’ve both been pulled into commitments. At this rate, it’ll be tomorrow before my sore wrist goes into retirement. I rest my hands at her hips, rubbing my palms along the silkiness of her dress, imagining her skin, even silkier beneath. I turn a pointed glare on Amir, not so subtly signaling him to get ghost and give me a few minutes with my girl before we have to go our separate ways for the night.

“Uh, I’ll meet you downstairs in . . .” His expression inquires as he heads for the door.

“Twenty minutes. I need to get there a lot earlier now.”

“K. I’ll call for the car.”

“Bye Amir,” Bristol says. “We’ll see you in a little bit.”

“We?” I eat up the inches separating us, leaning down to run my nose along the satiny curve of her neck. “Damn, you smell good, Bris.”

“Thanks.” She pulls back and grabs her phone from the couch. “If you think for one second I’m leaving you in the same room with Clem Ford without me, you have another thing coming.”

As much as I want her with me, I don’t want her babysitting or feeling like I can’t handle my shit with this idiot.

*Okay . . . I did lose my shit a little that last time, but that’s beside the point.*

“That’s not necessary,” I tell her.

“Okay, it’s not necessary.” She doesn’t look up while her fingers fly over the keys of her phone. “But I’m still coming.”

“Speaking of coming . . .” I pluck the phone from her fingers and hide it behind my back. “We didn’t get to talk about what the doctor said yesterday.”

I can’t read her face, but she stops reaching for the phone.

“Oh, she said I’m fine.” She licks her lips, her brows jerking together and her eyes shifting away. “I mean, we can . . . ya know.”

My arm drops to my side and I hand her the phone without a word.

*We can ya know* wasn’t exactly the response I was hoping for. I mean, it’s great that we can . . . ya know . . . but she doesn’t sound too enthusiastic about it, certainly not desperate for it like I am. I swallow my disappointment and smooth over another layer of patience.

“Great.” I clear my throat and glance down at my dark jeans, button-up, and Jordans. “I look okay? I wasn’t planning to be onstage but I—”

“Grip, I’m sorry,” she interrupts. “You’ve been really patient, and I know it’s been hard.”

It’s *hard* right now with the double addiction of her scent and her nearness seeping into my veins and smoldering in my blood and headed for my cock like a cum-seeking missile, but I play it off.

“Babe, it’s okay.” I cradle her face between my hands and caress her cheeks. “However long you need. I’m not some horny beast.”

She gives me a look that says, *I know you.*

“Okay, I’m a horny beast.” I laugh to keep from crying because I’m as hard as Skid Row right about now. “But we have the rest of our lives.”

*If I say it enough, maybe this hard-on will believe me.*

“Tonight, when I get home . . .” she starts.

“Tonight? Yeah, we can do tonight.” *Eager bastard.* “Or tomorrow. Tonight works if you want.”

“I was *going* to say it’ll be late when I get home tonight.” Bristol’s smile loosens because she’s not so secretly laughing at me. “I have to meet Jimmi when I leave the debate, and there’s no telling what time I’ll get home.”

I’ve fucked on less than two minutes of sleep before, but I don’t point that out. If there’s a curfew on our new sex life, we can ease into this.

“I’m . . . I don’t know . . .” She shrugs. “Nervous? I know that sounds crazy. Are you nervous?”

“About sex?” I cannot wrap my mind around this concept. “Uh, no. Not even a little bit.”

“Grip, oh my God.” She laughs, and it does sound nervous, unsure, which she’s never been. What we’ve been through changed me, and it changed her, maybe in ways I wasn’t prepared for, but our vows didn’t come with conditions, and neither does my love.

*Ask me when your belly is full like the moon,  
and our love has stretched your body with my child,  
Leaving your skin, once flawless,  
now silvered, traced, scarred,  
I will worship you.  
My eyes will never stray.  
My heart will never wander,  
gladly leashed to you all my days.  
I am fixed on you.*

It’s all still true and always will be. I couldn’t have known to write about losing that child, about losing bits and pieces of ourselves. You don’t see things like that coming, and you have no idea how it will affect you. You can only choose the right person, the person you want to go through shit with. Bristol is that person for me. I’ve always known she could endure anything life threw at her, that she would fight right alongside me. There’s always been a strength in her, but now it’s titanium core.

“I’m not nervous because nothing has changed,” I tell her, bending to align our eyes, our lips, our hearts.

“Things *have* changed.” She lowers her lashes, trying to hide from me. “My body and—”

“I love your body because it has you in it.” I drag my lips over the curve

of her jaw, groaning at the taste of her along the way. “Sweet Jesus, Bristol. How could you think anything has changed for me?”

“Not just physically.” She glances up at me. “I don’t feel the same.”

At those words, my heart stumbles in my chest. A tundra inches over my whole body.

“About . . . me?” I can’t regulate my breathing. “You don’t feel the same about me?”

“Oh, God, no. Not that, Grip.” She reaches up to touch the side of my face, her eyes earnest. “I feel the same about *you*. You know I’m . . . it’s just . . . I’m all over the place. I’ve always been uninhibited with you, and now I feel caged, like I’ve had to keep my emotions on such a short leash lately, and there’s something in me that’s not free.”

She spreads her hands and shakes her head, helplessness in the look she aims up at me.

“I’m not doing a good job of articulating this, but I’m—”

My phone cuts her off, and I want to hurl it and Amir across the room.

“Dude, what the hell do you want?” I snap.

“Put your dick up and get down here,” Amir replies calmly, used to me.

“Unless you want to be late and leave Iz hanging.”

*Shit. Have I mentioned that I hate Amir?*

“Oh, and I got you a brace,” he says.

“A brace? For what?”

“That carpal tunnel.” His deep chuckle taunts me and my stiff dick and my sore wrist.

“Fuck you.” I hang up and turn to Bristol. “Car’s ready. You sure you want to go?”

“There’s no way you’re going—”

“A simple yes would suffice.” I grab her hand, pausing to let her scoop up her clutch from the side table.

The town hall is being held at that same bookstore, and it’s being televised again. The magnitude of this hits me as I’m riding in the back of the SUV, cramming like this is some quiz.

“I’m not Iz,” I mumble, caressing Bristol’s hand absently while Googling stats on my phone. “Ford’s gonna eat me alive.”

“Ford will *wish* he was facing Iz tonight instead of you.” Bristol stretches her eyes at the skeptical look I offer in response to that bit of ridiculousness. “I’m serious. Iz may have the degree and the books and the credibility and

the—”

“Let me know when you get to the reassuring part, babe.”

“And all those things.” She pauses, leaning her head onto my shoulder. “But you have passion. You’re brilliant. You know these issues. You’ve *lived* these issues. Just tell them what you know, what you’ve experienced.”

Her confidence soothes my tattered nerves, and her reassurances give me peace in a way no one else can. She’s always done that. Her eyes glow with pride and love and confidence in me. This feels like us. It’s been months since we felt like *us*, since there’s been any ease around us, *between* us. Maybe it’s being in a different city. Maybe it’s knowing we’re rounding a bend with Dr. Wagner loosening the chastity belt. Whatever it is, it feels good. For the first time since Zoe died, it feels right.

Even before we lost Zoe, the shadow of loss hung over us for months. I know we’ll never be the same. We’ll bear the scars of the ordeal we’ve suffered, but we’ll still be us. It’s not about *what* we endure, but *that* we endure, the fact that I ain’t going nowhere, and neither is she, no matter what’s tossed our way.

“We’re here,” she says, studying the line of people crowding the sidewalk. “You ready?”

“Hell no.” I bring her knuckles to my lips. “But are you with me?”

“Hell yeah,” she whispers, dotting kisses along my chin.

“Then I’m good.”

I capture her lips, wanting just a taste to hold me over, but dammit she’s so sweet and I can’t stop. Hunger breaks the surface of my control and makes me sloppy. Deep licks, sharp bites. I’m sucking her chin, nuzzling her neck. Without my permission, my hand wanders to cup her breast, to pinch her nipple, her sharply drawn breath making me even harder. I need it in my mouth. I’m sliding to my knees in front of her when everything crashes and burns.

“Ahem.” Amir, not looking even a little shamefaced, grabs our attention. “Like your mama always says, if you didn’t bring enough for everybody, put it away.”

“You vibe-killing, cock-blocking motherfucker,” I say as good-naturedly as can be expected with a saber poking through my jeans. Bristol’s throaty, unabashed chuckle doesn’t help matters. *Inhibited, my ass*. I don’t care what time she gets home, I’ll be up and ready to show her how uninhibited she still is.

“Let’s go kick some racist ass,” I say, struggling to refocus.

“Kicking racist ass” may be overstating my performance, but I hold my own against Clem Ford. I’m not Iz. I don’t have the epidemiological substantiation for my responses. I know fewer statistics than Iz does, and God knows I’m not as polished, but every bullshit reason Ford trots out for his corrupt system and avaricious worldview, I have an answer for.

“Are you saying crime shouldn’t be punished?” Ford asks after we’ve been at it for an hour. “That black men deserve special treatment?”

“Special treat . . .” Disbelief traps the words in my mouth. “You think we get special treatment?”

“It sounds to me like that’s what you’re asking for, that crime be overlooked.”

“No, I’m asking that justice be blind and that punishment fits the crime the same for everyone,” I say, outrage stiffening my voice. “That a black man with a busted tail light not spend weeks in jail because he doesn’t have bail money when someone snorting coke is given a slap on the wrist and set free. Prosecute a man for being guilty, not for being black, brown or poor.”

“Oh, not this argument again.” He rolls his eyes.

“Which argument are you anticipating exactly?” I demand, heat licking up my neck in the face of his derision. “The systematic criminalization of black and brown men in America? Or maybe you think I’ll point out that when crack ravaged communities of color in the nineties it was a crime, but now when we have widespread opioid abuse in suburbs and rural areas it’s a health crisis? I’m not saying it’s *not* a health crisis, but where was that perspective, that compassion when drugs eviscerated a generation of black people and their communities?”

“I’m only saying—”

“Oh, no,” I cut in over him. “You probably thought I’d regurgitate facts about men of color serving three, four times the sentences for possession of marijuana as other groups for possession of cocaine and heroin. Are those the arguments you were expecting?”

For a silent second, hatred rears from behind the polite mask covering Ford’s face. His fury is fire, but my composure isn’t even signed. And before he can hide it, I see that my even keel only makes him angrier.

“The courts determine the appropriate punishment for the crime, Mr. James,” he finally replies, his voice smooth and restrained.

“And when there is no crime, Mr. Ford?” I ask, not waiting for his

response. “When black men, Hispanic men are pulled over and arrested for bullshit reasons and then languish in the system for months because they don’t have money for bail for their non-crime? What’s their crime? Their skin color? Their poverty?”

“I don’t think—”

“No, you don’t have to think about it, do you?” I punch the words for emphasis. “When corporations like yours set lock-up quotas, demanding ninety percent prison occupancy rates, securing cheap labor for your businesses, to do your work, you don’t think about the charges the system has to trump up to meet those quotas, do you?”

“We don’t—”

“What if people in certain states start paying attention to the fine print of their tax bills? How outraged will they be when they realize they are penalized for fewer prisoners? That they pay for empty beds? It’s outrageous.”

“What you call outrageous, we call capitalism,” he says, looking into the audience for understanding, because the word “capitalism” always works.

“I’m a capitalist,” I interject before he can garner much support. “Ask me how much money I made on my last tour.”

I look out at the audience, playing into the curiosity on their faces.

“I have no idea.” I shrug. “Too much for me to keep up with.”

A smattering of laughter emboldens me to finish my point.

“I bleed green like the next American.” I look out to the audience instead of at Ford. “But I won’t stand by counting my money while innocent men sit in jail for months, years because they don’t have the resources to prove their innocence. Men like [Khalief Browder](#). At sixteen years old, he was wrongfully accused and imprisoned for stealing a backpack. This innocent young man rotted in jail in Rikers Island for three years without a conviction—without a *trial*. Two of those years he spent in solitary confinement. He was little more than a child himself.”

I choke back anger and frustration at the miscarriage of justice. I can still see him in my mind, his young face and bright, intelligent eyes.

“He was never the same,” I continue quietly. “And when he was finally released—after three years, no trial, and no conviction—he later took his own life.”

Quiet descends over the crowded shop.

“I’m not asking for special treatment,” I say, looking back to Ford. “I’m

begging for reform, working toward it, so our justice system won't have the blood of boys like Khalief on its hands."

The applause, loud and spontaneous, startles us both. We've debated for well over an hour in relative quiet because the moderators requested the audience hold their response. Red crawls up Ford's neck and jagged displeasure seeps into his face. I look out, searching for Bristol in the crowd. She's on her feet, applauding with a smile wider and brighter than I've seen in months. It was worth it. Sitting in this hot seat, unprepared and scared pissless that I'd let Iz down—it was all worth it to see that smile on her face.

"You were amazing," she whispers when I come off the small stage.

"Thank you." I kiss the corner of her mouth, wishing all these eyes weren't trained on us. "You 'bout to bounce? To meet Jimmi?"

"Nope." She shakes her head, eyes locked with mine. "I asked her for a rain check. I wanted to spend time with my husband."

I really hope "spend time" is a euphemism for "screw my husband till we pass out from exhaustion," but I'll get clarity later. I just nod and keep her close to me as I sign autographs and take selfies and whatever else fans and people from the audience come up with for me to do. I twist our fingers together and pull Bristol into my side. She tends to wander off for this part, gets impatient and fidgety and wonders how I put up with this long line of people. I'm a patient man. Waiting on *her* taught me to be patient. All those years when I wasn't sure we would have this life together, that taught me patience.

Feeling this familiar closeness that I've missed, the closeness tragedy tried to steal from us, I'm not letting her out of my sight. Matter of fact, I'm tempted to send Amir in the car home ahead of us. Last time, we walked home from this very bookstore and were engaged by the end of the night. I'm considering shutting down the long line when someone taps my shoulder.

I turn to meet the cold calculation in Clem Ford's eyes. Bristol's fingers tighten around mine, a silent encouragement and warning. I tip my head slightly in her direction and nod, acknowledging her message: *play it cool*.

"Good job tonight, Mr. James," he drawls, looking mighty self-satisfied for a man who ended the night with most of the room opposing his views.

"Thank you." I can't bring myself to lie and say he did a good job—a good job doing what? Being an entitled asshole? We'll just leave it there.

"I didn't want to leave without saying I was sorry," he continues, even though my back is already half turned away.



“Sorry?” I glance at him over my shoulder, one brow lifted. “For?”

“For your loss, of course.” His voice pitches too low for the line of people waiting to hear. “I heard about the condition your daughter suffered from. It’s tragic really, but you know what many have long held about children from . . .”

His eyes flick in Bristol’s direction and then back to me.

“Marriages like yours.” He pauses, a demon’s gleam in his eyes. “Some think those children are abominations. I haven’t seen pictures of her, but I’ve heard she—”

My fist is already arcing toward his face. I know it’s a cruel, clever trap. I know he’s pushing my buttons in the worst situation possible—with the cameras probably still rolling and in front of all these fans. He wants me violent, not civilized, educated, articulate, certainly not putting his flabby, pasty, bigot ass in its place, but knowing his agenda and letting this go are two different things. It’s too much for him to speak about Zoe like that. Before I can reach him, a blur of white separates Ford from me, and a *crack* sounds through the space. Collective shock ripples through the crowd as they watch my wife glare up at the shit bag destined for the hard end of my fist.

“You aren’t worthy to speak my daughter’s name,” she says, low enough for no one else to hear, fiercely enough to strip bark off trees in Central Park. “She did more in one day than you’ll do in your whole miserable life, you racist asshole.”

Ford’s hand touches the livid mark on his face and he sputters, but Bristol charges on before he can speak.

“You want to send someone to prison?” she asks. “Send me. Press charges against *me*.”

His eyes, narrowed and angry, telegraph his outrage as the event organizers, with Amir’s help, hustle everyone outside, even though people continue to look curiously over their shoulders at the drama unfolding. His supporters try to press close, but the event security herds them through the front door while a few stay close to us.

“I will press charges and—”

“Oh, please do,” Bristol interjects. “Then I can tell the whole world that you told a recently bereaved mother that her child was an abomination. Let’s see how quickly the sponsors for your radio show disappear then, Mr. Family Values. And the super PAC raising money for your future political aspirations—how long would it take them to withdraw their support?”

He blanches, licking nervously at the spittle collected in the corner of his mouth.

“It would be your word against mine,” he says with false calm.

“And who would people believe?” Bristol tilts her head to a pitying angle. “Do you know who my brother is? The people I manage and represent? Who my father is? The power my mother wields in this town? Do you know who’s mentored me since college? You don’t have nearly enough influence or firepower to fight me.”

She takes a step closer, and I step with her, grabbing her arm, hating to see her any closer to him.

“Bristol, let’s go,” I say, reflecting the words she used to calm me the last time we had an encounter with this man.

Her eyes plead with me to let her handle it this time, and after a moment, I reluctantly nod, linking my arm around her waist in case something pops off. I know why she did it, but it’s galling and I abhor the fact that she put herself in danger—again, for me, but I’ll deal with that once we’re done.

“It’s not all those people you should worry about,” she continues, pressing her arm over mine at her waist, twining our fingers.

“It’s me you should fear, because of the three of us”—with her free hand, she gestures to herself, Ford, and me—“you and I are the thugs. My husband is an honorable man. You won’t bring him down, and the next time you try, I’ll show you what an abomination looks like.”

Ford’s eyes slit with blood-thirst and he practically bares his fangs at Bristol. The air chills around us, his malevolence sweeping in like an icy wind.

“You keep looking at her like that,” I tell him through gritted teeth, “I’ll undo all her hard work convincing these nice people I wasn’t half a second off whipping your ass.”

“You think too highly of yourself, boy,” he spits, a gnarled smile on his face. “Upstarts like you, imposters. Your day is coming, though.”

“Oh, my day is here.” I struggle to maintain my composure. He’s pushing every button, and I need to get out of here before things get worse, before he says something else that will make me want to squeeze the life from his body.

“You take our jobs, our opportunities”—his narrowed eyes shift to Bristol—“our women, and you weaken the country my ancestors built, but we *will* take it back.”

“They built this country on my ancestors’ backs, motherfucker.” We go

from me restraining Bristol to her restraining me. “None of us were here first. Unless you’re Native American, you’re an import just like me. We didn’t ask to come here, but we’re here now, and I have just as much right to it as you do. It’s as much mine as it is yours, maybe more, because nothing about you, what you believe, looks anything like the America I believe in.”

We’re a trifuckta, three sets of horns tangled up, when Amir steps in to break the tension.

“Car’s here,” he says tersely with a belligerent glance at Ford before he looks back to me. “You ready?”

I can’t even look at Ford for another second, the muscles of my arms straining and my fists clenching with the need to pound his face until it’s unrecognizable. I help Bristol into the car and immediately fling myself into the corner of the back seat, chin in my hand. Fury hounds me as I consider the city lights, unable to look at Bristol, much less speak to her.

“Grip, if you could—”

“Don’t.” It’s the only word I can manage without tearing into her.

“I know you’re upset I slapped him, but—”

“Bristol, be quiet.”

I close my eyes. I count to ten. I try to visualize a serene locale, but there is not enough woosah in the world to calm me down right now. It’s silent for a few moments, my harshly drawn breaths the only sound in the car.

“But if you would just—”

I snap my head around and pin her to the leather seat with a glare.

“What did I say? Not another word until we get home.”

“I’m not some child you can silence when you don’t like what I say,” she fires back, irritation pinching her pretty features.

She doesn’t realize her indignation is a puny thing compared to my wrath.

“One more word outta you, Bristol James, and you’re getting spanked or fucked in this back seat,” I snap. “Amir can never un-see either of those things. You decide what it’s gonna be.”

She blinks a few times, her eyes narrowed but a little nervous because she knows I mean every word. She huffs out a breath, sitting in her little corner and folding her arms over her chest, rolling her eyes in Amir’s direction. *What the fuck ever.* Pout, throw a tantrum and flail on the floor for all I care, but she better not say another damn word to me.

“Let us out,” I tell Amir when we reach our building. He and the driver take the SUV to the underground parking garage while we go through the

lobby. In the elevator, I still cannot stomach looking at her. I'm so pissed right now, and the worst part? I'm harder than a motherfucker. There was a time when I'd know how this night would end. We'd have a knock-down, drag-out, we'd resolve the issue, and then we'd fuck the night away with makeup sex—but we haven't had sex in six weeks, and the things I have to say to her may not be resolved tonight.

As soon as we're inside, she takes off her shoes and stomps up the steps like we're done.

*The hell.*

She makes it halfway before I catch up to her, grabbing her arm.

"Where do you think you're going?" I demand, eye to eye since she's on the step above.

"To bed," she says. "You're being ridiculous about this, and, apparently, you need space to calm down."

"Oh, I need space to calm down?" The anger I've been checking busts the seams. "Is that what you think I need?"

"Yeah. I think so."

"No, Bristol, what I need is for you to stop hurling yourself in front of Mack trucks every time you think you're helping me."

"I *was* helping." She throws her free arm out to the side. "If you had hit Ford after all the things you said tonight, it would have undermined everything. That's exactly what he wanted."

"So you *slapped* a powerful, evil, dangerous man like Clem Ford? That's your answer?"

"You have a better one?"

"Anything that doesn't involve you making an enemy of someone like him is a better solution, but that seems to be your forte—making dumb decisions to *save* me."

"Don't you dare bring up Parker," she says with heat.

"The same recklessness you demonstrated with Parker," I reply through gritted teeth, "is the recklessness you showed tonight when you slapped fucking Clem Ford."

"Don't ask me not to protect you," she says, her body taut with frustration and anger.

"You don't protect me, dammit!" My voice shatters the quiet of our home, splintering any chance for peace. "I protect *you*."

"That is the biggest load of chauvinist crap I've ever heard," she yells

back, the veins in her neck straining with the force of her anger.

“This isn’t about chauvinism or you being my equal, or whatever feminist *shit* you want to trot out. Call me a caveman, I don’t give a fuck. You will never put yourself in that position again.”

“Yes. I. Will.” The delicate line of her jaw juts out. “If the situation calls for it.”

“The situation won’t call for it.”

“You have a target on your back, Grip.” The concern in her eyes overpowers the anger. “Don’t you see that?”

“You think I don’t know?” I blow out an exasperated breath. “The more I do this, the deeper I get into these issues, the bigger the target gets. I can live with it, but what I cannot live with is you jumping in front of me every time you think I’m in trouble.”

“I won’t even think twice.”

“Bristol, no.” I clutch my head in both hands and look up at the ceiling. “You don’t get it.”

“No, *you* don’t get it.” Some of the anger melts from her face. “You’re right, this isn’t about me being a feminist. It’s about me being your wife, your partner. I’m not some damsel in distress, Grip. I don’t need rescuing, but if I ever do, I know you’d do whatever was necessary to protect me. All I’m asking is that you expect the same from me, and not lose your shit when I do it.”

I was right. This won’t be resolved tonight. I’m always going to want to protect her, and she’s always going to risk everything to protect me.

“You protect me all the time,” she adds softly. “You saved me.”

“When?” I scoff. “When have you ever sat your ass down long enough for me to save you?”

“When I was in the dark, unable to shower or eat or get out of bed . . . unable to imagine living again. That’s when you saved me.”

I wasn’t prepared for that answer. Her honesty and the naked need in her eyes chip away at my frustration.

“We saved each other,” I finally reply.

“That’s my point.” She pauses long enough for the words to reach my head and then my heart. “Yeah, I’m reckless. When you’re threatened, I don’t always think it through. I promise I’ll work on that, but I will save you if I can. That’s what this is: you and me spending the rest of our lives saving each other, supporting each other, loving each other. You say I’m precious to

you, right?”

“The most precious thing in my life, yes.” I cup her neck with one hand and wrap the other around the curve of her waist. My hands are ready to make up, finding her hips, fingers spreading over the top of her ass.

“We’ve been through a loss no parents should ever have to experience,” she says, her voice wobbling, her eyes watering. “I know I wouldn’t have survived losing Zoe if it hadn’t been for you.”

“I feel the same way.” I drop my forehead to hers.

“I love you,” she whispers, angling her head until our lips brush together. Just that contact is kindling, and after six weeks, I’m a dry bush ready to burn. The fire in my belly could quickly roar out of control.

“I need to make love to you.” I dot kisses over the slant of her collarbone, lick into the well at the base of her throat, suck the gold chain and the skin beneath into my mouth.

“Yes.” She licks her lips, dropping her eyes but sliding her hands up my chest and linking her wrists behind my neck. “I want that, too.”

“Bris.” I groan into her neck, nudging the strapless dress down to expose one breast. I circle my nose around her nipple, blowing on it but not yet taking it in my mouth. It blossoms, stiffens, straining toward my lips. “I want to be gentle, but—”

“Don’t be.” Need ignites in her eyes. “I’ve been numb for too long. My senses have been muted, I guess by depression, drugs, I don’t know, but everything has been a shadow of what I felt before. This, now, us together, it feels rich. It finally feels right again.”

She seizes me by the jaw, pulling me close and forcing her way into my mouth, sucking on my tongue, her cheeks hollowing with the forceful suction.

“Fuuuuuuck.” I squeeze my eyes shut because I know I won’t be as gentle as I mean to be. “I don’t want to hurt you this first time.”

“I feel like someone who cuts just to feel.” Her eyes find mine. “That’s how numb I’ve been. I don’t mind if it stings a little.”

“You’ve been numb? You want to cut to feel?” I slide her hand down to my cock, nearly poking a hole in my jeans. “Here’s your knife.”

She squeezes my dick, her hand sliding up and down over the jeans, her eyes entangled with mine.

“Tell me what you want,” she whispers, echoing the words that have been so pivotal in our relationship, one of us always trying to out-please the other.

“I want you right here, spread on these steps.” My words are rough with desperation and lust.

Wordlessly, she drops to sit on the step, elbows behind her on the step above, the motion pushing her breasts forward. One nipple is already out, the dress still half off, half on. She’s obeyed every command, but I have one more.

“Panties off.”





## BRISTOL

GRIP'S smoky words heat the air, and without breaking eye contact, I reach under my dress and slide the wisp of silk off, tossing it behind me farther up the staircase. I tease the dress up my thighs and spread my legs for him.

I'm gloriously wet. Since Zoe died, I've been practically asexual. There were days I felt nothing. Even when I looked at Grip, I would feel love, but passion was elusive, like my heart, my body could only accommodate so much emotion at once, and grief consumed everything. Six weeks later, my heart is still broken. There are some places that may never quite heal, but the passion, the want, the scorching need I've always felt for this man alone is finally blazing a trail through my body again, and it starts between my legs.

"I want you wider," he says, his voice pitched low and dark and tortured. His eyes never leave my pussy as he methodically undoes his belt, unbuttons his pants, slides down his zipper, jerks his shirt over his head.

I yawn my thighs open, propping my heels on the step. I'm spread like a buffet for him. He licks his lips, a tell of his hunger.

I run a brazen finger down my slit. He drops his long body in front of me, stretching down the staircase below, elbows propped on the step. His head is between my legs. I reach down, spreading it, serving myself to him. He groans into my pussy, slurping and biting and licking and running his nose through my folds. Arms lengthened down my body as I keep the lips pulled back for him, my head drops to the step behind me. Pleasure long forgotten exults through me, winding between my toes like steam, circling the tense muscles of my calves, the quivery line of my thighs. My spine bows and my hips buck into his mouth. I lift one foot off the step, curling my leg around

him, digging my heel into his back and thrusting over his face. Nothing exists for me except the starvation of his mouth against me and his thumb—*dammit*, his thumb in my ass, working its way into the spindled hole and finding neglected nerve endings.

“Oh, God,” I scream. “Yes, yes, yes, yes. Yes. Don’t stop, Grip. Baby, don’t stop.”

Ever since that day I heard Grip’s heartbeat, I’ve been living by proxy, leaning on his heart to beat for mine. Grief handed me a heart of iron, and I rusted it with my tears, a muscle not made of flesh, not pumping blood. Ever since that day I’ve been a lament in limbo, no longer in the dark but not fully in the light, but here, now, Grip’s touch drags me into the light.

I pop, like an incandescent bubble. The pain, the grief, the desolation, the darkness of the last six weeks unfurls from me in a low keening moan. It hums in my throat and explodes until I’m a deranged thing, bucking and flailing and weeping, tearing at my hair, pinching my breasts, scratching Grip’s back, feeling his skin beneath my nails. My body is making up for lost time, demanding satisfaction, expecting its due.

“Fuck me.” The plea trips over my bitten lips. “Any way you want, I don’t care.”

The dark, unspoken demand of his eyes, the shiny wetness on his wicked mouth, the scent of me hanging from his lips leaves me completely willing and wanton.

“Yes, that,” I gasp. “You can do that.”

“Babe, I don’t want to hurt you.” Even as he says it, I see a hot hope, a fantasy coming to life in his eyes.

“You won’t,” I tell him, my voice hoarse. “I want to feel you as deep as you can go, wherever you want to be. Make me feel it, Grip.”

“I have lube upstairs,” he says, his eyes drifting up the staircase.

“I have lube right here.” I run my fingers through my dripping slit. “Work with what we’ve got.”

“Damn, Bris.”

A shudder rolls over the muscled slope of his shoulders, tensing the ridged plane of his stomach. With my feet I coax his pants and briefs over his hips, pushing them down the carved line of his thighs. He shakes them off, his eyes fixed on my fingers at the hidden zipper in my dress. I pull it down the side until the silk falls away, leaving me completely bare and laid out for him, wearing nothing but Neruda on my shoulder and around my neck.

“Flip over,” he rasps. “On your knees.”

Unhesitatingly, I turn over, placing my elbows on the step above and my knees below, my body a perfectly fuckable right angle. He doesn't tell me what he's about to do, and the questions, the wondering adds an erotic layer of suspense. He runs his cock through my folds over and over and over, wetting himself with my juices, all the while stretching me out on a rack of sensual torture. I'm mindless, catching his cadence and pumping my hips in time with his. His fingers at my nipples and his lips raining kisses down my back make me whimper. One finger and then another spear my pussy, varying the rhythm from swift to languid, surprising my flesh, keeping me on edge as I wait for him to take me where I'm not sure he'll fit, but I can't make myself care anymore. My pussy is convulsing around his fingers and I'm reaching behind me to claw at his neck when I feel the first enormous probe. I tense, but his hand at my nipple and fingers moving inside me scatter my reservations.

“Relax, baby,” he says, even though passion and anticipation tighten his voice. “I got you. Tell me if we need to stop.”

I won't stop him. I'm so desperate to be penetrated. I need him thrusting into me—I can't breathe without it. I'm not sure I can endure another second of this empty body. I'm a void waiting to be filled, and I don't care how. Then he pushes forward in excruciatingly slow, slippery inches. The pressure and the width of him are momentarily unbearable, and I gasp. He goes still behind me.

“Don't stop.” I drop my forehead to the step above me.

“Are you sure?” His words singe the delicate skin of my neck.

I just nod my head and bite my lip, trusting him to make it good for me.

And oh God, he does. He slow-slides in deeper, all the while working my nipples and thrusting into me with his fingers, stoking me like a fire, tendrils of smoke spiraling from my core and fanning out through my limbs.

Grip's enraptured grunts and curses in my ear, the rhythm of his body, at first careful and then frenzied, trigger some ancient need in me, and my flight-or-fuck instinct kicks in. I push back into him, opening myself more, spreading my legs, giving him an all-access pass to the inner sanctum he's been wanting.

“This is so good,” he rasps in my ear, one palm at my breast, the other between my legs. “I want to stay here, fuck your ass all night, but I'm gonna come.”

With every thrust, he abrades nerves I never knew existed, mysteries and sensations my body tucked away and hid from me, but Grip has found them. I'm panting, I'm screaming. My body is an outcry, and he spills his response into me, going rigid behind me, inside of me.

Our harsh, heaving breaths punctuate the quiet as we lay in a sweaty sprawl on the staircase. Grip eases out and gently turns my body over. The lip of the stair digs into my spine, but I don't care. He rains kisses over my shoulders, suckling my breasts, fingers invading my hair and caressing my scalp.

"Thank you, Bris. God, I've missed you so much. I love you," he whispers over my lips, sending his tongue in to taste me. "I can't stop touching you. I thought I might lose . . ."

His voice breaks. He buries his head in my neck, and I feel his tears mingling with the sweat sheening my body. He reaches up, looking at me with wet eyes, and brushes away the tears I didn't realize were streaming over my cheeks, too.

"We made it." He smiles at me, eyes tender. "I told you we could survive anything together."

He never doubted us. When I wasn't sure I could make it, when I couldn't find my way out of the darkness entombing me, he came for me.

"Don't ever tell me not to save you," I say, tears rolling between my naked breasts and over the gold that binds our hearts together. "You saved me, Grip. You came for me."

He looks at me curiously, like it's something he can't believe I'm surprised by, like he wonders if I'm still figuring it out. He bends to lick at my tears and lifts the wild hair from my eyes, the look he rests on me devoted and sure.

"I'll always come for you, Bristol."

He said it after eight years of waiting for me. He said it when he came to LA after our fight. He's said it in a million ways with and without words. He says it with his heart, and I have to believe him because when I was at my lowest and thought all was lost, he found me in hell and brought me home.

## EPILOGUE

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers -  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all -*

– *“Hope” is the thing with feathers* , Emily Dickinson

“WHY DO I let her talk me into this shit?” I mumble, staring at the instructions I thought were in English, but may as well be Greek.

“Shit!”

I turn horrified eyes on my eighteen-month-old daughter’s cherubic face. She’s triumphant because she said a word.

A really bad one.

I squat down to the floor where she’s playing with the Sesame Street app on her iPad.

“We don’t say that word, Nina,” I tell her gently, running a hand over the dark coils of hair springing with life and health. Bristol takes such pride in finally figuring out how to do our daughter’s hair. Jade, of all people, who wore cornrows to the prom, helped her, Jade and YouTube—and my mama, and Shon. Apparently, it takes a village to do Nina’s hair.

“Shit!” Nina says again, her delighted eyes startlingly silver against the copper of her skin.

“No, baby.” My panic rises. The kid can’t say “dog,” but manages to say “shit” twice in ten seconds. “Bad word.”

“Shit!”

“Dammit,” I say under my breath. “Bristol’s gonna kill me.”

“Dammit,” Nina parrots absently, her attention already back on Sesame Street.

This is bad. I’m devising how to make this *not* my fault when my cell phone rings. Splitting a look between the directions I won’t understand without Rosetta Stone and the toddler I’m corrupting, I glance at the screen.

“Mrs. O’Malley, hi.” Pleased to hear from her, I slide my back down the newly painted wall to sit on the floor. “Happy belated birthday. I hope you got the flowers we sent.”

“Yes.” The one word comes over the line faintly but carries her distress. “I . . . thank you. It was sweet.”

“Is everything okay?” I frown, wondering what could have the usually upbeat owner of our place in New York upset.

“No, I . . .” Her voice collapses, and her pain reaches across the miles. “He’s gone, Marlon. Oh, God. Patrick’s gone.”

For long seconds, her tears, the sound of her grief, shreds me. I’m at a loss, searching for the right words to say, but if Bristol goes first, there won’t be any right words. The whole world will be inadequate if I lose her. I won’t insult Mrs. O’Malley with my platitudes. I respect her devastation, letting her weep for a few seconds until she can speak again.

“It was peaceful,” she finally says, her voice still not strong, but clearer. “I knew it would happen soon, but I wasn’t ready.”

How can you ever be ready to lose the love of your life? The question, even theoretically, accelerates my breath and pricks my heart in sympathy for her and in resignation that one day, we’ll all taste this pain. Death is the most inevitable thing in this life.

“It was the strangest thing,” she continues, fine with me not speaking. “I went to visit him last week, and he said my name.”

A fresh bout of tears floods the line before she continues.

“He said my name in that way only he ever said it.” Her voice sounds wistful, younger even. “Esther. That was it, but he looked right in my eyes and he knew me, Marlon. I know he did. It was really our last moment together. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

“Mrs. O’Malley,” I finally say. “I’m so sorry. I . . . is there anything we

can do?”

For the space of a heartbeat, she’s silent, and then her voice comes strong, like I’m used to hearing it.

“Yes. Yes, there is,” she says. “Keep sending me pictures of that beautiful little girl. We never had children, you know, and . . .” Her words fade into a trail of memories, a path of regrets.

“Of course,” I reply immediately. “We’ll bring her to see you when we’re back in New York.”

“Yes, do that.” She pauses before saying more. “And the apartment is yours if you want it.”

Even as my heart contracts for her loss, I can’t deny my excitement. Bristol and I have leased that apartment for years, hoping one day it would be ours. We’ve made love under the vivid city skyline in that greenhouse, and Bristol made her first pot of edible collard greens there.

It’s where I proposed and where Nina was conceived.

“I . . . yes. We want it, of course.”

“I’ll send all the paperwork to your firm.”

“Sounds great. They’ll take care of it.”

“And one more thing, Marlon.”

“Yes, ma’am. Anything.”

“Remember what I said the first day we met.” Her voice is a thin thread strained to the point of snapping. “Don’t waste one minute.”

Before I can respond, she hangs up. I hold the phone for a few extra seconds, still pressed to my ear like she might share more wisdom. I finally slip it into my pocket, not pulled from my stupor until I feel something wet on my toe.

“Nina, baby.” I scoop her up and rest her on my hip. “Don’t eat Daddy’s feet.”

I walk down the stairs to find Bristol. We’ve been in this house for less than a year, but it felt like home immediately—Bristol made sure of that. She insisted on decorating it herself, thus me going gray trying to read Japanese instructions for something that could have been delivered fully assembled. *I’m too rich for this shit.*

She’s in her office, wearing a frown, ripped-knee jeans, a paper-thin ankle-length cardigan, and a tank top that simply says PERSIST. It’s tight and strains over her swollen breasts and belly. She massages her side, eyes glued to the screen of her laptop.

“Hey.” I put Nina on the floor, lift Bristol from her seat, take her spot, and then pull her back down to sit on my lap.

“Hey.” She turns her head, looking around until she spots Nina, who has taken her post on the floor with Elmo.

Mrs. O’Malley said not to waste a minute, and I won’t. Before Bristol can say another word, I grab her chin and pull her face around to me, delving between her lips, caressing the soft hair escaping from her topknot. She kisses me back, hunger sparking between us like a flare. She turns to face me, splitting her thighs over mine, straddling me with our unborn child sandwiched between our torsos. The kiss slows then stills until she tucks her head under my chin and slides her hand under my T-shirt, caressing the muscles of my stomach.

“What was that for?” she asks huskily, looking up with a smile, her eyes the same silver as Nina’s. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“Mrs. O’Malley’s husband died,” I tell her without any lead-up. “I just got off the phone with her.”

“Oh my God.” Bristol sits back, one hand going to her chest. “Is she . . . how was she?”

“Devastated.”

“I would be inconsolable.” Bristol looks at me, her eyes softening and saddening in empathy. “We’ll send flowers and make sure to visit her when we’re back in the city.”

“That’s what I told her.” I watch for her reaction to my next statement. “She says we can have the apartment.”

“What?” Bristol’s head pops up, her eyes widening. “We can?”

“Yeah, if we want it.”

“We want it!” Bristol bends her brows with a sudden thought. “We’ll have to set up a nursery there, too.”

“Yeah, about the nursery—I’m not assembling any more furniture. That shit’s in German or something.”

“Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Bristol’s narrowed eyes shift from me to our daughter clapping and happily cussing on the floor. My wife pokes a finger in my chest.

“Marlon James, you better fix her.”

It takes the rest of the day to reprogram Nina, and I’m still not convinced she won’t say “shit” at inopportune times. I’m plating steaks from the grill for dinner when I realize it’s been a while since I heard any sounds from



Bristol's office. She's negotiating a new deal for Jimmi, a Vegas residency, and it's been more complicated than she anticipated. Kai's in another Broadway show, and Rhyson wants Bristol to set up a Prodigy office in New York. I have to keep an eye on her because she acts like she's not seven months pregnant.

When she's not in the office, I check the nursery because that's where she seemed to always be when it was almost time for Nina to come. We don't know gender, don't know names—we'll figure it out when the baby gets here. With our first pregnancy, we knew too much. We even knew that our baby wouldn't make it. We decided with Nina to take whatever came, and we're doing it again with this one.

As I expected, Bristol's in the nursery, but not setting things up or preparing for Baby Question Mark's arrival. She's sitting in the glider, where she'll nurse this baby the way she did Nina. In her lap is a box I haven't seen in years.

Zoe's memory box.

We only held Zoe for a day, but I think about her all the time. She lives on in our hearts, but also in the three people who received her organs.

Bristol looks up, eyes as wide and wounded as the day we lost our baby girl.

"I miss her." She shakes her head and bites her lip. "I think I always will."

"Of course, we always will." I go to my knees beside her to study the items in the box on her lap—Zoe's tiny handprints and footprints, the lock of her hair, pictures of our family and friends holding her, joy and heartache evident in every shot, the purple feather that hung on her door.

"She's a part of us," I finally say after we caress all of our memories. "As much as Nina is and as much as this one will be."

"Yeah." Bristol nods and tears trickle down her face.

"Dwell in possibility, baby," I whisper against her belly.

Bristol lifts my chin until I meet her eyes.

"Dwell in possibility, baby," she says to me, her eyes tender, loving, secure.

"Do you think it's a boy or a girl?" I ask.

"A boy, definitely."

"Definitely?" I cock a brow at her apparent clairvoyance. "How would you know?"

“I just have a feeling.” She shrugs and runs her hand over my head as I lay my lips to her belly. I push the tank top up to see her stomach, hoping for a kick or some signal that our baby is active and healthy. Bristol’s beautiful pregnant. She thinks I say that to make her feel better, but I love how her body blossoms, her breasts full and heavy, her skin glowing.

“*Ask me when your belly is full like the moon, and our love has stretched your body with my child,*” I say, quoting the vows we took years ago. “*Leaving your skin, once flawless, now silvered, traced, scarred.*”

I look up, meeting her eyes, swimming again with tears, and I caress the faint striations at her waist, on her skin—from Zoe, from Nina, from this baby she’s carrying now.

“I will worship you,” I remind her, taking her hand and tracing the letters tattooed beneath her wedding band, linking our fingers, showing her the ink beneath mine.

“Still?” she asks with a watery smile.

“Yeah.” *Always. Evermore. Even after.* “Still.”

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*STILL* is fiction, but the difficult issues raised in *FLOW*, *GRIP* and *STILL* are fact. Many ask if the story Grip tells about Khalief Browder, an innocent young man who spent years behind bars without trial or conviction and who eventually took his own life, is true.  
It is.

*Thank you so much for going on Grip & Bristol's journey. I hope you enjoyed it and consider leaving an honest review.*

*Rhyson and Kai have three books of their own,  
The Soul Series!  
Read on for the FIRST THREE CHAPTERS of  
Book 1, My Soul to Keep!*

## CHAPTER ONE - KAI

MAMA HAS BEEN DYING all day.

ALS is a stealthy thief. It stole Mama's wide, crooked-tooth smile and left her face a plane of twitches and jerks. That funny *snap, snap* she'd do with her fingers before she started making a fresh batch of biscuits? That saucy little pop and sway of her hips when she raced around the house on Sunday mornings, late for church? ALS snatched those long ago. Now, Mama's fingers lie limp at her sides on the bed sheets, the complete stillness startling and sad.

ALS is a slow assassin and it's been killing my mama for five years.

But I only realize now that the sound of her breath—barely a wheeze breezing past her lips—is the sound of her dying *today*.

“Mama?”

I bundle up a question and a plea into that one word and pray for an answer to either. I'm asking if she's still here. I'm begging her to stay. Oh, I hear that thin, labored breath. I feel that thready pulse, faintly thrumming through the vellumed skin of her wrist. I know she's *alive*, but is she still *here*? I've sensed her soul wrestling with her body all week, trying to break free for the promise of Heaven that keeps Mama going on her hardest days.

The Hospice workers trickle in and out of Mama's small, orderly bedroom, keeping her as comfortable as a woman slowly choking on her own breath can be. They don't know if she can hear me. They only know that she can no longer respond. I am left waiting for the battle to end and for her soul to escape its bodily misery. Mama has endured this last stretch of a race I wouldn't wish on anyone.

I confess there were times I longed for this day. Longed for it to all be over, not just for Mama but for me too. I know it's selfish, but things have been so hard. So different from before. Most of my life, I have been at the center of Mama's world. Dance classes, cheerleading, gymnastics, and vocal lessons—I did them all. Our life was a flurry of activity, shuffling between the small diner downstairs Mama owns with Aunt Ruthie and any number of things I was involved in. Mama dedicated a good part of her life and energy to making sure when my big break came, I'd be ready. But the big break is in my heart. And even though months ago, with the last few words Mama could actually speak, she assured me she was ready, I know I am not.

The tears burn like kerosene, but I refuse to close my eyes. What would I miss? Her eyes flickering open for a last glance? Her mouth pulling into that tender just-for-me smile one final time? I won't look away.

"You need to get some rest, darlin'."

Aunt Ruthie's voice sneaks up on me from behind. I drag my eyes from Mama's face, pale against the faded floral pillowcase long enough to glance over my shoulder. Aunt Ruthie leans into the doorjamb, which I think is the only thing holding her up. Fatigue and weariness have made themselves at home in the deeper crevices around her mouth and eyes. Running Glory Bee, the best little restaurant in our small town, Glory Falls, by herself hasn't been easy. She may not be blood, but she *is* family, and she's been there for Mama and me through all of this.

Mama was the cook of the operation, and Aunt Ruthie, her best friend since third grade, was the business mind. It's so ironic that as far as I can tell, my Korean mother makes the best Southern food this side of the Mississippi. She's known nothing but Georgia though, so her Korean heritage is not so much lost as never found. My grandparents, a Southern Baptist pastor and his wife, adopted her days after she was born. They brought her home from their mission trip, much to their congregation's confusion and then delight. That little, odd-looking girl, so exotic among the farmers and simple, hard-working folks became the sweetheart of Glory Falls Baptist Church. And when Grandpa finally retired, his young assistant pastor was the natural candidate for his replacement *and* Mama's husband.

A hurt so old it's cracked and fragile, threatening to fall apart if I think on it too long, lies heavy on my heart. Daddy should be here. He should be the one holding Mama's hand and crying and loving her until the end. No telling where he is, but it sure as hell ain't here. He hasn't been for many years.

Son of a bitch.

Mama would tap my wrist for swearing. Aunt Ruthie never really cared about the bad words. Her hand on my shoulder reminds me she wants me to rest, but I'm not sure I can leave Mama's side.

"Go on out to the front porch for a bit, Kai Anne. Grab some air." Aunt Ruthie's Southern drawl is even slower than usual, exhaustion dragging at the words.

"No, I don't want...I can't..."

The words fade like my hope.

"A few minutes won't hurt, honey."

I look up and over my shoulder, snagging her eyes with mine, trying to see if she actually believes it. And if so, how much time do I have left with Mama? A day? Two?

“You really believe that?”

“I’ll call you in here if...” Aunt Ruthie’s words follow the same trail mine do, and I wonder if her hope is as faint. “I’ll call if you need to come.”

Mama’s still as a tomb. Her dark hair fans out behind her. Her eyes are closed, and it’s been days since I’ve seen them open, but I remember those eyes. They tilt more than mine. They’re darker than mine. My skin is a fainter gold. My faith is not as strong. She always said I was the brightest thing in this town, but I am a shadow of her in every way that counts. And when she’s gone, what will I be then?

I settle onto the front step with its loose board that Mama never got around to fixing. Daddy promised at least once a week to replace this board that wiggles beneath my bottom as I wait here for the sunrise. I was eight when he left, and always wondered if Mama never fixed that board because she’d be admitting Daddy was never coming home.

Arms around my knees, shivering against the cold, bare feet on the next step down, I wait. I wait for Mama’s favorite time of day. Mama loved... Mama *loves* the sunrise. A new day means new mercies, she’d always say. God’s mercies are new every morning. I search the sky now for mercy. For respite. For light. For a stay of the death hovering over our little house tucked down a dirt road. I wait for the sun to stretch up over the horizon, but right now, I only see dawn; that limbo that hangs between night and day. If I can only see the sunrise.

*God, give me one more day.* One more day of Mama’s fresh mercies.

And just as I’m sure the light is coming to brighten the smudgy hue of dawn, the screen door behind me creaks open. Aunt Ruthie is standing there, face lit by the porch light.

“You better come.” She thumbs at the tears sliding down her hollowed cheeks. “Come on say good-bye.”

This is the break I could never be ready for. Mama breaking free of this world. Free of the pain. This disease has pressed her like a flower between pages. I look back to the sky, but there is still no sun. Still no mercy.

Only dawn.

When I go to Mama, it feels like the room holds its breath, as if it’s waiting for something. Everything is so still. I don’t know how much of my

mama is left in this body, frail and stiff and paralyzed, but whatever part of her remains would hate this. She's fastidious. She'd hate the fact that she cannot control her own drool. That someone else tends to her most intimate needs. When Daddy left, there was a span when Mama was so broken, truly on her own for the first time and unsure if she would manage. For the most part, she recovered. The fiercely independent woman she became would hate all the ways she can no longer take care of herself.

She twists and jerks under the sheets. Even with her eyes closed, a frown puckers her otherwise slackened face. She's not at ease, and yet I see why Aunt Ruthie called me. At any moment, she may be gone. I wonder why she lingers. Mama believes so deeply in the peace beyond this life. As much as I'll miss her, as much as I already feel the black hole spreading over my heart like an ink blot, I want that peace for her. I want her to go.

And then it occurs to me. Maybe I know what Mama's waiting for. I pull back the covers, pressing my fit body to her frail one, laying my warmth against her, and I say the words she used to comfort me countless times. The prayer that many a night she'd say to send me on my way.

"Now I lay me down to sleep." As soon as the words leave my mouth, tears leak down my cheeks. "I pray the Lord my soul to keep."

I lean closer, absorbing as much of her essence as I can before she leaves this world because there will never be another like her. I wrap my arms tight around her tiny, fitful body fighting for peace and whisper in her ear.

"If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

And like my words turned a key to the door she needed to walk through, her body stills. I swear the room around us sighs. Mama draws one last labored breath and then no more.

## **CHAPTER TWO - KAI**

*"You'd be late for your own funeral, Kai."*

The words in my head, as clear as if Mama is rushing off the L.A. Metro bus behind me, pounding alongside me on the sidewalk, jar my thoughts. Even as my heart pinches in my chest, my mouth pulls into my mama's smile. The one her little bits of wit and wisdom always squeezed out of me growing up. The ones that still do.

"I know, Mama." I adjust my backpack and quicken my steps. "I'm working on it."

My phone squawks from my pocket. I know it's Santos, my roommate and best friend, texting me. Bugging me. Worried about me, as usual. Not breaking stride, I pull the phone out, and sure enough.

**Santos: *What the hell? This is not the day to be late. U OK?***

With my head lowered, I rapid-fire my thumbs across the keypad and barely miss walking into a tow zone sign. I stand still to finish the message. I don't care if it's Cher waiting at our voice coach's house. Even she's not worth a concussion. And as much as I love Cher, that's saying something.

**Me: *Up the street and on my way. Missed my bus. Audition was a joke. Can't wait to tell. Who's Grady's mystery guest?***

**Santos: *Hurry your narrow ass up and see for yourself.***

I have a sneaking suspicion I'll be less impressed than Santos, which doesn't take much. An unabashed celebrity whore, he even gets the autographs of obscure reality stars. Really? Excuse me for not being impressed that you are just like me, only you get paid to shop, eat, and act the fool on camera. That isn't talent, and I don't need you to sign anything for me. But thanks.

I stomp the last few blocks to Grady's bungalow. Every time my foot slams into the sidewalk, I envision that vile man's face from the audition I just left under it. Any audition that ends with an invitation to suck a man's dick is suspect, wouldn't you say? I'm tired of being propositioned and objectified and pressured to sleep with these predators who assume I'll set up a drive-thru between my legs to get a record deal. I know girls who do that. Some days, I wish I could throw off my principles and take the easy way. On my back and on my knees, but Mama's voice, even six months after she passed, is still strong in my ears. Strongest in my heart.

Grady's bungalow is deceptively simple. I haven't been in L.A. long, but even I know anything in Arcadia costs a pretty penny. At least more pretty pennies than I have to rub together. Grady houses a small studio in the back of the bungalow where he teaches voice and music. He and Santos have been my saving grace in this town. One my longtime friend and lifeline, the other a mentor of sorts who has grown into the closest thing I've felt to family since I moved here from Georgia.

The heavy wooden door stands open, with just the screen door between me and the muted sounds beyond the entrance and down the hall. Judging by all the cars in the driveway and along the street, every one of Grady's students has shown up to meet this mystery guest he's been dangling in front



of us like a carrot for the last couple of weeks. Guess I'm here to bite like everyone else.

I step inside and close and lock the door after me. Even in this neighborhood, you can never be too safe. And I doubt anyone will be coming after me considering how late I am. The living room, with its eclectic mixture of modern and antique, stands empty. The music, now that I'm inside, reaches me from the rear studio.

And what music. I stop, needing to stand still for a moment. Needing these notes to wash over and past me. I've never heard Grady's old baby grand sound like this. Like some magician is coaxing tricks from it, nimbly charming the keys to make miracles. I don't know classical music very well. Get much beyond "Chopsticks" and I can't name tunes, but even I know that whoever is playing is brilliant. Just moments before, I needed to stand still, but now my feet urge me forward. I have to see who's playing. I want to see them in the throes of this.

I stand in the doorway of the studio, ignoring all the other students standing along the walls and sitting on the hardwood floor. My eyes stick to the man I can see just head and shoulders of in the space between the lifted lid and the piano desk. His eyes are closed, and thank God for that, because it would be so awkward for him to catch me gaping at him. I instantly know him, of course. It's Rhyson Gray, one of the most gifted and well-known musicians in the world, but right now, I don't see the shiny layers of fame, wealth, and privilege I would typically associate with him. The piece he's playing holds him captive, sloughing away all those layers until only this raw yearning on his face remains. His eyes are closed tightly, his brows knitted with the passion of the music he seduces out of the piano.

His features are almost too much. His nose is strong, straight, and prominent. His brows are thick, dark, and slashing. His mouth is wide, sensual, and full. The hard angle of his jaw clenches, like this piece he's playing submerges him in the same emotion drowning me, but he disciplines his face against it. His shoulders are broader than I imagined they'd be, the muscles flexing beneath the white T-shirt covering them as he plays. I'm not even sure if he's handsome, but I know he's dangerously magnetic, like the center of a whirlpool. Something that would suck you in and down before you had time to pull away.

I don't know this piece, but it knows me. Each note slides in, occupying some corner of my soul that's been barren and empty. And the melody

breezes in, scattering dust and cobwebs. Breathing in life. This music, with its rushing crescendos and heaving turns, refreshes me, and I have no idea why. Is it the music? Is it him? Are they separate or somehow inextricably entwined? I love music and know like I know my own name that it is what I'm meant to do, but I've never been moved this way by it. Not this deeply, this quickly, this thoroughly. Like those fingers touching those keys are actually touching me. And though I'm completely covered, I feel naked and exposed. I can only hope that no one sees. That he won't see.

And then the music ends. With a crash of keys, it's over, and thunderous applause presses into the awed silence that immediately follows. Those who were sitting, stand and clap and cheer. We all know we've brushed up against greatness. I'm grateful for the clamor, giving me time to compose myself. To reassemble all the pieces that music broke me into. And the culprit—the man who undid me so effortlessly—opens his eyes like he's coming to himself. Like he'd forgotten we were even there, voyeurs to this fantastic musical display. And then I see those layers wrapping back around him. It starts with the tightening of those full lips, pulled into a practiced smile. It moves to his shoulders, pressed back with pride. And it settles over his eyes, the naked passion of that music hidden in seconds behind the dark, guarded eyes that all of a sudden stare back at me.

### CHAPTER THREE - RHYSON

When I was eleven years old taking the stage at Royal Albert Hall in London for the first time, I told myself it was a sea of faces out there in the audience. I never allowed myself to focus on one particular person. In every venue since, whether before thousands or a group as small as Grady's vocal class, I always block out the faces. I smile. I may even bow, but I blur the faces to remain blissfully oblivious to their expressions of approval, pleasure, or disdain. It insulates me from the crowd and cocoons me inside the music, which is the safest place I have found so far.

Except today, I open my eyes at the end of the Chopin piece, prepared to blindly glance over the crowd in Grady's studio, when I see a face. A *particular* face in a sea of faces. Everyone around her claps, but she doesn't. Her hands hang at her sides, and her expression hovers somewhere between devastation and delight. When music truly affects me, I don't clap either. I don't stand to my feet. I *absorb*. I let the music change me, touch me, and

possess me. That's what she's doing. I recognize it. Everyone around her appreciated my music, but I can see that she, this girl, communed with it.

She is looking at me. I am looking at her. Her face...I wish I had the right words. I write songs and create music for a living. I practically bleed my thoughts and feelings into everything I compose, into every lyric. But I can't find the words to adequately describe this girl. Maybe I've seen girls prettier than she is, but it's hard to tell, because even with the width of Grady's small music room separating us, it's like I've been hurled into an electrical storm. My brain is charged and my thoughts are icy water suspended and trapped inside my head. It's a face I can only inadequately describe as...extravagant. Like God spared no expense when He made this girl.

If I take her in parts, maybe I will do a better job of this. She has this wide mouth the color of fire-blasted rose petals. Her chin is slightly pointed, narrow, but her face widens and flares at her high cheekbones. Her eyes, the darkest, richest sable—glintless, fleckless, bottomless brown—carry a dramatic tilt, and I am sure a glance from her could seduce me. This, combined with her honeyed skin, make me wonder if she has Asian ancestry somewhere down the line. Her eyebrows are thick and smooth over an abundance of eyelashes. So thick and so long they look fake, but I know they are not. There is nothing fake about this girl. No artifice. Not even makeup. Her beauty is raw and unfiltered. Long, dark hair runs down her back. Of all things, she wears a Madonna T-shirt from the The Virgin Tour. Her skinny jeans mold her slim legs. Small feet in Toms. Simple silver musical notes in her pierced ears. She is this heady mixture of exotic and mundane, and just being in the same room is giving me a buzz. Imagine if I touched her. Imagine if I kissed her. Imagine if I fucked her. I'd be done for.

But I suspect she'd be worth it.

Grady's hand on my shoulder, his words of praise, and the students crowding around me pry my attention from the petite girl by the door. And when my eyes again seek out that particular face in the sea of faces, she's gone.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first must thank all of the readers, bloggers, authors – everyone who supported GRIP and FLOW. Those books explored difficult issues our society continues to wrestle with. We are sometimes so divided, and when we should be standing together, we find ourselves torn apart. I wanted to raise my one voice using my little love story, and so many of you responded. Thank you for loving Grip & Bristol enough to want more.

Thank you to my beta readers – Michelle, Margie, Mary Ruth, Teri Lyn, Shelley, Chele and Sheena. You ladies are so valuable, and if this book is in any way great, a huge portion of the credit goes to you. Joanna, thank you for the 1am messages, the fine-tooth comb through this manuscript over and over. For being exacting, and when I need it, eviscerating. I lean heavily on your brutal honesty and constructive spirit. Don't ever be afraid to tell me the truth.

To J.A. Derouen, thank you for all the consultation, and making sure I didn't screw things up too badly. Most of all, thank you for the compassion you demonstrated, which I hope saturates these pages. The *feather* belongs to you.

To Imani of Enamored Reads, girl you awed me with your unwavering support, monthly re-reads and generous giveaways. I'm humbled and grateful beyond words for how you have advocated for these stories. You were so in tune with Grip & Bristol that you knew what they needed even when I wasn't sure. You know the scene I'm talking about! ;-)

To my peeps in my Kennedy Ryan Books group and on my ARC Review Team, my team admins and just everyone who is in my corner every day, thank you!

Thank you to my family, specifically my brother-in-law Reggie who gave me

just the right idea at just the right time, and shaped crucial aspects of this story.

I have too many author friends to thank, but everyone has an inner “squad” who puts up with them in times of self-doubt, bad cover photos and deadline madness. Mine includes Dylan Allen, Corinne Michaels, Mandi Beck, Adriana Locke, Stephanie Rose and too many more to name. But these chicks get the brunt of it, and you’re invaluable to me.

Thank you to Jenn and Social Butterfly for being hustlers. It’s hard out here, and working with such a diligent, dedicated, grinding team made it a little easier. Your enthusiasm and commitment to excellence does not go unnoticed or unappreciated.

Finally...lastly...always thank you to my boys, my son and my husband, for sharing me with the worlds and characters I create...for months at a time. A story like STILL is best written from first-hand knowledge. My grasp of a great love tested, of surviving and managing to stay in love during difficult times, is not theoretical. It is actual and has been with the love of my life for the last 20 years.

To you, my darling and my greatest inspiration, I say

*Always  
Evermore  
Even after  
Still*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kennedy Ryan is a Southern girl gone Southern California. A Top 100 Amazon Bestseller, Kennedy writes romance about remarkable women who thrive even in tough times, the love they find, and the men who cherish them.

She is a wife to her lifetime lover and mother to an extraordinary son. She has always leveraged her journalism background to write for charity and non-profit organizations, but enjoys writing to raise Autism awareness most. A contributor for *Modern Mom Magazine*, Kennedy's writings have appeared in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *USA Today* and many others. The founder and executive director of a foundation serving Georgia families living with Autism, Kennedy has appeared on *Headline News*, *Montel Williams*, *NPR* and other media outlets as a voice for families living with autism.