TOXIC

A Novel By

Lady Luck

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*This book is dedicated to my best friend, Jasi, Gabe, and my favorite cousins Jessica, Tiip, and Jasmine, for supporting me throughout the entire writing process. My beautiful daughter. Yall are so dope. Thank you for supporting me. A big thank you to my readers, who followed me through this writing journey. I appreciate all of you and your feedback.*

***Dedicated to my favorite lady, the sweetest grandma in the world***

***Daisy Mae Wright-Felder***

*January 21, 1947*

*-*

*November 24, 2019*

***Dedicated to my favorite cousin, Gary Jenkins****;*

*September 8, 1970*

*-*

 *May 12, 2019*

***Dedicated to my special friend,***

***Ashley "A-Town" Anderson;***

*May 5, 1989*

*-*

*May 5, 2009*

 *Dear Diary*

 ***Summer of 05***

High school brings the birds and the bees, and I was a sassy little hornet at West Charlotte High School. North Carolina may have been a little slow, but I could tell things were about speed up in my life. I finally got my license, and my parents trusted me to borrow the car to hang with my friends and even extended my curfew to 11:30! Earning my parents' trust was vital because I wanted to have a little freedom without nagging about my life. Besides, my school schedule was rather challenging that year, especially since I took Calculus and Chemistry in the same semester. I had imagined that I would be in a tutorial every day! But enough of the academics, I was more excited about graduating from the itty-bitty-titty committee to a 36C cup. I was a 5'5, fun-size, pretty young thing that weighed 110 pounds; my breast had finally developed, adding definition to my petite stature.

Though my butt was not as plump, wearing boy shorts under my pants usually lifted it! My juicy lips glistened with just a touch of gloss, and My parents blessed me with smooth, milk chocolate skin. I inherited some dope genes! My Mom always taught me that no man likes a contentious woman who is attitudinal for no reason, so I made sure to have a pleasant aura. A positive attitude with a pretty face attracted a flock of boys to my locker every other day, which caused many girls to be envious of me.

 This year I realized I had that juice that made Varsity boys come to their knees and submit to anything I commanded.

Like any young lady should be, I was very selective with my time, body, and attention. Then the man that I thought I would love forever came into my life. His name is Christopher Cook. Chris was a junior, and I was intimidated by his dominating, muscular physique and strong demeanor.

But his reassuring smile would permanently settle the butterflies fluttering around in the pit of my stomach.

I remember the first day that we met; it was at a basketball game, and he was the point guard.

I was standing at the concession stand, irritated that my hair had poofed up from the humidity. And to make it worse, the concession stand had run out of chili cheese sauce for my fries.

I tried to hide the anguish that appeared on my face with a smile. Chris scoped my frustration and said the corniest joke ever to the server, "Man, just give the natural Princess the fries. I'm all the chili and cheese that she'll ever need!" I could not help but blush while smiling from ear to ear; I hope I don't look like a total fool.

"What's your name, Ms. Thang?"

Jasmine, but my friends call me Jas.

"Nice to meet you, Jas-mine, because pretty soon, you're going to be mine."

I was so giddy that I could barely walk in a straight line back to the bleachers. By the time I had gotten back to Kayla, my best friend, my hands were so sweaty that I dropped the fries on the ground.

"Girl! You left for thirty minutes, and when you finally return and drop our food! Have you lost your mind?"

Girl, I will buy you more so that I can get closer to Chris!

"Chris, who? Because I know you aren't talking about Chris Cook; he should be on the court scoring some points for this sorry team."

 I don't know about all of that, but he can score me any day!

"OMG, he's a junior. How did you pull that off?"

Well, you know I have skills! Besides, he probably got tired of me staring at him all day in the hallway!

"Girl, I have to bounce. Besides, Mark is waiting for me, and now he has to buy me more fries because of you."

Kayla leaves to cuddle up with her boyfriend, Mark, and I gaze at Chris throughout the game. After the game, he spots me in the bleachers while waiting for my Mom to pick me up.

"Need some company?" I'm so nervous that I can't think of anything to say. So, I smile and nod my head, yes.

"You're lovely, you know." I grin so hard that my cheeks touch my eyes.

Thank you!

"Is it okay if I call you sometime?"

Sure. Chris passes the phone and caresses my hand in the process! I save my name as Jas-Mine because I know that I will be his soon.

When I return the phone, he took my hand and kissed the back of it. My self-esteem increased ten notches, and it was all because of Chris.

"Is it okay if I take you out on a date this weekend?"

Sure, that's cool. I'll have to check with my parents, though.

If they say yes, this was my official first date without Kayla and Mark, and I was so giddy!

The following weekend he borrowed his Mom's car to pick me up. My parents prepared to ask him 21 questions, and I hoped that he could answer each one.

My Dad even recorded his license plate just in case he had to track us! Parental protection was on overload! But that was the least of my worries; I was looking for a fly outfit that would show how much I was into him. Kayla and I searched through every Macy's, Ross, TJ Maxx, and Marshall's to find something iconic. I scored a white and blue striped BCBG fitted dress that barely came above my knees. My Mom wouldn't let me wear heels yet, so I settled for wedges.

I curled my hair and even added a goddess braid to the side. I wanted to be as elegant as possible. He greeted me with tulips and chocolate, then walked me to the car and opened my door. I had never imagined that my first date would be a fairy tale; he was such a gentleman. We dined at Red Lobster, the most upscale restaurant in town for teens on a budget.

 Our conversation was magical—I never wanted it to end. Chris was interested in my home decor ideas and even offered to let me decorate his room. Of course, then I thought it was innocent, but now, I'm sure of what he meant, but we'll get to that later.

He gave me my first french kiss, and I would then learn that he would take my virginity. During that summer, we were inseparable, and nothing could break us apart.

I was in a utopia until he had to go away to college, which was 4 hours away from Charlotte. He studied law at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, aka Hot-lanta, and I was afraid that he would forget about me. I knew he was going to leave eventually, but it seemed like it was so soon. He promised that he would not forget about us and would be faithful to me. By this time, our love had grown, and we needed to take our relationship to the next step. I was still a virgin, and I knew that he would be the perfect one to share my first sexual experience with. Chris was so patient with me in everything, and I trusted him with my life.

Finally, the inevitable was about to happen. We were at his house, he began caressing, kissing my body so much that I felt like I was about to pass out. He stopped kissing, turned me onto my back, and gave me the best massage that I have ever had in my life.

I was surely about to fall asleep until he decided to turn my body over and go all the way down on me. About ten minutes into it, my body starts to shake, and then I feel a magical sensation all over my body. I could not believe what was happening—but I don't want it to end.

"This is just the beginning; are you ready for the rest?"

I could not believe what was about to occur; I was excited and nervous at the same time, but I knew that it was what we both wanted.

"Jas, I don't want to end something so perfect."

Me either, But I heard about those rumors in college. I don't want to get my heart broken, Chris."

"I promise not to hurt you. You have my heart, and that will never change."

I stared deeply into his eyes and pulled his body closer to mine, giving him silent permission to enter my sacred temple.

"Are you sure that you are ready for this? I'm not pressuring you to do something that you may regret later."

No, baby, I'm ready. I love you.

He holds my body and pulls out his little, big man; I cannot believe that this will fit inside of me! After he puts the head in, I yell so loudly that he pulls it out.

No, I'm okay to keep going! You are already in now.

He proceeds with caution and very gently; I appreciate his slow motion until I can get into the groove of this love session. I moan under my breath as he goes deeper into my flesh, kissing me with every stroke. Although it was uncomfortable, it was a cherished moment.

 I could not have felt more bonded to him than at this present moment. He had a piece of me that could not be given back, and I was afraid that he would forget about me once he went away to college. After that, I craved his presence every day, and I wished that he didn't have to go so far away for school.

Chris visited about every four months, but sometimes I felt as if there was a gap of distance between us that could not be closed by quarterly visits or lengthy phone calls.

I sensed that someone else was taking my place in his heart, and since I was a few hundred miles away, there was nothing that I could do about it.

"Man, baby, I'm meeting so many great people out here! I can't wait until you're out here with me." "Oh? Who are these new people?"

"Well, for starters, there's my study partner, Claire. She keeps me on top of my game and reminds me that I have what it takes to pass the bar. She scores well on all of her exams and has been tutoring me since I enrolled in Emory."

The way he described this girl assured me that she was someone of importance to his new life. I tried not to become envious of his admiration for her, but I could feel a part of his heart leaving me for this new study partner.

"I mean, she makes this rigorous journey at the University a tad bit easier, and I can tell her anything. She's a great friend. But don't worry, you're always going to be number one in my heart!" I have no words to say about him and his new confidant.

Finally, after Chris has traveled back and forth from

After five years, Atlanta North Carolina decided to move to Atlanta to be with my love. My father was not too thrilled with the idea of me moving in with a man who was not my husband, but I knew that I had to follow my heart.

Chris loves me just as much as my Daddy, but Daddy is not impressed by the status quo. I keep reminding him that this is my life to live, my mistakes to make, and Chris will take good care of me. I am ready for new scenery, life changes, and career opportunities. I realize that I will have to work twice as hard to keep our relationship secure.

 I am sure that our relationship won't be perfect, and it may even go through a few ups and downs. But I am prepared to walk through the fire with Christopher.

I hope that this sudden infatuation with Claire does not become the demise of our relationship, better yet, our friendship.

***A year after Chris graduates college…***

 *Chapter 1: Jasmine*

***Not Again***

Cleaning has never been so exhilarating! I dust in between every nook and cranny so that our new home is spotless. Chris has outdone himself in choosing a house in Atlanta for us. Man, I cannot believe that I live in the ATL with the man of my dreams. I am dedicated to making this house a real home and hope that Chris and I create priceless memories. I have a natural talent for interior decorating; hell, I even made a career out of it. That's how dope I am. I live in IKEA, Home Goods, Pier 1, and vintage boutiques, which allow me to use my creative eye to produce a masterpiece. In the future, I plan to design sets for Love and Hip-Hop Atlanta and other celebrities. It is 2015, and opportunities are boundless; I plan to be the premier interior designer of the year!

I can see my visions coming to fruition, and I can hardly wait! While cleaning the windows, I can already envision the curtains that I'm going to hang up, the house's theme, and the color scheme. We're painting the living room turquoise and green, which symbolizes serenity and new beginnings. The bedroom will be a fiery red, which will signify our love and passion for one another. Our home is in Little Five Points, and there are a galore of home decor stores, chic bars, and beautiful people.

Chris was supposed to oversee the landscaping since

I'm not privy to the outdoors, but I have grown tired of waiting on him to manicure the lawn.

 I'll never understand why a man who has so much talent procrastinates so much. He was supposed to mow the yard Friday afternoon, now Sunday has come, and my parents will be here for Memorial weekend. If they even glance at a lawn that it's not up to their standard, they will assume that the owner is unfit to manage a home.

On the other hand, Chris does not understand how important it is to impress my parents and complement their lifestyle.

We are not high school sweethearts anymore; my father looks at him as a grown man looking after his only Princess.

I have not seen them in more than a year, and now they announce that they are driving from North Carolina for a visit. Chris is a man's man with a bit of Huxtable DNA.

Unfortunately, since graduating from Emory University, he became a bit pretentious to have a lot in common with my parents.

 Sometimes I wonder if I choose men to complement my parents so that I can easily please them.

Chris has keen features that are worthy of admiration. His smooth, chocolate skin resembles silk and accentuates his 1000-watt smile. His thick lips and kola nut-shaped eyes have always invited me to taste a little of what was happening in his world. He usually complains about how I don't introduce the 'new' him to my parents.

Instead, he claims that I focus on the high school jock, not the educated man. I understand where he's coming from, but I need him to maintain our home for now!

 Now that I'm out in the sweltering heat doing what my Dad would consider 'men's work,' I am re-evaluating if Chris and I are as serious as I thought. Maybe cutting the grass wasn't too bad of an idea. After all, when else would I schedule a moment to ponder our relationship?

Just as I am about to re-fuel the lawnmower, Chris calls.

Hey, honey!

"Hey, baby, I've got some bad news…."

I sensed the hesitancy in his voice. I have a habit of speaking over people before they can complete their thought, an annoyance that Chris has been trying to break out of me for years now. I interject,

No, no, you are not about to cancel on me tonight! You promised! I exclaimed. He goes on,

"I know, baby, I'm sorry; a new case just broke into the office, and it is high profile, so we have to put in these extra hours before the end of week…" (Sighs)

Chris, I—

"I'll make it up to you, I promise. I have to go; I love you." Click.

I shouldn't be surprised, but this is not the lifestyle I planned when I decided to drop everything and fulfill his dream as a high-profile attorney.

Thankfully, Kayla moved to Atlanta a year before me, so I am not entirely alone when Chris deserts me. I can always go out with her and have the best time of my life.

She has been the ultimate party animal since we were 14 years old. Now, twelve years later, we are still hanging strong.

Throughout all my hardships, she has been there for me, mostly when Chris was in college, and I went through my dating multiple men at a time phase.

I was her primary support system after her ex-fiancé canceled her wedding a day before the actual day. It turns out her man had been creeping and sleeping with her cousin, Toni.

It's a damn shame how people can plot against you right in front of your face, and you're clueless about it. Meanwhile, she doesn't answer, so I jam to my TLC playlist while I finish cleaning.

***BANG! BANG!***

Now, who in their right mind is banging on my door like they are the police?

"Jasmine! I know you hear me, girl! Open this door, we have moves to make, and they do not include cleaning for your stuck-up parents!" exclaims Kayla.

I open the door and instantly inhaled the marijuana fumes. It has not been more than three months since Kayla was stood up, and she is back to her usual self.

Kayla! I have been blowing ya celly up!

"Well, I'm right here now; you don't have to call! It's okay, girl, cuz I'm gon' be alright tonight!" In her Usher's voice.

 *Somebody's in high spirits*. I want to go out tonight, get drunk, and shake what my Momma gave me! I'm tired of sitting in the house these last few months. Chris is always working, and I haven't found the perfect job since we moved here.

She looks at the well-furnished house, plush carpet, exquisite kitchen, and antiques surrounding the living room.

She squints her eyes and examines the diamond rock that is sitting on my right ring finger.

"Girl, I had to make sure you didn't elope! Well, from the looks of it, you don't need to work! Girl, you're living the life."

I left my parents' house in North Carolina to live in the city with my man and decorate for celebrities, not live alone while he's always at work. So much for my plans to live in Hotlanta. I'm going to explode if I stay in this house one more night! You down?

Kayla's body language said it all; of course, she was ready to go out. Between Chris not paying me any attention at home and Kayla getting back to the single life, we were both ready to turn up.

"Let's go to Boogalou Restaurant & Lounge in Midtown.”

 “Boogalou Restaurant & Lounge in Midtown is where all the highly paid professionals hobnob with other movers and shakers in the city. The dress code is grown and sexy, so only a certain echelon is invited. Kayla suggests.

The DJ plays the best club mix, so I throw on my tightest strapless dress and five-inch heels. I am not playing any games tonight! It's upscale, and I am bound to find a sugar daddy!”

We ride there in total silence; we don't even have on the radio. There is usually never a dull moment between Kayla and me, but I can tell that something is on her mind. Kayla has always been audacious and outspoken, but I know that Corey, her ex-fiancé, punctured her soul.

 She is determined to disguise the hurt behind marijuana, clubbing, and shots of Tequila. But after knowing her for more than ten years, I know when she is hurt, happy, or going through pure hell. This experience was pure hell for her. Here it comes her wrath.

"Man, fuck both of 'em! This bitch had no place to go with four kids, and I took her in, and they dared to fuck each other behind my back! I'm working, paying bills, fucking him on the regular, feeding their asses with my hard-earned money, and this is the way that they choose to repay me!"

We are at a red light for what seems like an eternity before the driver behind us honks. Kayla presses the accelerator with more pressure.

I hope this is not my last day on earth, Kayla! I was yelling at the top of my lungs. Now she's hovering over the steering wheel and imagining that both are outside of the windshield.

"Well, guess where y'all shit at now! It's cremating in my backyard as we speak.

No, you didn't start a bonfire with their clothes, did you? You are a trip! She smirks and nods, yes.

We finally arrive at Boogalou Restaurant & Lounge and park valet because I refuse to destroy my new Red Bottoms.

Before we can even step out of the car, we hear catcalls. Kayla lets a guy escort her to the door, where he also presents her with a shot of patron.

"Girl, I am not going home single tonight! Let me know if you need my keys!"

I order an Amaretto Sour, my signature drink. By the third one, I'm ready to go to the dance floor and let loose! Though Chris is still heavily on my mind, I refuse to live in loneliness. And then, just like in the fairy tales, he sends a text. I watch it light up and pretend to ignore it. Kayla's nosiness will not allow her to overlook the alert.

"Go ahead and reply. You know Chris misses you."

Welcome back, party animal. Taking a break from the dance floor to spy on me, huh?

As soon as I am about to reply, a guy taps me on my shoulder.

"I hope I'm not overstepping, but you're killing that dress! What are you and your girl drinking? Next rounds on me."

Damn! I haven't met a dude this fine since I've been down in Atlanta, maybe because I got caught up with Chris acting differently since I moved here. Now 'Mr. Buy you a drink' is here; I am distracted. I am blushing and smiling from ear to ear in our conversation. I had forgotten to reply back to Chris.

After a while, we were so caught up in conversation I lost track of time.

"I'm happy that I took your mind off that 'dilemma' you didn't want to talk about earlier. How about a dance?"

I dance to the reggae beat winding my hips closer to him, onto the dance floor. I love how he guides my hips as he caresses my lower back; I feel like a teenager cuddling with my man at prom. I wish this moment could last forever.

Antonio was stunning, and his eyes were so captivating. I couldn't help but look at this charming man in front of me.

 He has butter caramel, smooth skin; thick, red lips shaped like hearts with a deep curve in the center; this delight of a man stands at 6'1" and has a body like Adonis.

I am mesmerized by his hazel brown eyes; he possesses a charm that no woman can resist! I reached out to shake his hand and introduced myself. As I pick up my phone, Antonio recites his number. I add him to my contacts. I shoot him a text:

***Me****: Nice to meet you, Antonio.*

He replies aloud, "The pleasure is mine; keep in touch."

He sees the discomfort on Kayla's face and walks away. I am staring his back down like a laser beam.

"Kayla, I can't do this. Can we leave, please? Chris is on his way home, and I want to see how he plans on making it up to me."

"You always do this to me. Every time we go out, you have to go running back to Chris. I bet you're only leaving because you don't want to get caught up with this new guy."

Kayla spots another one of her friends and says she isn't leaving anytime soon.
*Damn, I knew I should have driven my car!*

 She ditches me and heads to the dance floor with her drink in her hand. Friends, I tell ya. I sit at the bar, scrolling down my Instagram timeline and can smell Antonio approaching.

"Damn, baby, why the long face?"

"Let me be honest with you; I am in a relationship. You are fine as hell, but I'm trying to do right by my man.

I'm a little upset because I'm ready to leave, but my ride isn't. Antonio offers to take me home, and I accept. I text Kayla to let her know; she tells me not to do anything she would do. That girl is a trip!

I feel an instant attraction, but I know my heart lies with Chris, and he is the one that I go home to at night.

 The conversation on the way home was sweet, innocent also knowledgeable. As soon as Antonio and I arrive at my house, Chris calls.

"Hey, sweetheart, can I buy one more hour at the office? I know I was on the way home, but more details have been added to the case, so now we have to rewrite…."

Sure, Chris. Whatever you say.

The level of annoyance I was feeling right now had reached its boiling point. I guess the adage is correct, "Another man's shoulder to cry on is also another man's dick to ride on."

Antonio pulled me in close and directed my head into his bulging chest. It felt like the safest place that I could ever imagine.

My tears stained his shirt so badly that they started to feel wetter than my panties. He took his shirt off and revealed his chiseled chest had tattoos of bible verses. His right chest read, "Only God Can Judge Me."

 His left chest displayed Psalms 23. While massaging my lower back, I noticed that it was natural for me to succumb to his temptation. I had so much sexual frustration and cannot remember the last time Chris touched me. His fingers caressed my ass so well that I eventually cracked a smile. He seized that opportunity to kiss me.

His kiss was more than comforting; it reassured me that he was ready to love my body the way it intended to be love.

 I was dripping wet and could not abstain from the temptation. I can't believe that I was about to fuck Antonio in his car in front of my house. I moan loudly, permitting him to take whatever he wants.

"It's yours if you want it."

Antonio whispered those words in my ear and then proceeded to slide his tongue from my ear to my breast. He sucked my nipples so hard that I clutched onto his back for dear life. Finally, he came up and looked me in the eye and kissed my lips.

Life couldn't have been any sweeter than his kiss.

He nibbled on my neck as he took his fingers and slid two of them inside of my wt box. This man was gifted!

If he made my heart sing with his fingers, then I could only imagine how the real instrument felt.

I finally opened my eyes and looked down, only to see his dick appearing as if it were going to burst out of his pants. I removed his fingers and unzipped his pants to pull out his magic stick.

He growled, ensuring that he was ready to accept whatever plans I had for his little big man. The thickness of his shaft was well appreciated, and I showed my appreciation by stuffing it into my mouth like a lollipop.

 I glanced up at him, and his eyes were directly in the back of his head, precisely where they should be. I licked around the head and swallowed his dick whole. Learning from porn, I developed a kissing pattern, then licking, then softly gliding my lips up and down. He finally came, and I swallowed like it was a glass of cold water.

"I can't let you do all the work, babygirl."

Before I could gather myself, he lifted me on the passenger seat, placed my legs on his shoulder, and danced his tongue in my pussy.

Unlike Chris, who usually shied away from oral sex, Antonio softly kissed my lips and then took the tip of his tongue to taste it. He had so many routines and performed them with such grace. I came three times in his mouth, and each time he looked at me with eyes that said, "I'm still not done."

 Finally, I sighed. I want it in. Before I could take my next breath, Antonio was going in and out and using different stroking methods that my one-person body did not recognize.

After we both came, I realized it had been an entire hour and twenty minutes.

Chris would be home any minute now, and I had to clean up.

"When can I see you again?" He whispered in my ear. I laughed.

That was incredible. We may have to do this again. But I have to go wash off before Chris gets home.

He has severe OCD. The way you just wore out my ass, I'm sure he would notice that I had been pleased with something more than the dildo that he bought me.

I grab my purse and heels in hand then leave the car. I realize that I am missing my keys. As I'm searching through my purse, I feel something grope me from behind. I recognized his scent. I know you're excited, but you can never come to my house! My man could come home and bust us both.

"Your man? Do you mean your placeholder? I'm all the man that you’ll need. But I'll back off for now. See you soon."

He seals his exit with a kiss on my neck while handing me my keys. What the fuck have I just started? Meeting a random is totally out of my character, but I needed everything that he was offering. I go into the house, lit some candles, shower, and lotion my body. I hear Faith Evans's song, "Soon as I Get Home."

Chris will smell the candles and think that I am in the mood. In reality, it's a distraction because my body needs a rest from the workout with Antonio. He comes upstairs and tries to harmonize, *"I'll make it up to you."*

I roll my eyes so that he can sense my exasperation. "I'm trying to do better, babe; this case will be over on Friday. So just stick with me a bit longer. I have the whole week dedicated to you and your parents."

 And oh, yeah, my law firm is having a dinner party Friday night to celebrate this high-profile case we won in court.

Your college, sweetheart? I retort.

"You got jokes, anyway, we need to dress to impress because I want to show off my prize!"

"Okay, babe, anything for you as always. I wish we could have some time for Jas too. I turn over to get lost in my thoughts until I fall asleep.

 *Chapter 2: Jasmine*

# *To My Surprise*

"Are you ready, honey? We're going to be late; what are you doing?" He can wait all night for all I care.

Ironically, Chris is rushing me to go to this party, but when I ask him about going out on a date, he acts deaf. My requests seem to go in one ear and out the other these last few months.

"Stop rushing me!" I bark back at him. I stood in the mirror, contouring my nose and cheekbones, applying lashes and brushing down my edges. I swear finding an edge control that works is like finding the right pair of pants that makes your ass look fat. It's almost impossible. I am already beautiful, but it never hurts to enhance. Besides, I need to be the hottest thing there! Even though I'm not completely satisfied with my man, I don't need to show it. We can fake the funk like everyone else! I waltz downstairs to show him why I have to take my precious time.

"You damn sure were worth the wait! I can't wait to show you off to my colleagues. I know I have not been the best, but I'm going to make it up to you. One more chance; baby, give more one more chance!"

He is singing in his best Faith Evans voice. It's nice to be appreciated, especially since I don't get any attention regularly. His excuse is that if you don't want a broke man, you're going to have to deal with a busy man.

He would certainly benefit from a time management course. Man, but why can't I have two in one? If I could have Chris and Antonio wrap into one, then I would be a bad bitch. I still have not gotten Chris to touch me the way Antonio did a few nights ago. That was a one-hit-wonder.

"Thank you, baby!" I bashfully reply.

"I love it, baby. He slaps me on my ass while he opened my car door and leans down to kiss my lips. When we get home, that ass is mine!"

He asks me to GPS the location to Claire's house, realizing it isn't too far from the club. I wonder if we've run into Claire before.

"Is she married?"

He hesitates to answer then shifts his eyes to the left. I know that anytime he feels uncomfortable, he'll maneuver his eyes before answering.

*"*Yes, she is. What does that have to do with anything, though?"

 I sucked my teeth inadvertently, a habit that I should have let go of when I was a teenager.

"How does she look?" He burst out laughing and retorted, "What do you mean, how does she look?"

Exactly what I said. How does Claire look? Is she cute? Does she look better than me?

Now any man in their right mind would not answer that question unless they were ready to see the light. He hesitates again; this is making me suspicious.

"I mean, she's straight, I guess.

I roll my eyes as I lean my head against the window. I don't pay that much attention to anyone; besides, I have your beautiful picture to look upon every day. That's all I need, babe."

"Jas, what do you want me to say? Okay, she is an attractive woman, very career-driven, bitter, and a little naive."

"Naive and bitter?" I ask with a sarcastic tone. I know that my Chris would not be the type to take advantage of a woman, but I also know that he has a captain save-a-ho syndrome. I'll make my impression tonight and assure her that Chris is happy at home, and the only woman he has eyes for is me.

"Yeah, naive and bitter; in school, she always attracted to the bad boy, but she was the "good girl." They seem to take advantage of her, and she never realized it until her heart was broken. Now, she's bitter as fuck."

Have you met her husband?

"No, and don't care to, But enough about them, let's talk about us. I know I have not been the best boyfriend to you. But please believe that I am going to make it up to you very soon. Just let me get some things in order, and I will be all yours."

I looked out of the window in shame, thinking about the other night. We finally pull into the driveway, and I unbuckle my seatbelt while Chris stepped out of the car to open my door. Her house is immaculate; I can see why she's trying to steal my man.

You can have all the riches in the world, but nothing can comfort you if you are bitter. Their house has red brick, and her last name is engraved on the front of the door.

There is a garden with natural fruit and vegetables and two rocking chairs with empty wine glasses beside each. It looks like a model home.

Talk about relationship goals! Maybe I should stop agitating Chris about work. If this is the future he is building towards, I'm sure it's worth the wait.

 I suddenly get a text from Antonio at 7:45 PM:

***Ant:*** *Damn, I'd do anything to taste you tonight. You have no idea.*

I don't reply. The thought of Antonio's touch sent chills up my spine, making me a little lightheaded.

I vow never to see him again, but he is so addicting. *Come back to reality, Jas!* I can see the kitchen through the front window; it's filled with soul food in a buffet style. I try to cut the tension between Chris and me before we walk into the house.

I hope that the food is good because I'm a foodie, and there's nothing worse than going to an event, and the food sucks.

Before Chris can ring the doorbell, I hear Claire shout something to her husband about people arriving. Then I hear footsteps approaching the front door with heels that are stomping heavily into the floor.

I straighten my posture and prepare to meet the woman who has been keeping my future husband's company at work.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach as the door opens. Claire greets us with a gracious smile and a friendly hug. I hear a man huffing and puffing as he came down the stairs; I'm guessing this is her husband.

My eyes widen before he can even walk into the threshold. I can't believe my eyes. *It's Antonio!* His posture shifts for a split second, and then he regains himself.

"Claire, are you just going to talk them to death or invite them in?"He says amicably. I crack a smile as he daps Chris. Seeing Antonio is officially the worst day of my life.

"Chris, Darling!" Her voice ascends into a high pitch, like a loud screech. I am awkwardly standing with a smirk on my face. My heart is pounding, and my palms are sweating. My sweat glands have exploded into mini volcanoes, and lava is on my hand. I could melt right now. How in the hell did I let this happen?

We can never happen again. But suddenly, my panties feel soaked. *Damn Jas, I think to myself, was the D that good?*

"Hi, you must be Jasmine! I've heard so much about you. So nice to finally put a face to a name. I'm Claire, Chris's work wife! Glad to meet the girlfriend!"

*What the fuck did she say?* Chris and I are not even married yet, and she is already the work wife? I laugh it off because my "slapping a trick" days are long gone. But I will be bringing this up during our next argument. I see Chris hang his head down in my peripheral vision.

I calmly respond, "Yes, that's me!" We hug, and then Antonio escorts us inside of their home. Their home looks more like a ballroom.

The living room was stunning; the drapes were custom made, the table looked sleek, and the lighting illuminated every part of the room. The lamps were tall and elegant. Each wall had a pattern that was unique and accompanied paintings from across the world. Someone was an avid traveler. I wonder what the problem is between these two. I don't even want to know because I refuse to get emotionally involved with Antonio. It was just sex---only one time. *No repeats.*

I glanced at Antonio as my heart sank below my navel. He eases the tension.

"It's nice to meet my wife's job, husband, too!" He passed both of us wine glasses. "But she knows where home is." Everyone laughs at Antonio's joke. *I can't believe I cheated on Claire's husband. Checkmate.*

Antonio seems eager to make me feel like a welcomed guest. He winks and introduces me to his brother-in-law, Dre. Dre is rough around the edges; he reminds me of a lost young man who only knows a life of crime but has a good heart. His personality is much more passive than his sister's. I smile at him, and he nods his head to acknowledge me.

On the other hand, I know what Antonio has up his sleeve, but I play my role.

"Jasmine, how about I give you a tour of the house? Claire and Chris have a lot to discuss, and I don't want you to get bored." Claire interrupts him, "But what about your speech, Antonio?" He surprises us both by saying that he can save the speech until he shows me every part of their home. I cut my eyes at him and follow his lead.

Claire walked away in frustration; I finished my wine in two gulps and grabbed another glass off the tray.

 *Chapter 3: Antonio*

# *Living a Lie*

 I escorted her to my man cave and prayed that no one noticed how wide my eyes had gotten after watching her round ass jiggle. She sashayed down the hall to get on the elevator, and I stood there, wondering how this beautiful creature is with a nigga like Chris. I had a few swigs of Bourbon, so I'm hornier than a motherfucker right now. The elevator stops, and we walk down the long, pure-white hallway. I open the door to my massive man cave.

"What is this?" Jasmine asked in amusement."

"This is my home away from home. When my wife and I are at odds, this is where I retreat. Consider this my studio apartment." the walls were painted with Afrocentric symbols, my 75-inch TV mounted in the middle wall, and the game system was stationed right under it. Michael Vick himself signed my vintage #7 Falcons jersey, and it is hanging on the left side of the TV.

 I had a Miami Heat jersey autographed by Lebron James, and it is hanging on the right side of it. The mini bar is in the far-left corner and stocked with Coronas and leftover hot wings. Since Jasmine will be here more often, I will have to get some Moscato. A man cave is not complete without a pool table! Mine is situated next to the fridge. Finally, topped with black satin sheets, the platform bed is smack dab in the middle of the floor with a tall headboard. Jasmine is impressed, but I can tell she's nervous.

"I can't believe this! We can't say anything about the other night to a single soul, Antonio!" I pulled her in close to me. Are you sure about that?

"You're married, and I don't want to jeopardize everything that Chris and Claire have earned." She looked remorseful. I assure her I am not happily married, and it seems that the "work wife and husband" are enjoying their party. Still, I know that she is a caring person, unlike Claire, who seeks to sabotage everyone.

 "No, are you out of your mind? Jasmine nervously bites her lips and finally convinces herself that we both deserve love, too.

 She whispers, "You're right, babe, plus everybody's upstairs. And who can resist those luscious, thick red ass lips of yours?" I lick them and I see her quiver. I relax her nerves by leading her over to the bed. I turn on the Wi-Fi-powered stereo system and cue my R&B Playlist. I locked the door from my phone and told her that nobody has access to come down here; I am the only one who knows the security code. She throws back the rest of her wine and cracks a smile.

I slid her panties down to her ankles and put them in my pocket. I slowly push her legs back as I gently licked her inner thighs in circles and bit her thighs. She giggled nervously.

"You taste so good," I say as I come up for air. Jas' scent was foreign but alluring. Her aura lured me in, and at this point, the lust that I had for her had already escalated. I have not felt this feeling since my wife started working at the firm a year ago.

Her body language is screaming my name, and I'm fully equipped to answer.

I begin to pound my tongue into her clit and tongue kiss her pussy lips. When I glance up to see her reaction, I can see that she's rolling her eyes back and arching her pelvis. I pull my wood out and start to suck on her neck as she waits for it to slide in.

Jas's moans made my dick solid as a rock, and she has her back arched off the edge of the bed with her feet propped on my shoulder. As I begin to suck harder, she dug her nails into the back of my neck, forcing me to apply more pressure. She releases all her frustrations and then asks what she can do to repay the favor. She doesn't know that her loving itself is the favor.

"Oh, shit! We've been here for a minute already! We have to go back upstairs,"she said exhaustively.

 Are you sure? I kiss her lips slowly.

Would you rather be upstairs or making love to me? As I kiss her slowly, her incoherent mumbling is proof that I'm hitting the spot. I turn her body over and spread those legs a little bit wider.

I lie in between her legs with my dick rubbing between her ass cheeks.

She moaned as she buried her face into the pillow. I slide back into stroke deeper, grab her neck, slightly choking her. I can tell she likes that kinky shit because she yelps loudly.

As much as I wanted to keep grinding inside Jas, I let go of her neck and roll my tongue behind her ear.

I felt her body clench. I was so into pleasing her that I forgot about this damn party. After we came, she lay there, trying to catch her breath.

"That was everything!" She squeals.

She took a birdbath in my bathroom before she went back to the party. I stalled a little longer so it wouldn't look so suspicious. We left for at least thirty minutes.

 As I come upstairs, I noticed Jas and Chris were in a deep conversation. Chris appeared to be worried, but he doesn't need to be because I just made sure that Jasmine was satisfied. Also, Jasmine comes from a suburban, middle-class family, she is down for whatever, and I love that about her. I don't even want to deal with these bourgeoisie people. I want to take my ass to bed after that nut. Claire interrupts my thoughts.

"Finally, you're back. Where were you?! Will you please get the Hor oeuvres? Thanks." I look at her with a blank stare. She hasn't satisfied me so long that she doesn't recognize my face after getting some good sex.

Her assistant intervened to remind her to announce the promotion.

I could care less, honestly; it had nothing to do with me. I'm just here for spousal support. I always wanted a family, a beautiful wife, a football team of little boys running around, or even a Daddy's girl that I can spoil rotten. Claire has told me that she would give me that.

Nonetheless, we discussed it last Friday, she didn't budge an inch on that decision. I'm starting to think that's why she's been avoiding sex with me. Claire was making her speech while I was staring at Jasmine.

She kissed Chris on the cheek then blew a kiss at me behind his back. It felt good to have a sexy lady stroke my ego satisfy my every need with no complaints.

"Christopher Cook," my wife calls out, "Congratulations, you have won the Lawyer of the Year Award." I see her wink at him; she's not slick. Everyone applauded except for me. All I want to do is taste Jas again. Instead, I keep my composure while walked to the middle of the floor to deliver my speech. "I would like to thank each of you for supporting my wife along her journey as an attorney.

You all are like extended family--some of you may even take my place one day!" Everyone chuckles except Claire and Chris.

 Eventually, everyone leaves, Claire and I are left to clean the house. Claire's brother, Dre, is high as hell on the couch; of course, he is no help. Claire is drunk, staggering, muttering something about how well-mannered Chris is at work. Even Stevie Wonder can see the chemistry between those two.

 Claire, you sure are talking a lot about Chris. I'm your real husband.

"Yeah, but you don't make me feel the way Chris does. He is compassionate and cares about my career. Chris is interested in how I grew up and did not call me the bourgeoisie. He grew up in the Suburbs, too, so he gets my lingo. We work well together."

 "I'm not too comfortable with this work-husband affair. I know men. They are all after one thing. But I'm sure they'll never get it because I can barely touch you without you turning your back."

 "I don't have time for this criticism, Antonio. I don't need a bad boy to save me anymore. I need a real man who can accept when his woman makes power moves. I will not continue to stroke your ego, Antonio."

 Say no more, Claire. I'll sleep downstairs in my man cave like I always do anyway, stroke my own damn ego. Just don't come begging on your knees when that nigga takes advantage of you. I take care of mine. If you don't want to be taken care of, let me know. You're replaceable.

*Chapter 4: Claire*

# *Claire The Wrong Man*

 I cannot understand how I ended up in such a love triangle between Antonio and Chris. I have never been this deceitful in my life. I do not know who I am becoming. I pledged vows to this man to become one with him, but lately, I feel like I have been carrying us both on my shoulders. Why did I marry him? I wish I would have taken Chris when I had the chance. But I think I can win him back. I am going to do everything in my power to make him mine. Chris is a little more naïve than Antonio. Besides, his new ***thot*** has nothing on me. I'm educated, beautiful, a hot commodity.

It will be easier than taking candy from a baby. I know some people who owe me a few favors, so I am not worried at all.

 Chris and I began our rendezvous during our last year of law school at Emory University. Although we were exhausted from studying for the bar, we found an exceptional support team in one another. He reminds me of my father, tall, muscular, not afraid to tuck his tie into his shirt to get his hands dirty. We started to have study sessions in the library then migrated to my apartment. He was so attentive and focused while we were preparing for the rigorous exam. In addition, we were both passionate about non-profit organizations, he encouraged me to volunteer with different agencies around Atlanta.

He is more than an inspiration; he is a wonderful sensation. We complement one another. He does not judge me for any of my flaws. That one moment that we experienced was so sensual and divine. It was the best climax I have had to this day.

 He took his time to ensure that I was satisfied he forgot about his own needs; he never asked me to do anything that made me uncomfortable.

He was the first and last man that received fellatio from me. He knew exactly where to kiss and rub. Chris would use his tongue as an instrument, and he struck many chords in my body.

Our bodies were in such sync, and his kisses were so nurturing. My nipples hardened as his soft lips caressed every facet of my body.

I will get Christopher Cook back! He was appreciative of my every being, I fiend for his presence. I know we meant to be together because he is the only man I can connect with physically, spiritually, and mentally.

Now, fast forward five years later, he moves his high school crush, Jasmine, here; she is not of my caliber.

He describes her as a club hopper who does not know when to come home. I told him that he should put that ass on a curfew!

Seriously though, I know that he's the perfect boyfriend, and if she doesn't want to appreciate him, then I will gladly teach her.

My first time seeing her was at the party. She looked like a slore, a slut and whore. I know I settled for Antonio. I'm sure Chris is doing the same with Jasmine.

I've always dreamt of a happily ever after with Chris, but I decided to settle for Antonio, Mr. Rough' 'round the edges. It was fun initially; I mean, what girl would say no to a bad boy who isn't good for her? Unfortunately, he did not work a 9-5; instead, he sold drugs but was very careful about not getting caught. He is good at what he does, but after I kept pestering him about our future, which did not involve selling drugs, he made me a contrary promise to give him a child.

At that time, it was easier to be mute about the situation. But my Mr. Wrong soon caught up to my games about not having children.

We never discussed whether I wanted to have children or not with him, so my initial idea was to lie procrastinate then it will look like I could never have children in the first place. The vice to that plan is my little bitty conscious tearing at me throughout the last year. I'm losing sleep and hair simultaneously.

My dermatologist referred me to a sleep specialist who referred me to a psychologist who advised me to tell my husband the truth to keep my sanity.

I love my husband because he is a fantastic person, but it takes more than an incredible person to be *in* love. I can't keep this up because I'm not happy in this house. He hardly ever comes home. I have asked him numerous times to talk in person, but he continues to blow me off as if I do not exist.

My initial surgery involved removing my fibroids, but I lied. I said they had complications during surgery that caused me to need a hysterectomy.

I felt so much guilt after the procedure, but I had to think of something to save myself for my future life with Chris. I hate that I am not telling Antonio the truth, but I don't want his children.

 I was in such pain after the fibroid surgery; the only person I trusted was Chris.

He's been a perfect gentleman. My feelings toward him have become more intense. He helped to heal my broken heart while Antonio was MIA.

 Fast forward to this year, now it seems like Antonio is gone every other day. He ignores texts and calls refuses to disclose his whereabouts. I wait until I get home to text him, just in case I have to pour a few shots while waiting for him to reply. It feels as if we are living separate lives even though marriage is supposed to be a union.

There's an unfamiliar presence in the house that suggests that our home is as empty as our hearts. I cannot believe that my marriage is over. I'm left to pick up the pieces. I deserve this for finding in a man whose finances are a lot shorter than mine. I decide to take a hot bubble bath to clear my mind from all of the drama surrounding my marriage.

As soon as I play *Sade*, her melodic voice is interrupted by a loud thump at my door. I hear the alarm go off, so I know that it's only Antonio. Look who decides to come home.

"Where you at, yo?!"

He knows that it grinds my gears when he barks throughout the house like a dog.

I slip into my robe to meet him in the kitchen. "Bonjour to you, too!" I retort. I embrace him, hoping he would take advantage of my dampened body, but he didn't bite the bait.

 I try to break the ice by clearing my throat.

"What do you want, Claire? I'm going into work; you know how much you love do-boys with a 9-5," he said sarcastically. "I haven't been at the job in a few days. I guess it is time to play catch up. Time to get to this money. So, what do you need to talk about?"

 I hesitated, inhaled, stared at him in an attempt to figure out what he was thinking. It's either now or never.

Focus, Claire! I swallow a gulp so hard that I'm sure my Grandmother hears it in her grave. Hell, I remember her cheating on Granddaddy with the owner of the dry cleaners. Maybe it's in my genes.

"Okay, so remember a year ago when I had that hysterectomy? Well, that was not the entire truth. I lied to you.

 I had surgery, but it wasn't a hysterectomy. Antonio's face displayed all of the emotions. He looked confused, disappointed, hurt all in one.

He replied in a stern voice, "What you mean you lied?"

"I never had the hysterectomy. I only had my fibroids removed."

He had a blank stare plastered across his face.

 *"*So, you said fuck me and what I want—or better yet, fuck us and what I thought we wanted. This why you were fucking me? So I couldn't get you pregnant? You are nothing but an inconsiderate, selfish, conniving bitch that I should have only used for a quick nut. Because you damn sure can't make me a better man.

Marrying you was the biggest mistake of my entire life. Put some damn clothes on!"I sit there frozen, trying to digest everything. I don't even comment. He continues to rant.

"You knew what having kids meant to me, and you go pull some bullshit like this. What the fuck did our vows mean?"

I feel like a piece of shit. But Antonio knows that we are not financially ready for a child.

Hell, I'm supporting his broke ass.

 "I'm moving out of this miserable ass house, Claire. I don't have time to babysit selfish women like you."

He walks into the room to pack some clothes he had here. I follow, hoping that I can calm him down.

 I attempt to console him, but he thrusts me across the room. My body hits the wall so hard that our wedding picture shattered, broken glass from the frame sprinkled my upper body.

 A sudden rush of adrenaline, rage, and guilt overwhelmed my face. His last words rang in my ears like bells.

"Bitch, you going to regret this, you will pay.”

 He storms out as I try to regain an ounce of life that I have left. Sobbing, I finally found the courage to call Chris.

I know that he will have sympathy for me. He knew that something was wrong; I was breathing too heavily. I started to hyperventilate. I could hardly utter a word. He said that he was on his way then hung up the phone.

 Damn! How did I get myself into this entanglement? I'm the one who suffered the operation's pain. He is acting like he's the victim. Hell, I'm the only victim here. That selfish ass bastard!

 I see Chris's bright lights from his car, I suddenly feel secure and protected. I trot down the stairs, disable the alarm, to let him in.

"Where is he, Claire? What is the problem?"

 "Chris, what did I do?" I begin to punch myself in the stomach. He knelt beside me to removed my hands, kissed them. He whispered that everything was going to be okay. Now I have him right where I need him, in my corner. It won't be long before he forgets that he had ever met Jasmine.

I lay my head on his chest begin to kiss it.

"Hold up, Claire," he said, "we agreed that our last time together in law school was indeed the last time."

"I need you right now, Chris. I need you to fuck me right now."

 I felt his dick harden. I nudged his nipple, then glided my tongue down to his little "big" man. I can feel him surrendering. Fuck Antonio. He never knew how to fuck me right. I started to swirl my tongue around the head of his dick. I looked up to find his eyes floating around his head. Not even a whole ten minutes, he's already bust one nut. I swallow it all, pretending he's a faucet. He pulls me up and kisses me on the forehead.

He turned my body over to sucked my breasts so hard I could have sworn I was lactating. I yelped out the loudest moan, ensuring him that I was ready for more.

 He licked my navel then fingered my pussy until it was an oasis. He put his finger in my mouth and then in his. I knew he wasn't playing any games.

His mouthpiece is beyond fire; it's divine. I poured all of my tears that didn't come from my eyes into his mouth, and he graciously accepted.

He lifted me as I graciously climbed this thick ass right on top of him. I grind my hips slowly so that we could both get lost in the moment. I wanted to ride his dick all night if he'd let me.

 After two rounds of ecstasy, he realized that time had flown, he had to get back home. I tried to coax him into staying a little longer, but he insisted that he had to go.

 I figured since he caved in that easily with me, then he and Jas must be having issues because he was pretty sure that our law school affair would be the only affair. Slowly but surely, I will create a gravitational force so strong that not even she can interfere.

As I lie alone in my bed, I reminisce on how Chris and I would study after class with our favorite scoop of ice cream, mint chocolate chip. We barely studied; we were too busy enjoying each other's presence.

I can feel that he genuinely wants to be with me. Those kisses were just too passionate and sensual to be false.

But I'm sure he feels like he owes Jas' because of all of the sacrifices she made to come here. So what? Dumb bitch. She must not know that you can't trust any nigga.

Hell, she might be fucking around on him. When I wake up, the first thing that I will do is going to the bank, open a separate account, and transfer all of the money from the joint account into my personal savings account. Since Antonio wants to play these street games, then let the fun begin. I've called the locksmith to change all the locks to the house as well as the alarm system. I'm helping him move out since that is what he wants to do so badly. He is fucking with the right one.

*Chapter 5: Christopher*

# *Everything I Wanted*

Finally, I have it all! The house, the soon to be wifey, career, what else could I need? I can't wait to make it official with Jasmine; she deserves it. I know that a good woman like her will not wait too much longer. She may not be a lawyer, but she has her degree in Business Management, serves and submits to her man, is beautiful inside and out and is not lazy in bed. She is all that I have ever desired in a woman, and I want her to know that I appreciate her. I know that I have been slacking our relationship, she does not hesitate to let me know. She doesn't even come home some nights, claiming that she's out styling hair or hanging with Kayla. Nights like these are happening one night too many. But this month will be my redemption weekend since her parents are coming into town. Hopefully, they set a date to tell Jas to be home; she has no clue about their visit.

 I haven't seen them since I left for law school five years ago. I'm a new man.

I'm going to make the best impression on them this weekend and assure them that their angel is safe in my arms.

Two weeks after my job promotion, Jas's Mom and Dad made their appearance; of course, they showed up without calling, so thankfully, the house was clean. I wasn't leaving any room for them to deny my request to marry my Queen.

Her parents were supposed to arrive earlier in the month, but a doctor's appointment postponed the plans.

 I'm going to cook dinner to make the night even more special. I prep her favorite cuisine, blackened salmon, Jasmine rice pilaf, Caesar salad, asparagus. Desert will be an exotic fruit medley with pineapple, pomegranate, papaya, infused with strawberries, blackberries, raspberries. I can't wait to Chef-Boyardee it in the kitchen for my new family.

I realize that I am out of some ingredients, so I have to head to the supermarket a little early to still be on time to meet her parents at the airport. Driving in Atlanta is no joke!

Every hour is rush hour, especially when these jokers fly down I-285 like they're on the highway to hell. While I wait in traffic, I realize that I miss my sexy bunny so much.

Man, I know I've been neglecting her big time. She has a hell of a way of punishing me too. Silent treatment, no dinner, and we had sex only once since the party.

She has been acting strange ever since the party, reticent and distant. I figure she was irritated by the "job wife" joke. Claire never could hold water; that was an inside joke that was not supposed to come outside the office. I can tell she looks down on Jasmine. Jas is growing tired of looking for a 9-5, but I need her to trust that I can carry both of us on my shoulders. Hopefully, after I pop the question, she'll realize that I am serious about us becoming a family. I finally arrive at the airport after sitting in traffic for more than 2 hours. I guess I can go to the supermarket after I drop them off at home. I'm sweating bullets.

I step out to grab their bags plus show off the new wax paint that I had serviced on my car.

"Very nice, my boy!" Her Dad seems surprised that I have a 2017 Audi. It's clean leather on the inside also waxed on the out. That eases my nervousness about impressing them.

"What do you mean 'very nice'? I know he wouldn't have my Princess riding around in a hooptie'. *The is bare—!"* Her Mom is always complaining about something.

"Stop naggin' the boy! Can you please make this a pleasant trip, Michelle? I didn't come to Hotlanta to be irritated; you do enough of that in the Queen City."

"Queen City? Is that supposed to be an alias for Charlotte? I cannot keep up with your young people." Hopefully, that corny joke can clear the air.

"All I'm saying is that I don't want my precious daughter cruising down these filthy streets in a gang-affiliated vehicle, such as an Impala or Crown Vic. looked up the crime rate in Atlanta. It is not one to boast about; in fact, you all live just 20 minutes away from Pookie and them. But I trust that you will keep my baby safely out of harm's way."

She commands such protection for her daughter but has no clue that her precious gem is at Boogalou Restaurant & Lounge in Midtown every other weekend. But I digress.

Finally, we're pulling into the driveway as I escort them into our house. As her parents go back and forth about who will hug Jas first, all I can think about is the last time she and I hugged.

Though this is not about me, I was compelled to showboat about my most recent accolade, my promotion.

It's as essential for the bride-to-be's father to accept me. He glares at my degrees on the mantelpiece and says, "Well done, son." I show them their room and let them wind down. I run back out to go to the supermarket, which was always crowded as usual. After purchasing the items, I notice that Kayla is the cashier, except she doesn't have braids, so where the hell was Jasmine? "Sup, Kayla, you talk to Jas?"

"No, not since last week. I thought Jas' was at home."

Yeah, she stepped out early this morning, and her phone is dead, so I haven't spoken with her since then.

I hated to tell a story about her being home this morning, especially since I barely saw or heard from her yesterday. But I'm not having her girls gossiping about us. I guess I'll finish dinner and wait until Jas returns my calls. I use the time to reflect on how blessed and humbled I am to reap the fruits of my labor.

***Ding-dong***

I open the door. It's my brother, Curtis, been incarcerated for more than ten years. He was supposed to get out five years from now; I guess he got out on good behavior. He was always one to charm someone out of their good senses.

"Hey, baby boy! It's me, baby bro!"

I can imagine the puzzled look on my face as I shove him out before Michelle hears him.

I dapped him up asked how long he has been free. Of course, a whole two days, of which both spent at Magic City.

"Wait, so you broke out of prison to see the strippers?" We are both bent over laughing by now.

"Damn, baby bro, something smells good in here! I know you got your bitch throwing down in the kitchen. Let her know y'all got some company."

"That's all me. But I don't mean to be rude, but you can't stay here this weekend.

Jas's parents are in town, this is the weekend that I'm proposing to her. I can get you a hotel for the weekend until her parents leave.

"That's my boy! Always looking out for ya, boy. I'm so proud of the man that you turned out to be."

The man that more of our young Black boys need to see." We walk to the car. "Dammmnnn! Do you know how many honeys I would scoop with this whip?! You gotta let your boy hold the keys!"

It feels good to get props from my brother, especially since he has schemed against me most of my life. I guess prison helped to ground him. I'm happy that her parents didn't see him because he is not too far from being Pookie and them.

"So, what's up?! I know that you have babies crawling around by now. Whatever happened to that girl that Dad didn't like, you know big booty, Jasmine."

 No, Bebe's kids yet. But that's who I'm with now, Jasmine. She moved down here with me to start fresh. The old man kept breathing down my neck about living up to his standard.

"Well, as I remember, she was down for you. She was bad as fuck too."

"I'm her type anyway; an educated man, bicultural,I candress up in a silk tie and camouflage it with some Jordan's."It's silent for a moment, so I turned on the radio.

"Oh, shit! My brother said while too excited to hear Backpack Shawty This Ain't No Rap Money. That's my shit!"

This new artist is from Columbia, SC. I can't believe that even simple things such as music can be taken for granted while you're locked up in the pin.

"Damn, big Bro, I'm taking you to Onyx as soon as the inlaws *leave!"* He stops rapping then turns down the music a little bit.

"So, you're really about to do this, baby bro? You're really about to trade in your pimp cards for one broad?"

"She's not abroad; she's my Queen. Don't you get tired of hopping from one lady to the next? I'm ready to settle down and make some little ones with a woman who I know will stand by my side through thick and thin."

"Best of luck to you. As for me, I'm going to be pimping for life!You know women love a man who's straight out of the joint! New tats and a new fade, I'm in there like swimwear!" He turns the music up to rap again. Then we hear sirens.

 The cops haven't stopped me since I was 17; I wonder what the reason could be.

I pull the car over onto the curb and watch the policewoman through the side mirror. She is about 5'7, has smooth butter pecan skin, her face graced with a galore of freckles around her nose and cheekbones. I can tell that she has had a pretty exhausting day because her hair is in a messy bun; strings of curly hair fall out of the top of the bun.

Her persona exudes a high sex appeal. Curtis slumps down into his seat as I turn the radio down.

"Good afternoon, sir. I'm Officer Cyn. Do you realize that you were going 60 miles in a 40 miles per hour zone?"

"No, ma'am, my apologies. I was just super excited because my brother just got back home from jail.

I haven't seen him in ten years." She looks into the car and asks him to step out. I look through my peripheral vision to see Curtis slumping down further into the seat.

"So, you just got out, huh? I hope you can stay clean because I would hate to have to arrest you." She smirks and then escorts him back to the passenger's side. "Here's my number. I want to go over some things with you regarding the new laws.

Give me a call, or I will find your case and see you both in court. Capish?" He gleams that thousand-watt smile and replies, "I got ya, boo."

She left and didn't even ask for my license or registration. I don't even think she ran my tags. This gives big bro exclusive bragging rights.

"Chris, don't tell me that I have to school you on police etiquette as well. Never tell a cop where you're coming from or where you're going. Plead the 5th and remind them that you are a young black man just trying to abide by the Constitution and the state's laws. Now, thankfully, that honey was just after the D. Otherwise, she would've searched the car, and it could have gotten ugly. You have no street smart, but you don't need it because that's what I'm here for."

I shake my head, and he bursts out laughing.

"But on a serious note. I really will need a place to crash until I get on my feet. I know you with wifey to be and all, but you know family comes first."

We finally pull into the hotel parking lot. I think about it, and he's right. I'm sure Jasmine would not mind. She's isn't like her parents. She knows that the struggle can be real and that we have to help out our family. He steps out to get his bags. I pick up my phone to text Jas.

 I haven't heard from her all day. As soon as I go to the message icon, I see 13 unread messages. They're all from Claire! I can feel the grin spread across my face.

"Damn! She got you blushing like that. You wide open, Lil' man."

"Man, this is not even Jas. It's claire, my work wife."

"Work wife? That's the recipe for effin' up with the real wife. I may not have been with a girl in ten years, but all of them want the same thing, attention and to know that you only belong to them. Don't even pay that work broad any attention. Let her man handle that."

I see my phone lighting up, and it buzzes so hard that it falls off of the table.

***Claire:*** *Chris, I need you to come over right now. I am so lonely and need you to hold me the way you used to in college."*

***Me:*** *I am handling the family business now. I'll stop by if I have time.*

I know that she wants me to be her side piece, but last night was the previous night. I go inside the hotel to pay for Curtis's room and then call Jas. It's 7:45 PM, and she still has not contacted me. I'm sure she's okay; I'm giving her until 9:00 tonight before I send out a police search, I joke to myself to ease my mind.

I finally arrive at the house, and as I turn the key, I hear her Mom and Dad bickering about who's making the sweet potato pie.

Her Mom yells about Jas not returning any of her calls, either. "I'm sorry she isn't here. She's at her friend's house, braiding hair. You know Jas is always doing what she can to make her money." Her parents look dissatisfied, and I hold my head down in shame while walking up the stairs.

Her Dad follows me and asks, "Son, when are you going to ask for my daughter's hand in marriage?" I look at him with a blank stare.

"You know I'm in love with your daughter, and it's the only thing I dream about, sir—I" He cuts me off before I let another word come out and said,

"Don't dream, boy. Turn it into reality. I don't think stringing my daughter along is love.

I saw my wife, and I knew what I needed to do to marry her and made it happen. I didn't let anything or anyone stop me from my goal." I shake his hand and thank him for the advice.

I go to the room and work on some cases. I feel my phone buzzing from the missed calls and messages alert.

I have four missed calls from Claire. A selfie from Curtis with the policewoman in the jacuzzi at the hotel. At least one of us is happy. Maybe I should cut off all ties with Claire, but she's such a good woman. I can't try to please them both. Curtis is right about that. But where the hell is Jasmine?

I send Claire a goodnight text so that she doesn't feel neglected. I go to bed and refuse to stress over this situation.

*Chapter 6: Jasmine*

# *Here's to New Beginnings*

 As soon as I opened my eyes, the sun's rays blind me, forcing me to wake up and begin my day. Light equals truth, and right now, I am living a lie. We are locked in his man cave, which is an hour and a half away from my house. It's in Macon, a place I've never heard of before meeting Antonio. It's like a vacation every time I come here, a place where he can do what he wants when he wants to. It looks like an arcade accompanied by several controllers, pornos, and a camera right in the middle of the room. After that party, his wife threw they got into a nasty fight, so he left got this space.

I cannot believe that I am involved with him so intimately. I sit and meditate on the situation and wonder what the hell I had gotten myself into. Finally, the birds chirp so loud that it is impossible to sleep in, so I roll over and kiss Antonio on the forehead. He pulls me in close and asks, "Where the hell are you and my goodies going?"

I rolled over on my stomach and asked him what was on his mind. "Honestly, babe, I wanna open an upscale lounge. I know that may sound weird coming from a hood boy like myself, but I want to establish a spot where you can be sophistic-ratchet."

"Did you combine sophisticated and ratchet? I cannot deal with you, babe. On that note, let me get my sophistic-ratchet self in the shower."

See, that's what I love about you. You go along with my dialect and believe in me.

You're not like my bourgeoisie wife, who swears that I am nothing but a dope boy. A hood boy has dreams of getting out of the hood but still giving back. Feel me?

"Baby, you know I feel you!" I take my hand and grab his dick. He rolls his neck and extends his legs. He whispers,

"Now, don't start anything that you cannot finish, baby girl."

 I hop into the shower. The water pressure pierces my skin, so I utter a moan that sounds like pain and pleasure.

Antonio bursts through the door with his Glock in his hand, asking if everything is okay. I was a little startled but was happy to know that he would kill for me. I don't ever want to let this man go.

He sees my body dripping wet and decides to shower with me. He gets on his knees and washes my insides so well that I lean back on the wall. He uses the showerhead to rinse me off, then goes to work. His tongue is perusing through my body, and I lose balance. He takes one hand and holds my hands behind my back. I cum all over his face, then collapse into his arms.

I grind on him to make sure he gets him too. We finally leave the shower, and I get ready to face reality. Of course, he walked me to the car and kissed my forehead. Why do I have to leave him? Why can’t I stay in this romantic paradise forever? Oh, yeah, because he has a broad that he can’t shake loose, and I have a man who I can’t connect with to save my life.

 Before I start the ignition, he knocks on my window and hands me a key.

"If you ever need to get away, you can always come here. But don’t tell anybody about our spot because not even Claire knows about it. It is our little refuge from the bullshit that we go through. Got it? "

"I got it, Daddy." That key felt like gold, and I was on a high the entire ride home. It’s 7:00 PM, and I realize I haven’t talked to Chris since Friday. I feel bad and turn around to go back to Antonio’s house.

"Damn bae, you back for more?" Antonio is happy to see me, and I explain to him that I will leave in the morning. We didn’t even have sex that night, we cuddle, and he massages my body. His hands take away all the pain that I have in my life.

I wake up early the next day and make breakfast for Antonio and me before leaving to go home. Why am I still calling Chris’s house home? I cannot remember the last time I stayed there for a whole week.

"Don’t stay away from Daddy for too long, baby."

Antonio hates sharing me with Chris, and I can’t front. I like the fact that nobody knows about our little rendezvous. Shit, I need to put Chris’s address into the GPS because I have forgotten the way.

I pull into the driveway only to see Chris sitting on the porch drinking Heineken. It’s 7:15 AM, and he still has on his PJs, which is highly unlikely for him. He’s always up at the crack of dawn suited and booted for work. At that moment, I realize that I have fucked up. But it’s not my fault. If a girl cannot get the attention that she needs at home, it guarantees that she will go somewhere else and get it.

And I am doing just that, so he should blame himself. "You’re stepping in at 7:15 AM and acting as if it’s okay?

I have been blowing your phone up all weekend. You do know that you left on Friday, and today is Sunday, right? The fuck, Jasmine? Who does that shit, especially when your parents are here from out of town? So where were you? What is up with your phone?”

 And I saw Kayla at the market, and she did not have braids, nor has she spoken with you, so tell me the truth."

Shit. My phone was dead all weekend. I’m going to start crying. That is always my escape route.

 "Those tears are not cuttin’ it this time, Jasmine. Where the fuck you been?" I can’t believe he is dropping the F-bomb like this. I was still in my car in tears. He stood up and walked into my face. He began yelling, and I feared that he was going to become belligerent toward me. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach, and my face had gotten even more heated. After an awkward silence, he finally went back into the house. I wiped my tears and walked in after him. To my surprise, my parents were eating breakfast and asked where I had been. I told them that I had stayed the night at a friend’s house because I was styling hair. That was the same lie that I said when I would sneak around in high school. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Chris scolds me and storms upstairs, mumbling something about going into the office. I follow him upstairs.

"Are you cheating on me, Jasmine?"My phone buzzes. I glanced at it. It breaks the tension.

It’s Antonio.

 ***Antonio:*** *Hey, baby, just checking in on you.*

***Me:*** *Going as expected, fill you in later.*

He even inserts a blowing kiss emoji. I blush, forgetting that less than 2 seconds ago, I was in a heated argument with Chris. Our relationship has become an afterthought.

"Who have you laughing like that? Don’t say, Kayla, because I know that look. That’s the same look you used to have when we were together."

"Wait, so we aren’t together? I don’t have time for the mind games, Chris."

"So, let me get this straight. You come strolling in at 7 AM, and you mean to tell me that I’m playing games? Girl, have you lost your damn mind?:

 It’s clear that you are having testosterone troubles. So, we can finish this when you come back from the office." As he gets into his car, I realize that he still has on his sweats and wife beater. Who the hell goes into an office with that attire? I guess two can play that game. My Dad tells me to get dolled up; he’s taking mommy and me out! Of course, it takes us two hours to get dressed, but once we step downstairs, my Daddy has a gleam in his eye that no man can emulate. To say that I am a Daddy’s girl is an understatement. As soon as we are about to step out, I hear the key turning in the lock. Chris is back from the office already and seems much more relieved. But he says that he never made it to the office and had to turn around because of a flat tire.

I see the raggedy spare tire on the left side of the car.

 I didn’t know that it took two hours to change a tire.

"Where the hell were you for two hours?"

Chris facetiously responds, "The same place that you were for two days."He asked me for the keys to my two-seater so that he can drive back to the office.

I told him no, so he took the keys to the third car, which is also the one my parents were driving during their stay.

He leaves again without saying where he’s going. Did this man get some guts in two hours? My parents could feel the tension between the two of us. My Mom is much short-tempered than my Dad and me.

 "Who the hell goes to the office on Sunday. That’s a family day."

She shakes her head, and her smirk says, "I told you so." I was not in the mood for my Mom to be proven right. I’m so embarrassed. Why does this have to happen while my parents are in town? Chris is going to pay for this bullshit. I start crying out of frustration. My Dad runs over to console me. My Mom is in a little corner to herself, looking spaced out. A deafening silence enters the room. My Dad finally makes eye contact with my Mom, and she nods.

“What is going on?”

 "Baby, your mother and I have some news to tell you. My Dad takes a deep breath. "Honey, the doctor found a lump in Mommy’s left breast. But you have to remain calm. It’s cancerous. She will begin chemotherapy next week, which is why we wanted to visit this week."

I rush over to my Mom and jump into her lap as I did as a little girl. She smells like heaven. She and my Dad are the only stability that I know. Once again, Chris is MIA.

"They just found out last week, which is why we planned an impromptu trip." I wonder if I can move back to Charlotte or if she can complete chemo here. I can’t be too far from them right now. I wish Antonio were here to comfort me.

 *Chapter 7: Antonio*

# *I Got Served*

I wake up early in the morning to go to the house that Claire and I share has never felt like *home*. Although we are legally married, I do not see the need to alert her of my every move. I come to the house while she isn’t home to pack my clothes. She barely recognizes me when I am here, so I am sure that she won’t notice my items missing from the drawer. Before I can adequately pack my color-sorted Burberry button-downs, I hear a knock at the door. Claire is at the office so that it may be the mailman.

“Are you Antonio Jennings?” “Yes, how may I help you?” She pauses and greets me with a sinister stare.

The police officer hands me a thick envelope then sashays away. Claire has not only appointed a police officer to bring the divorce papers to our home this morning but had the nerve to leave a kiss imprinted on the envelope.

Woman, go to hell! I signed those papers so fast I can still smell the ink. If Claire wants war, then I have the ammunition ready, and Jas is my alias. According to her, I am a broke-ass dope boy who deserves to live in the trap house. She swears I’m mooching off her, but contrary to her belief, I have more than $600K in the bank. I have been keeping a secret stash from her for years for rainy days like this one. But deep down, I did want shit to work out between us two, mostly since everyone was against our marriage in the first place.

No use in crying over spilled milk! I’m grateful to have Jas; she deserves my love. If she thinks this will keep me down, then she has another thing coming.

Beyond all of the drama, I am ready to invest my money into Homely Vizions, my real estate company and Vizions, my night lounge. Jasmine is going to be my interior decorator and transcend my vision into reality.

God has a funny way of making my dreams come true. I would have never officially broken it off with Claire, which is why God chose her to pull the plug on our marriage.

Even though I may not want to admit it, I have committed infidelity during my marriage. Jas and I will be a power couple; she’s my Flotus, and I’m the goat!

Besides, she grinds just as hard as I do, and she appreciates a hard-working man. I have a mean ass work ethic. I have no choice but to propel myself to the top.

It’s a quarter to 8 PM, and I need Jasmine’s tender embrace. I call her to share the good news.

"Baby, I have some great news. How about you come over tonight?"

"Ok, it’ll be later, around 9:30. I’m cooking dinner for my parents. I’ll be over as soon as I finish with them."

“Enjoy your parents, but don’t keep Daddy waiting too long.”

*“*Never that, baby.”

Jasmine told me about her mom’s diagnosis of cancer, I empathize with her. I lost my mother at six years old, so trust me; I know what it is like to lose someone so close to your heart. Chris has abandoned her for his job during her time of need. He does not know how to make an even balance between home and work. I can’t wait until Jas is in my arms every night. I have been her shoulder to cry on for five nights in a row. One man’s trash is another man’s treasure. Except when it comes to Claire, she’s nothing but hot ass garbage! But I digress. I can’t believe Chris is fucking up like this. I'm not complaining at all; in fact, I'm happy that Chris is driving Jasmine right into my arms.

Jas calls and says that she is not in the mood to drive, so I call her an Uber. She should be here in thirty minutes, enough time for me to clean the house and burn some incense. I have already planned a romantic picnic in the backyard. Maybe she’ll be down to get it in back there too, with her freaky ass. But I’ll wait until she gets here to surprise her with a picnic. I can’t wait to see her eyes light up.

The blanket laid across my freshly cut yard, a bottle of wine is chilling on ice, the fruit cut into little hearts, the papers are right beside it. The only thing missing was the soundtrack to set the mood. So I retreat to some 90’s R&B. Silk, Musiq Soulchild, Usher, Dru Hill, Black Street, Ginuwine, and Tyrese will sing everything I’m feeling for Jas. She can hear the music thumping as soon as she steps out of the car.

"Damn, why didn’t you tell me it was 90’s night?! I would’ve brought my Xscape, TLC, and Blaq with me! Oooh, baby!

How did you know Tyrese was my husband, and ‘Sweet Lady’ was my favorite jam?"

"Because I know you, baby."

She was so intrigued, and I’m glad everything is perfect. She kisses me on the lips.

"Damn, babe, don’t kiss me like that. Let me give you dinner and the good news first."

"You are the main course." She kissed me one last time.”

I raise my glass toast to celebrate our new life together.

"To my baby, this is the beginning of our future!"

I pass her the glass; she takes one sip then asks me what I have up my sleeve.

I hand her the papers. She reads them in disbelief.

"You’re getting a divorce?"

I spilled everything that led up to it—the lying about getting a hysterectomy behind my back, habitual lying, and the constant belittlement. As soon as I stopped explaining, Jasmine was infuriated. Her eyes were red, and she asked if I wanted her to see about Claire. I like that sophisticatedhood shit; she knows how to ride for her man when he’s hurt. I put my feelings on the back burner because I want Jas to know that I’m here for her during her time of need. But what I love is that she sees me hurting and finds a way to caress me.

 I swallowed Claire’s betrayal and continued to tell her that she is my primary motivator for starting a business. Her words of encouragement are so simple yet so potent*.*

"Baby, the world is yours and everything in it. Take what’s yours. I got ya back."She said.

The timing couldn't have been any better; Claire wants out, and what I need in my life walks in and is ready to accept my love. As soon as she stops playing wife to that lame Chris, then I can claim her. Never thought I’d be a side nigga, but there’s a first time for everything. I expressed my vision of her becoming my business partner, hoping that she accepts. I will cover the operating expenses, manage the profits, and distribute the wages. I need her to be VP of the company to handle the décor, maintain the marketing, cover food and set the ambiance for Vizions. She needs to do something that she can be proud of and start utilizing her talents and Business degree. She was so enthralled with my proposition that she hopped into my lap and started tearing my bottom lip apart!

"Tell me you are not bullshitting," she squeals.

"Baby, I'm dead ass," I confirm. I pull her tighter into my embrace as the moon was set perfectly on her smooth, brown sugar complexion.

"For you to consider me as a partner for one of the biggest goals of your life is an honor." I slowly lie back on the blanket, and my arms reassured her that I was not going anywhere anytime soon. The sounds of nature, infused with Jesse Powell- You," was the perfect soundtrack for the love session that we were about to have. Our bodies have divine chemistry that allows us to be in sync with each other, pure ecstasy. I never thought that I would enjoy making love with someone as much as I do with Jasmine.

 I release all my frustrations into her, and she graciously accepts without pulling back an inch. She knows how to take this blessing! I nibble on her ear lobe and make my way down to her neck. I glide my tongue up and down, then slide down to her perky breasts. She rolls over, and I unhook her bra with my teeth.

"Oh, so you do magic, too?" She moans so passionate that I flip her over so that I can taste all that she has to offer.

I stick my tongue so far up into her insides that she pulls on the blanket. All of her sweet juices trickle down my throat, and I want to taste every drop. She tastes like the sweet sensation of honeysuckles that I ate as a kid at my grandma’s house.

"Damn, baby, I want to please you, too." I move my head, and she climbs on top of me and starts riding my dick to a tempo that is just perfect. By this time, "Love" by Musiq Soulchild is playing, and her body’s rhythm complements the song’s rhythm. As soon as we came, she stares at me and says it.

"I love you."

I love you too, baby girl.

I carried her inside placed her in bed after ten minutes. I heard her phone vibrating on the nightstand. *It’s Chris*. She wakes up as soon as she hears her phone and answers reluctantly. I kiss her neck while she’s on the phone, and she begins to squeal. I hear Chris on the other end of the phone.

"Why do you sound like that? Where are you, Jas? You’re going to have to start doing hair at home because I can’t have you spending the night at places and tracking you down."

"Ok, Chris. But let me call you back. I need to finish another client."

 I go into the front room, and my cell phone is ringing incessantly. It’s Claire sending me the same text messages multiple times, saying:

***Claire****: Fuck you! Trust me; this shit is not over! You did this shit to me, and you’re going to get what's coming to you.*

I don’t give a damn about any of this bullshit that’s going on because I have my rib right next to me. I don’t want Jasmine caught up in this shit, so I don’t even mention it to her. I swear I left my hood days in the past and don't want to regress. I’m a 30-year-old black man who has an entire future, and I want to start a family with Jasmine. I am a changed man. Besides, she’s the one who wanted the divorce, but somehow, I’m in the wrong.

I’m not stressing myself out with that drama. Before I can even put the phone down, I get a private call, so I answer, "Who the fuck is this?" The voice is deep and raspy.

"You better watch your back Motherfucker ‘cuz if I see you in the street, that’s yo life." Click.

That's it, the first thing tomorrow morning, I'm changing phone companies, numbers and getting an alarm system with cameras installed in my home. I'll be damned if I get caught up in some bullshit and fuck up my record. I go back into the room with Jas to see her lying across the bed, partially naked. I lean down, kiss her on the forehead.

She smiles and snuggles under me. I annoy her to see if she will tell me what is going on in her mind. I’m all ears, babe and give her a back rub. She denied me a response to what is going on in her world. I guess she forgot that I memorized every piece of her body, physically, mentally, and very much so sexually. I moved from her back to her booty, and I hear her giggle. I grab some coconut oil off of the dresser and smooth it evenly across her back.

I glide my tongue in figure 8 circular motions to ensure that she’s enjoying her massage. I gradually increase the amount of pressure. I hear her moan, "Ooohhh," in pleasure.

"You like that?" I continue to rub in that area specifically; she yells, "Yes, baby!"

I started kissing her butt and then take small bites into it. I slide my hands down and follow her body's curves like a map, searching for her hidden treasures. I rub a little more oil in my hands, and I ease down south to kiss the path. She stops me dead in my tracks.

"Stop, you’re going to mess around and have me splashing all over your sheets!"

"I’m ready to go swimming with you, baby. I can drown in you."

"I can't just get up and move. It’s a very complicated thing. I feel so lost. My heart is with you, but I’m stuck with Chris. I’m just with him out of habit."

"Chris doesn’t deserve you; I deserve you!" I was turning red in the face and had to step back. All I want is to be with her.

"I’m ready to go home." She said.

 "Damn, are you on a curfew? Why are you rushing? He isn’t even home yet, and you’re acting like he’s going to beat your ass."

"Don’t talk to me like that, Antonio. I can’t help the situationship that we have created. All I can do is protect it. And my mother is at home. I can’t forget about her."

"I’m so sorry, baby; I just don’t want Chris to break your heart."

"That’s not going to happen because I have you."

# *Chapter 8: Christopher*

# *My Brother’s Keeper*

It has been two weeks since Jasmine’s parents left. I hate that they had to witness our feuding. It’s as if I’m in a war zone and don’t know what I’m fighting against. What is my target? I thought it was to give Jasmine the unconditional love that most women yearn for, but it seems she isn’t involved in the relationship these days. But maybe I’m just selfish. I mean, after all, we are talking about her Mom surviving cancer. Maybe Jas needs some time apart from me—and us.

 To make matters worse, I had to get her approval on whether Curtis can stay here for a few weeks while he gets on his feet. She graciously complied; it would be just like old times for Curtis and me.

I can see us now, kickin’ it, reminiscing about our childhood while carefully skipping over how our different perspectives on life led us to separate privileges as adults. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

 I can remember the day that I had an epiphany about my brother’s fate. Though I love New Jack City, I am my brother’s keeper, and it seems like I’ve been trying to keep him safe since my junior year of high school. This year, he decided to rob the bank, eventually robbing himself of any future outside of the law. He and his accomplice, Dre, kidnapped a young girl and held her hostage as they drove out of the state.

There was a slight chance that they would have gotten away with it if it had not been for their third homie, who was a covert coward afraid that they would end up getting caught by the police. The conscience can set a man free or keep him imprisoned; in this case, my brother’s friend decided to go to jail in exchange for a clear conscience. They were each sentenced to 20 years, but one of the guys had favor over his name.

Dre’s sister, Claire, is an attorney and persuaded the judge to reduce his sentence to ten years with parole. With his innately covetous manner, my brother was highly jealous of Dre for such an unfair ruling and refused to speak to him for the rest of their lives. Now that he’s free, he says that he has some unfinished business to handle. I hope he doesn’t dig a grave and expect me to pull him out of it; I refuse to get caught in the middle of any of his bullshit.

"What’s up, kid?" Curtis says as he is drinking milk straight out of the carton.

 Bro, you better not let my girl catch you doing that. I try not to add any tension, but at the end of the day, this was my and Jas’s home first, and big bro has to respect that. We have more than enough glasses for everyone to use.

 "Where she at anyway?"Before my mouth would allow me to speak, my mind froze, and my thoughts were in a frenzy.

Honestly, I can’t tell him or anyone where the hell she is because she’s so damn secretive the last few weeks. I’ll say what she always says, She’s at work. Making Daddy’s money! I had to throw in a joke to ease the pain.

 "That’s what’s up, baby bro. Let these females know who is running things!"

Yeah, she got a new job and has been out a lot with renovations on some business and residential properties.

"That’s what’s up. I’m proud of you two. Power couple. What time do you go to work?"

Anytime he asks for my schedule, and I get skeptical about his plans.

"In a few. Why, what’s up?"

 "Man, I got some heat on my chest that I need to let go." I already know where this guilt-driven conversation is going. Why is it that he blames me for his poor decisions?

I decide to be a sea and let him drown his sorrows until it’s time for me to leave for work. He goes on,

 "When I called you that day, you know, that day, I went in, why didn't you answer*?*

You didn't write, visit, put money on my books, or even check on me. That shit hurt, bro."

I see the fury, betrayal, and hurt in his eyes. One would think that Adam’s apple had gotten knocked out of his neck by the creaky sound in his voice.

Before I speak, I believe that anything that I say will be wrong in his eyes. I stare at him for a moment, then reply. Man, I’m sorry. I just wasn't ready to confront him and tell my honest feelings on the matter. Was I mad? Selfish? Damn right! I’ll apologize so we can both move on with our lives.

I wanted my brother to be free because we had plans for our lives! Dreams for us to prosper and be the brothers who made it without a record. But he blew it when he decided to rob a bank with his homeboys. I felt like he traded me for a snitch and a traitor.

"I'm your brother, man. How could you turn your back on me? I've always been there for you, have I not?!" At this point, we both were infuriated with one another.

"See, that's your problem, Chris!" Curtis was standing right in front of my face. I dared not flinch or show any signs of fear. He goes on in a much more solemn and low tone.

 "You think you’re better than me. As a kid, our parents treated you as a trophy kid. You got what you wanted when you wanted it. I, on the other hand, was left to be the fucked up. Don’t you know that kid?

I was meant to be another nigga with a felon under his belt. While you got the privilege to have a degree under yours. Everyone expected me to fail, but when I thought I had at least one person behind my back, my brother, even he disappeared."

 "What do you want me to do, Curtis? I’m trying to make up for it now. I'm letting you stay here, rent-free, and you act like you’re too good for forgiveness. Really? I wanted to have your back, but I didn’t know how to.

I wanted to be there for you, but it felt like I would only be bragging about my life. So, I kept my distance. I don’t judge you on your past, and all that I ask is that you give me the same respect. That flew into one ear and out of the other.

"Damn that! Dre is my homeboy, and his sister bailed me out, son! I thought we were better than that kid." It hurt me to know he was feeling like this. But I stand firm on what I believe.

No, fuck that! That’s some bullshit! You're right, BIG BRO. I am the kid. Honestly, I don't even agree with Claire bailing you out because I knew you would come out acting like the victim when you did the crime. That’s some bullshit.

"If that's how you feel, then maybe we weren't as tight as you claim to be. You aren't nothing but a bitch."

 He storms out of the room and slams the front door so hard that the glass screen door breaks. Another expense that he cannot afford to repair. Damn, I knew this would happen, but I can't help but express how I feel. He’s not a child.

It’s now 10:10, and I’m incredibly embarrassed. My cell phone rings, It’s a client asking if I will make our 10 AM meeting. I reply I am on the way; I had a family emergency. My apologies for the delay. I grab my keys and hop into my car.

I was pushing 90mph on the highway, cutting a 30-minute trip into a ten-minute drive. As I pulled into the office, I realize that I left my tie at home, and I also spilled coffee on my pants. Where the fuck is Jas when I need her?

"What a morning you’re having, hon." It’s Claire. I smile, the first time I’d done so all morning.”It’s a shame that Claire has made more of a home for me in the office than Jas does at home. I love Jas, but I can’t front. Claire will always have a special place in my heart.

*Chapter 9: Claire*

# *The Takeover*

 It’s one thing to be stagnant in my personal life, but to be dormant with a man, well, that’s an entirely different point of failure. I have lost Antonio and our marriage, but my gain will be so significant: *Christopher*. I lost a lazy ass vagabond who thought working security at a ghetto club was a career. Hey, maybe, losing a loved one isn’t as bad as I thought! I guess what I’m struggling with is the love that was lost. Where did we go wrong? I thought I was marrying a bad boy who would grow out of that hood shit and become a man. So much for reminiscing.

 Gosh, five o’clock can’t come any sooner! My client is running fifteen minutes late; I hope he knows there’s a fine for that! Does he not know that I have a date with Mr. Merlot and my little magic bullet. Now that I think about it, I need to purchase some double A batteries since I got to do manual labor. I mean, I don’t mind a little finger or two to achieve an orgasm, but that vibrator does the job.

 It has more functions than Antonio’s missionary sex game. But I digress. Where the hell is this client? My assistant calls into the office,

"Ms. Jennings, your client is here to see you."

Daniels! My last name is Daniels now; I’m not a Jennings anymore! How many times do I have to tell you that? The next time you forget the name of your boss, your ass will be standing in the unemployment line! You got that?! Send the client when he arrives and bill him an additional $150 late fee."

As I hear the door crack open, I can already tell who it is,

Dre. Who else would come into a place of business blasting T.I’s Trap Muzik album on their iPhone while snacking on sunflower seeds?

 Dre, why are you here? You know how I feel about meeting me at my office. Could you not have called? I’m busy working on cases for paying clients.

"I am the client. You don’t have to treat me like I’m some little child, you know. You can kill all of that arrogance, Claire, because you’re the one who needs a favor from me."

Favor? Don’t say anything to me about any favor's boy, because the last time I checked, I did you a FAVOR and got you and your partner in crime a reduced sentence. That is the least you can do for me and turn that ghetto ass music off and close my door.

 "Damn, sis who pissed in your fruit loops, geesh. I take the time out of my day to agree to see what big sis wants, and you’re chewing me to pieces. This how you do a brother?”

 You’re right, Dre. I am sorry; I am so fucking stressed about life. I knew that you were the only person who I could call to save me from this bullshit. My life is falling apart right in front of my eyes; with your street smarts and my legal know-how, I know that I can win this battle.”

 “Anything for you, baby girl. We have to stick together!” I smile and give him a playful wink.

“Anyway, I found a picture of Chris’s girlfriend. I don’t like her for him. He deserves more. He deserves me."

He stares at the picture and pops another sunflower seed into his mouth, sucks the salt, and cracks it, then he spits the shell onto the image, right on her face.

"I see why you want her out of the picture; she’s bad as hell."

 I ignore his comment and give him the files that I have prepared for Jasmine. It has her address, car tag, registration, description, driver’s license number, and access to all of her social media accounts.

Of course, she’s at the ghetto clubs downtown, but I also found a location that my GPS couldn’t quite reach. It’s in Macon, which is at least 45 miles from her home in Buckhead.

 Do you need anything else? Should we track her vehicle with an internal GPS to find out the exact location in Macon? I need this to be as quick and smooth as possible.

 "I like the way you think, sis! This bitch is going down."

Right. We are going to track Jasmine down to a science. Here’s a phone that allows us to talk freely with no trace.

We will never skip a beat! I’m more than positive that we can create such an impressive profile. She will start to think that she is cloned! That broad has to go.

 "One question, though, sis.

I recognize the devilish glow surrounding his face, the same one that got him expelled from school after knocking a boy’s top grill out with a basketball. I like that he has no chill, and it’s no boundaries that he wouldn’t cross.

How close can I get to her?" He said.

 The ball is in your court; you can do whatever you want to do with her. Fuck her.

 “Bet. Well, little bro has some other business to take care of at Onyx Strip Club. So, we can finish this Q&A after a little T&A."

Be safe! You know these THOTS in Atlanta don’t have any sense! I said while he walks out.

 I don’t feel a bit of regret for conspiring to take Jasmine down, especially since she’s stealing my happiness. That’s supposed to be me with Chris, encouraging him to go further in his career and giving him a family. I should have just left Antonio broke ass when I had the chance. Even though I bailed my brother out of jail, he does not know how much of an asset he is to me. Without Dre, this will not be possible. I know that he will kill for my happiness, and I will go poor to make sure he always has his freedom.

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#  *Chapter 10: Jasmine*

# *Truth Be Told*

I could not be any happier right now; it’s like everything is happening the way it’s supposed to without a problem. My Mom is doing well in chemotherapy, Antonio just got approved for the business loan for Vizions, LLC, and I will finally design a space without any limitations. But then again, there’s Chris and his extra baggage. Not only have I found text messages to Claire stating that he is always going to be by her side and will support her no matter what. Unfortunately, this man is so caught up with his work wife that he forgets about his real woman. He hasn’t even proposed to me, but I could give two fucks right now, especially since Antonio is in my world.

 The business is going so well for Antonio; Club Vizions is doing great, and the houses have been selling like water! After creating the blueprint for the renovations, Antonio can increase the price, proving that our teamwork does make our dreams work.

But what if our dream is a nightmare waiting to unfold? I’m not one to be a pawn in anyone’s life, especially since he just got out of his divorce, and I am not entirely out of the relationship with Chris. I can sense that Antonio is a bit upset that I have not ended my relationship with Chris, but I keep telling him that it’s not that simple or easy.

He did not have to break up with Claire; she served him. Chris will never leave me, and I don't know how to let him go. Chris has been my everything—he was even my first.

He was always my rock, that is until the work wife moved into his heart. I know that I am too good of a woman to compete with anyone else, but what do I do?

Antonio sparks my fire as no other man has, and he is the only man I’ve slept with besides Chris. He is so good in bed that I feel like I need him. My body craves him. Our chemistry is genuine and free, and he’s shown me things about my body that I didn't know existed. He has exposed me to a new life that I enjoy, but what about Chris? He may not be the best boyfriend, but he is a great person, and I do not want to hurt him.

 After giving the construction workers my final blueprints, I decided to go straight home to Chris and have a serious conversation about our relationship. I took the long way home instead of the highway to have more time to clear my head.

WTF! Ughhh!! I just had the tires checked last week, and now the tire pressure signal is on again. The car jerked, and I smell the rubber. Damn, another flat tire; I’ve had two in the same week. My Daddy taught me how to change a tire years ago, so I kick off my Red Bottoms and lace up my Nikes. I grab my hot pink jack kit from the trunk and begin to take the tire off. I can’t believe that I am out here alone in this hot sun, changing my tire. Just as I lift the flap in the trunk to retrieve the spare tire, I hear a car pull up behind me. It is a sleek, black 2013 Altima that has tinted windows. The hard part is done. Maybe he can put a donut on the car. He steps out and looks a little familiar; I can’t imagine where we may have crossed paths.

 He approaches me with a warm smile and a buff chest. I search my brain to remember where I know him from; this feels like Déjà vu.

"Hey, Miss Lady, can I help you with that tire?"

 Usually, I would instead do it myself, but hell, I don’t see the harm if he's offering. Chris always reminds me how I should let men do manly things, even if I can do them myself.

 I smile and step aside from my trunk, pointing to the tire. You know, I can do this on my own.

"Yeah, but a beautiful young lady like yourself should not have to."

 He lifts the donut as if it were a weight; I can tell he has a healthy workout routine. Just as I am about to finish imagining this stranger’s itinerary, I feel my phone vibrate. It’s Chris calling. I forward the call to voicemail.

He tells me to hurry and get home because he has something special for me at the house.

 I am in no mood for surprises, especially from a man who does not attend to any of my needs.

"Hey, how much longer?"

"Not too much longer, baby girl."

 I sit in my car while he is chaining the tire, but I can see everything he is doing in the rearview mirror, so I’m not worried. Why does he have a charger and his phone on my wheel?

"Hey, what is that phone for?"

"I need to use the flashlight from my phone; it is pretty dark under here."

 I hear a strange notification sound from his phone that says, "Device synched." I figure it is an update since this guy still has the iPhone 6. Okay, it has been 20 minutes, and I have somewhere to be, not to mention it only takes no time to put on a tire.

"Done yet?"

He puts a screwdriver, a strange cord, and his phone into his pocket before he answers.

"All done, baby girl. You be careful with those nails. I saw three in your old tire."

 "Damn! They’re always doing construction on this I-285, and it had to come from there. Thanks. What’s your name?" He smiles and then walks back to his car.

"You can call me D."

I don’t even have a chance to give a tip to him before he speeds off. Shit! I forgot about Chris again. I text him at 6 PM:

***Me:*** *I’ve caught a flat and will be home soon. Some guy helped with my tire be on the way in a few.*

I haven’t told the truth in so long I almost forgot how it feels. When I ignite my car, my Bluetooth informs me that a new device is synched. Finally, I can make calls via Bluetooth without having to connect my cellphone.

 As I turn onto my street, I hear a strange beeping sound, which is odd because my GPS is off and on my seat belt. Maybe it’s the Bluetooth signal, or better yet, a sign that I should be at Antonio’s house instead of Chris’s. Just let me get home safely, please!

I pull into the driveway and notice that Chris has finally cut the bushes and mowed the yard. Maybe I should take another vacation so he can mow the backyard. God, please watch over this conversation. It’s the first real one we’ve had in weeks. As soon as I step outside of my car, I hear a buzzing sound. Maybe it’s Antonio. Let me turn my phone off because one message from him and I’m out of the door. I go inside and notice Chris pouring a glass of Merlot, my favorite wine.

He’s wearing the Polo button-down that I bought him for Valentine’s Day and the cologne that I got for his birthday. He knows that my weakness is a good-smelling man. I can’t help but beam and plant a kiss on his soft lips. Before he could slip his tongue in, he stops and backs away.

 "I know that we have not been on the same page since we’ve been living here. I’m sure you’re always gone because you're stressed about your Mom’s cancer. I am working on being that support system that you need. Just give me some time, babe."

 I feel tears welling in my eyes from feelings of guilt, but I do not want to tell him about Antonio and me, so I break the seriousness.

 "Damn, baby, it smells like Chef-Boy-Ar-Chris is back! Is that salmon and asparagus that I smell?"

He laughs and motions for me to take a seat at the table, decorated with flowers and chocolate. I sit down as he serves me. He sits down beside me and breaks the silence.

 "I know we have not been on the same page this month, hell, not even this year."

 I roll my eyes before responding, "You mean ever since I moved to Atlanta?"

 He shifts his posture, and I can feel the vibe changing. He knows that I do not bite my tongue for anyone, so I do not understand why he’s acting as if my comments are something new.

 "You’ve been absent so long, Jas, that I almost forgot how much of a smart mouth you have. You’ve been acting pretty strange since that party at Claire. Do you even want to be in this relationship?"

 "Chris, I moved here so that we could build a family. But it seems like you’d rather be building a family at your little firm with your little work wife. You should ask yourself the same question because I feel like we’re drifting. Why should I come home every night to an empty house? I get tired of waiting for you, only for you to text that you’ll be in a little late."

 I feel tears welling up in my eyes, so I leave the kitchen and sit on the ottoman. As soon as Chris was about to follow me, Curtis came into the house. I do not mind him living here for a while, but who the hell gave him a key?

 He tells Chris that he needs to speak to him privately for a second. What the hell is going on? I’m fucking my fiancee’s co-worker’s ex-husband. I should feel guilty, but a part of me doesn’t. I mean, who wants to feel neglected or come in second place to their spouse? Chris’s phone goes off again; it’s a text from Claire. I’m sure it’s work-related, but I want to check anyway.

***Claire****: Hey, boo, I’m ready for you to come and massage my pussy again. Nobody has ever fucked me the way you do, and I’m not letting you go. I’m here waiting for you.*

 Now what the hell kind of work information is this? I’m glad that I have my side piece because his ass sure as hell has his.

When Chris and Curtis come back into the living room, I throw his phone at his head. Tears of frustration begin to fall from my eyes. I uprooted my life to be with him, and his whole plan was to play me? I have so many questions, but it seems they’ve all got answered from these text messages. I sit frozen.

 You son of a bitch. Is this who the hell replaced me? So, is this the damn case that you have to rush to every day? You’ve been sleeping with her this whole time? No, I can believe it. I knew it!” I slapped him in the face.

"It’s not what you think, Jas. Just let me explain."

 I walked away from him, and he grabs my arm to come back. "No, do not touch me. You can't feel me! I can’t stop crying. How could he betray us?

"Baby, listen, it was an old relationship."

 How old, Chris; we were together in high school, and you promised me that nothing would ever happen between you and her while you were in college. Do you love her?

 He puts his head down and shifts his eyes. I know the truth. I knew it in the car on the way to the party. I knew it when you left to go to the office for two hours in a wife beater.

 I knew it when she considered her the wife before I was even the fiancée. So why the fuck did I stay? How could I be so damn naive?

"No, baby, I swear that I love you and want us to work this out. I’m doing everything for us, baby, please."

 "I asked you about her, and you told me that it was nothing. You lied to me repeatedly. With the same damn lips that you kiss me with, you lied with and then went to kiss her. I’m glad I did what I did!

 "What’s that supposed to mean?" Chris asks. Curtis comes into the living room to ask Chris if everything is okay. I storm off to pack my things; I’m staying with a friend for a while.

I text Antonio at 8:10 PM:

***Me****: Change of plans on the way back to you explain once I get there.*

 Chris joins me in the room and starts to unpack my suitcase.

He yells at me, “Where are you going; what is that comment supposed to mean?” I don’t respond. I snatch my shirt out of his hand and put it back into my suitcase.

"Jasmine! Baby, you’re not going to leave! We’re going to talk about this now!"

He snatched my bag and blocked the door so that I can’t leave the bedroom. You want to talk; I’m sleeping with Antonio, you happy? That’s where I have been hiding; I wasn’t doing any damn hair I’ve been with him. So, are we all talked out now? Do you need any more clarification than that?

"Antonio?” He repeats his name; he looked in disbelief. The look on his face screams a thousand questions. I brush against him, knocking him back a little but I still manage to reach the top step. My phone goes off; Chris asked.

 "Who is that, Antonio?" He answers it, "Stop calling my damn girl; leave us the hell alone!"

 Give me my damn phone, Chris! We tussle for a second before his chest bumps me backward down the stairs. I hear my ankle crack, and I cry out in pain. I can’t stop crying.

Chris comes down the stairs and tries to help me up, but I jerked back, intensifying the agony. A sharp pain shot up from my lower back to my neck.

"Leave me the hell alone, Chris!

 Curtis was outside on the phone with Officer Cyn, as usual. He came inside and saw the commotion; he tells her to radio the paramedics.

 "What the hell happened? What did you do, Chris? " I hear Curtis yelling at the top of his lungs.

"It was an accident. I swear I’m sorry, Jasmine!” Chris pleaded. He’s pacing back and forth.

 My phone keeps going off; it must be Antonio wondering where I am. I text him more than 30 minutes ago to tell him that I was en route. A female cop is standing by the paramedic’s side, eyeing Curtis with a big ass grin spread across her face.

I’m in too much pain to decipher what the hell is going on; I wish Antonio were here to comfort me.

 "What happened, ma’am?" The paramedics are looking at me, and I look at Chris, then back at the paramedics.

 "I tripped down the stairs while trying to carry my suitcase."

"Is that right, sir?"

Chris nods his head, yes. I ask for my phone, and he hands it back to me.

 The paramedics put me on the stretcher, and Chris tries to follow behind me. I tell them that I do not want him anywhere near me. I let Officer Cyn know that I wish to get a restraining order against him. She says that she will work on it as soon as I leave the hospital.

*Chapter 11: Antonio*

# *The Calm After the Storm*

Dreams have a funny way of revealing the truth to us, even when we don’t know what exactly is going on at present. Vizions came from a dream that I had; it was a dream to own my shit, be self-sufficient, and not have to depend on a motherfucker for anything. Now that I have my rib, Jasmine, I know that success is inevitable. That girl is a real ride or die, and I will not lose her to a sucker who cannot recognize a real woman. Jas is supposed to be here by now. Where the hell is she at? I fell asleep waiting for her. I check my phone, and just as I was about to call her again, I realize that I missed ten calls from Grady Memorial Hospital. Who is calling me from the hospital? I listen to the voicemail and hear Jasmine’s voice during screams and cries.

 I have never heard her spirit sound so broken; I could barely understand a word she was saying.

I scrambled to get dressed and rushed to the hospital. I need to know that Jas is safe. Details can wait until after I pick her up.

 The hospital is such an eerie place to go to better. The walls are bleached yellow, and the lights are dim. This seems like a place to lie down and die; man, I need to get my princess out of this hell hole. I stopped by the gift store, the only place that looks like it has any life, and purchases a dozen flowers, balloons, and her favorite chocolate bar, besides the one in my pants. I search until I see the receptionist's desk. Ol girl looks like she is ready to give me a hard time. She rolls her eyes at me before I even approach the counter.

"How may I help you?"

"I’m here to see Jasmine Butler."

"Sir, what is your relation to Jasmine Butler."

I say that I am her brother so that I can gain easy access. I don’t have time for any hiccups.

"She’s in room B12; she’s sleeping, so please be courteous."

It’s 11 PM., and Jasmine is sound asleep. It looks as if she’s dreaming about heaven.

I can only imagine the hell that Jas went through to be sleeping inside this hospital. The last time I spoke to her, she was on her way home but never showed up. What could have happened from Chris’s house to mine? If he put his hands on her, then his ass is mine.

 Her eyes flickered open, and a slight smile graces her face.

"Baby, you came. I can’t believe you came."

 "You know I would not leave you here by yourself. Now, what happened?

My voice was stern, and I was staring her directly in her eyes so that she knew I was not joking.

I fell…

 "So, you fell so badly that you ended up in the emergency room with a leg brace? Try again. What happened, Jas, don’t lie to me."

I could sense her fear and see the shyness in her eyes. She reclined back onto the bed, and a tear rolled from her eye.

"Come on, baby; I’m going to take care of you myself. You’re not going to lift a finger."

 The ride home was solemn and melancholic. I grabbed her hand and pick it up and kiss the back of it. It’s so quiet that I can hear her thoughts and empathize with her pain.

Even though I was disappointed in her giving Chris another chance, I spared giving her a speech. So all I have is one question.

 "Baby, what made you go back? What did you have to piece together? I thought everything you needed was here with me." I accelerate a little faster and drive over a pothole, causing another tear down her face.

 "I don’t mean to hurt you, baby, but—" She cuts me off with a hollow cry.

 "Baby, I needed closure. I didn’t want to tell you this, but Claire and Chris have been seeing each other and fucking just as much as we have, as a matter of fact way before we were."

I slowed down so I won’t get into an accident.

 "The hell you mean, they’ve been sleeping with each other from the jump. I knew it! We’re cutting both off! God knew what he was doing when he let that dirty whore give me those papers!"

"Baby, I’m sorry. I guess we’re just two hurt people who have to build each other up."

 I swear she always says the right thing at the right time, and she always lifts my spirits. Even though I have every right to be upset right now, I will not take away from Jasmine’s pain. She has been through a lot, not to mention her Mom is still in chemo. My baby is a champ.

I could kill Chris for all of the pain he put my future wife through.

I knew his ass wasn't right when I first laid eyes on him, especially the way he flirted with Claire at that party*.*

"Baby, let’s just go home." She said.

 As soon as I pull into the driveway, Jasmine attempts to open her door, but I lock her in and tell her that she will not be lifting a finger while I’m around. She smirks and is happy that she can rest her mind for a little while. I open the door and lift her over my shoulders. She puts her hands on my face and gives me the wettest kiss. She whispers, "I love you so much, babe."

 I love you too, girl. No more tears, baby, I’m here for you, and I will never hurt you the way that Chris did. I’m gone give you the world; you will never want for anything, babe. Do you hear me?

Once we got into the house, I run her a bath, pour some oil in it, and help bathe her. She asks me to leave because she needs some time to herself.

I am infuriated with both so much that I punched a hole through my living room wall. I turn the TV on, and a commercial for their law firm pops up on the screen. Jas calls out from the bathroom, "Babe, what was that noise? Can you bring my pain medicine, please?

 I take her the pain pills and a bottle of water; as I open the pill bottle, she notices that my hand is oozing with blood*.*

"Baby, what did you do to hurt your hand?"

I’m just so pissed off! I punched a wall, and—She cut me off.

 "That's what that noise was? We’re punching walls now?"Well, Chris isn’t here, so I can't punch his ass. Listen, as of last night, you and Chris's relationship is done. Look at what he did to you! I want to break his legs and crack his jaw! But I know that I have to be 21 about the situation and take care of you.

She shook her head and grabbed her towel to leave the bathtub toward the medicine cabinet for the first aid kit.

"Whoa, whoa, where do you think you’re going on a broken ankle?"

I grabbed her and sat her down on my lap.

"But your hand—"

But my hand will be fine. Let’s get you in bed and get some rest. I’ll be back; I got some things to handle.

I take her to the bedroom and oil her body down, massaging every crevice of her body. I see her drift into a deep sleep. I kiss her forehead and leave. I set the alarm and lock her in just in case something happens. Jas is all I have, and I’m not going to let anyone or anything hurt her.

I hop in the whip, and before I can ignite the car, I feel fumes steaming from my ears and fury in my eyes. I was going 80 mph heading to Claire’s house.

I decided to go there first because a part of me has questions that only she can answer. I pull into the driveway and see a 2013 Altima parked beside her car.

 I bam on the door as hard as I could until Claire opens it. She has the nerve to curse me out.

"What the hell do you want, Antonio?"

You lying piece of shit! Sorry excuse for a woman! I shove her out of the way and storm into the house. I continue to rant.

"How dare you? Out of everything you’ve done to me, this has got to be the absolute worst! Every time I think you couldn't get any lower, you never cease to amaze me. You’re going to get yours one day. You watch. Before I even allow her to say anything, her hood rat brother comes to the rescue.

So, who are you supposed to be? Her savior?

He lifts his shirt and flashes his piece on his hip.

"Na, clown. Just the brother that will kill for his sister. Now, do we have a problem?"

 I think about Jas and my future; these chumps aren’t worth my happiness. I smile and nod my head. Watch your back, boy; these streets are small. I walk off and slam the door. I can't believe this timeline of events didn’t add up, but I decided not to check her because our marriage took a turn for the worse before I met Jas. I can find the courage and admit that I didn't fight hard enough for our union, but neither did she.

We were once soulmates; now, we’re two souls who can’t even communicate. I made a promise to myself to do right by the next woman that God sends my way. You live, and you learn from your mistakes, but more importantly, you grow from them.

I drove to my boy Quinton’s house to get an unmarked gun.

"I got everything you need, playa — bullets, bulletproof vests, masks, you name it.

 I'm good fam, appreciate the lookout. I may come through later this week.

We dap up, and I head out so that I can check on Jas. She hasn’t eaten since this morning. But first, I have to stop by Vizions to let them know that Jas and I will be out for a few days due to a family emergency. So I put the best person I can think of in charge of managing the club until Jas and I are well.

 While I was at the club, the Cadillac dealership leaves a voicemail and says that the car is ready to go home. It’s a surprise for Jas; she deserves it after all the blood, sweat, and tears she poured into the club. She didn’t play any games when it came to the contractors, plumbers, and employees. Because of her, we could open in under nine months, versus the year that I had initially envisioned. We’re already the number one spot, and it’s all because of Jasmine.

*Chapter 12: Christopher*

# *In My Feelings*

The bible was right, Gain the world and lose your soul.

 Who was I fooling? I know that Claire and Jas were both in my palm, now I’ve traded my soul mate for an old ass sex life. It seems like I can’t pay Jas to pay me any attention. And this nigga, Antonio, is only selling her street dreams. He can’t possibly be building a future for her! I feel a little guilty for trying to restrain Jas from her true talents. I should have been more attentive; I should’ve just been there. Today makes two weeks since I have heard from Jasmine. I have been calling, texting, and leaving multiple voice mails, only to hear nothing. She had Kayla get the rest of her things.

Damn, I feel like a fool; I should have been upfront and told Jasmine everything.

But instead, I gave her the wrong impression and led a double life. I thought that there was still something between Claire and me, but the only thing in that woman is misery. She reeks of jealousy and does not know how to move on with her life. I love Jasmine! I don’t know what the hell she and that hood rich guy had going on. All I know is that Jas and I are not going to be caught up in that bullshit. I told Claire that I need a few days away from her to clear my mind. Claire has been checking in to see if I'm okay, though I have ignored all of her calls. I don’t need two women, and it’s my fault for making her believe that she would ever have a chance to be my wife.

"You good, kid?"

My brother comes in and interrupts my thoughts and has a look on his face that says, "I told you so."

I'm alright.

“Have you heard from her yet?” He asked.

Nope, not even an update on social media, and you know she posts on Instagram every other day. You never really appreciate what you have until it’s gone. I'll give anything to fix what I did wrong.

"Didn't I warn you of the consequences? Man, if you’re going to cheat, at least do it right! You didn't even try to hide it; it is almost like you wanted her to see it."

I didn’t realize how careless I was in our relationship. How selfish of me to focus on Claire when Jas’s Mom is fighting cancer? I bet her Dad doesn’t want me to touch her with a ten-foot pole.

 When her Dad finds out about this, he is going to have my head on a platter. I don’t even waste time arguing with my brother. I’m going to win Jasmine back, also if it means losing everything I have. She deserves more than what I have given her, and I know that this new guy is only running a game on her. She is obsessed and does not know that he is filling her head with fables.

She’ll be mine again soon enough.

Damn! How could I have forgotten that I have a client coming to my house today for his appointment? Hell, I guess I’m off of my A-game just as much as Jasmine. As soon as I was about to call my client, Kayla rings my phone. "Kayla, have you heard anything from Jas? I haven’t spoken to her in days."

I can tell by her long sigh that she was not going to tell me any information.

"I was just calling to let you know that she is fine and is not ready to talk to you just yet. I will be by later to pick up the last few items."

"Tell her that if she wants her things, then she needs to come home!"

 I hang up on her and prepare the documents for my client’s case so far; he is in deep hot water with this charge for domestic assault and battery. The irony of this situation could have easily been mine, but God decided to spare my life, reputation, and career. I thank God every day because I know that I deserve to be behind bars.

Now, who is this banging on my door like they’re the police? I know my client has more class than to pound on my door, especially since he just informed me that he would be ten minutes late. It had better not be Kayla bringing her ghetto etiquette to my neighborhood.

"Who is it?" I yelled.

"It’s Officer Cyn. So I open the door, agitated that Curtis is bringing his booty calls to my house.

"If you are looking for Curt, he just left. Come back later."

She is not smiling, and her demeanor is as stiff as my last drink. She has a designer briefcase that she uses to move me out of my doorway while inviting herself into my home. She stands in the middle of the living room and rolls her eyes at me while handing over a sealed certified document.

"Sir, I am here to issue a temporary protective order, otherwise known as a restraining order, on behalf of Ms. Jasmine Butler, due to the domestic abuse that you have caused her. Such abuse led to her admittance to Grady Hospital.

You are required to stay away from her workplace, home, and any other recreational places during the time that she frequents them. In addition, you are prohibited from contacting Ms. Butler via phone, email, in person, mail, or through any third party or mutual friends."

I could not believe what was happening; this must be a nightmare.

"What do you mean I can’t come to her home? You are standing in her home; she lives with me!" I throw the papers in the air, and Officer Cyn places her hands on her belt loop, which has an attached pair of handcuffs.

 "Please, sir, I need you to practice self-control. Besides, she did not place this address as her home address. My contact information is on my card; please use it at any time. I expect you to adhere to the terms and conditions of the temporary protective order. Failure to do so can and will result in incarceration for an undisclosed amount of time."

I decide to cooperate before I have my livelihood stripped away from me. I will deal with Jasmine later. Right now, I need Officer Cyn out of my home before my client arrives.

 "Is there anything else that I can help you with, Officer Cyn?" "No, but I’m sure this gentleman in the doorway would like your help. He’s been here for a while."

 What the fuck! My client has been standing in the doorway the entire time that Officer Cyn has been here! I can tell in his posture and body language that he is going to break some bad news.

"Attorney, it seems like you’re dealing with the same issues as me. I need an attorney who already has his shit together.

Good luck to you, bro."

Today is the worst day ever! What kind of man loses his future wife, career, and manhood in one day? This is tragic! He walked out of the door and left the unsigned contract on the floor to join the restraining order. This was the day that I had marked on my calendar to propose to Jasmine to top it all off.

I broke down and ripped every single piece of paper into tiny shreds. Officer Cyn is standing in front of me as if she had seen a ghost. I am kneeling in a prayer position and feel her rub my back.

"No! Get the fuck off of me! That’s how I got in this predicament; all y'all women are trying to trap a man, and then he ends up losing his Queen!"

Curtis comes in and sees me going off on Cyn.

"Bro, I don’t know what you have going on, but don’t go off on my girl, especially when I warned you about not cheating on Jasmine."

All I can do is sob—no need to escalate a problem when I’m already in hot water. After looking at me sob for about ten minutes, they both decided to leave as well. It seems that one moment of pleasure has spawned into a lifetime of pain.

*Chapter 13: Claire*

# *He is Mine*

"The night could not have been anymore hollow, and the stars could not have provided any brighter light for such a dim life," I remember reading poetry like this to Chris during undergrad when we were both stressed from studying for finals. I am the only one who can soothe and calm him down when his whole world is shaken up. He called me practically sobbing about all of the trouble he’s suffered throughout these past few weeks! It’s a damn shame that he was blinded by this low life, also known as Jasmine Butler. She decided to play Detective Butler and found evidence in Chris’s phone that proved that he and I had been intimate. I guess she didn’t know that she was expendable, mainly if she did not perform her duties as his woman. My goal was not to be his side whore but to let him know that what we had in undergrad was the real thing and that I would not let him go without a fight. With all of the turmoil going on in his life, he does not need extra baggage.

First, Jas strategically injures herself so that she can have a pity party; then, she schemes a way to have a restraining order against the man who housed her when she had nowhere to go. Finally, he lost a multimillion-dollar contract with a high-profile client due to her childish antics. And this is the woman that he wants to marry? I know that I may not have it all together, but I know that I will be loyal to Chris, never do dirt behind his back, and satisfy his mental and physical needs.

Now that I think about it, he mentioned that the restraining order had a different address registered as her new home address. Where the fuck is this broke-ass broad living without a job?

Dre is on the way with new findings on Jasmine’s secret life. That tracking device had better tell me every move she makes because I need to track this heifer down before causing any more problems with my Chris.

"What’s up, Dre? What’s the 411?"

Dre’s clothes are falling off of his slender frame, and he looks as if he is floating with the angels. I can read his body language, and he is high as fuck. I don't have time to assess his mental state; I need the documents to prove to Chris that this woman is against him.

"Yo, Lil’ sis! You know I got you, but first, you gotta feed a dog."

Damn, I should have known this man would not do anything for anyone until his belly was full and happy.

 I march right into the kitchen and warm up the leftover pasta that I’d cooked last night. As soon as the smell from the food permeates the air, he begins singing like a little bird.

"That’s what I’m talking about, baby sis, hook a brother up with some of that good cooking. The next thing we’re going to fry is Jasmine. She is all over the place, places that I didn’t even know existed."

I load his plate with a ton of pasta and prepare his favorite drink, Hennessy, with Coca-Cola. He is sure to tell me everything that I need to know before he passes out.

I place his food next to the file that he has prepared for me. If Dre wasn’t so stuck in a ghetto-fabulous hood mentality, then I could hire him as a private detective. But I can’t have him coming to my office high and cursing in every other sentence. I always have admired my brother’s raw talent to achieve anything that he puts his mind to, but those distractions will be the death of him if he doesn’t control them soon.

"Damn, sis, quit your day job and cook for a living! This shit tastes just like Moms.” I modestly laughed at the compliment.

"What is this central location? According to your GPS, she goes to Macon, GA, every day; that is a hike from Chris’s house in Buckhead. Man, this shit is deep in the cut because the actual address doesn’t even register. I can only see the city and its remote location. Let me call my girl at the police station. Hopefully, she can track it down."

After he cleans his plate, he stands up, and I can tell that his high is wearing off. His eyes are still bloodshot red, though.

"Do what you gotta do, sis; I’m about to grab something out of the whip. Be back in a sec."

I call my connect at the police station and give her the addresses that the GPS detects. She reads off a list of street names and numbers. She asked if I know anyone there. I tell her no and pray that she read some of the residents’ names from the central area.

"Oh, look, Claire, you may have family out there. The system is registering Antonio Jennings for this same location. I even pulled up a picture of the home, but the street numbers are still incoherent. Wait! I got it! Your girl has skills!"

"Did you say, Antonio Jennings?"

"Yes, is he a family of yours?"

"Not for long. Anyway, thanks, girl. I owe you one! I hang up the phone and pour a double shot of Brandy.

I need something to knock this pain out of my system. I say to myself, “This bitch is with my husband.” I hear Dre stumble in and shout, "Well, ex-husband now!"

How did he manage to find the funds to purchase a condo in Macon? He could barely keep up with the rent and bills in the home that I mainly was maintaining. Two can play this game. I’m showing Chris everything, and we’re driving to Macon to blow up their spot! I take another shot to ease my mind and vent to my brother.

"Dre, you won’t believe this shit! Antonio is foul, and he’s going to pay for this shit! The place that the GPS registered, the address that Jasmine has registered as her new home on the restraining order, is the same address that registers Antonio Jennings as the homeowner. That lying bastard!"

"Yo, sis, calm down. We’re going to make them pay. But you gotta chill, so we don’t do anything crazy too soon. Getting revenge is a strategy."

He sits down and pulls out two ounces of weed and two grams of cocaine. He uses a blade to cut the coke into trim lines, just like they do in the movies.

See, when I was growing up, I knew my brother was into drugs, but he never exposed me to that lifestyle. So though I’m a grown woman around him, I still feel like a little girl.

I text Chris:

***Me:***  *You need to come to my house as soon as possible; I have some information you need to see.*

***Chris:*** *I’m not up to it, Claire. I have a lot on my mind right now.*

***Me****: It’s about Jasmine.*

***Chris****: OTW.*

 Damn, this woman has him whipped like that and doesn't even appreciate it. Before I know it, I throw the shot glass against the wall and let out a screeching wail.

 "Chill, baby girl. You can’t be out here spazzing like this. Remember that we’re going to take this bitch and this bum ass dude down by the end of the week.

Usually, I wouldn’t let you, but I can see that you need something to calm your hyper ass down. Take a hit of this line and puff this joint.

 I promise you’ll be able to function after you get a hit of this. It’s the only thing that keeps me sane."

Dre doesn’t know that I dabbled in cocaine for a short period in law school. However, I am still hesitant, so I look at him for a sign of approval, then pick up the straw and follow his lead. I feel an exhilarating rush, and my eyes widen. I finish the line and go to the bathroom to wash my face. As soon as I turn on the water, I hear the doorbell. It’s from Chris! I have to clean this shit up. I drop some teardrops into each of my eyes to ease the redness.

 "Yo, Dre, Chris is outside. Clean this shit up! Put it all away. I can’t lose my rep over this!"

I go back into the living room, grab the files, and then tell Chris that I want to talk with him in my home office. See, this shit already has my mind all fucked up, but at least I’m at ease.

Dre is in the living room spaced out; I cannot afford Chris to see my new lifestyle. I pour us a glass of wine and sit the file on the table.

I bring my laptop to check the email and surveillance of Antonio and Jasmine’s secret house. It’s my first time viewing the video as well, so we’re both in for a treat.

"What is this, Claire?"

"This is what your sweet thang has been hiding behind your back, Chris. Jasmine thinks that she found some dirt on us. Well, I have an entire gold mine on her. I did not want to be the one to tell you, but Jasmine is having an affair with my ex-husband, Antonio. I have a tracking device that proves it."

I see the hurt in his eyes as he goes through the files.

"I already knew this. Jasmine told me about the affair weeks ago. How in the hell did you gain all of this bullshit in the first place?"

I can’t believe that he is accusing me of making up a story for my good.

"Not only have you insulted me as a woman, but you’ve insulted me as an attorney! Are you serious, Chris? I have proof, and it is right before your eyes.

The problem is that these are the answers to your questions, and you don’t like the truth. It’s ugly, I know, but you had to find out sooner than later."

"What you are telling me is that you stalked Jasmine?"

Admitting to that claim was difficult to say on my behalf, but how else would we have found out?

I don’t know what kind of attorney you are, Chris. But one thing is for sure; I will do anything necessary to get to the truth of the matter. You are the love of my life! And I’m not letting you get away this time.

"See, Claire, that’s that delusional shit that I’m talking about right there. We will never be together; get that shit through your head! Jasmine has confessed everything. This stunt was below the belt, Claire. I expected more from you.”

“She what?” I felt something thick running from my nose. Oh, shit! It’s blood!

Chris stares into my eyes and asks if I am high.

No! Why would you ask me that?

He shakes his head, “Your bloodshot eyes say otherwise.” I turn my head immediately.

"Yo, you need a tissue. I never knew you could have a nosebleed from drinking wine. I’m out of here, Claire. I thought you ended this habit in college. Go to rehab."

 I tug on him so hard that he slips and falls to his knees. I jump on his back and kiss his neck and plead for him to stay. I reach down and grab his dick and caress it. I hear him moan, then he takes his wrist and pulls my hand away.

 "You're pathetic!" He stood up and walked through the living room to get to his car. He sees my brother snorting a line. "Don’t get another nose bleed while you’re doing your detective duties."

There is nothing I can say to defend myself. He was right; I am pathetic.

 I was furious that he was mad at the wrong person and devastated that my brother brought these drugs into my house.

"Damn, sis, all you did for that man. Are you going to let him get away with this shit? I can take care of him right now. All you have to do is say the word, and it’s a done deal.

I could die right about now. I sit by him and snort another line, followed by another until I was in a zone that I have never experienced before.

Dre, we’re going up there to handle this shit.

"Say less, sis. Let me know the time, and I’m there."

*Chapter 14: Jasmine*

# *How Dare You*

Who would have thought that I would get bored with the wonders and images of home decor? I redesigned the living room, kitchen, and bedroom, which added a more exotic jungle theme to each. I have a cheetah print carpet installed in the living room and ordered a set of lamps shaped like giraffes. Antonio had one of the painters paint a red accent wall to add a definition to the whole room. No matter how much life I add with decor and other materials, I still want to be a part of civilization again. I have been hopping on these crutches for at least two weeks, not to mention that the doctor ordered that I be confined to the house for at least four weeks.

Antonio has been so patient with me throughout the recovery, but I am ready to breathe fresh air and show off my toned legs! These crutches have forced me to do involuntary exercising so that my whole body is accustomed to walking.

After he grew tired of hearing me whine about how lonely I am while he’s at the club, he surprised me with a pure white, red-eyed, baby pit-bull so that I would have some company. I named her Kisses. She fits in the palm of my hand and is so cute! Every day, he brings fresh flowers to let me know that I still deserve to be treated like a queen no matter what happens. He never lets me forget that I am the only woman that he will ever love. This type of love feels so different, mainly since Chris was never this thoughtful.

I guess I deserve it after all of the hell that I went through with Chris. I know his whole world was shaken up when I served him a restraining order.

Nonetheless, even Kisses can’t replace real humans, especially my best friend, Kayla. I beg Antonio to let Kayla come over for a few hours because I can't take being in this house by myself much longer. He agrees and even buys premier wine and food from my favorite wing joint. The party platter had four different flavored wings; chicken sliders, mozzarella sticks, meatballs, and spinach dip. He knows our top selections! Do I have the best man or what?

Girl, he said yes, you can come over! So be here around five. We have so much to catch up on! And he even bought hot sauce bottles that are different levels of heat, girl! I’m in heaven!

I can hear her beaming through the phone so hard that she can barely respond. Instead, she sings her favorite song.

"Go best friend, that’s my best friend, that’s my best friend! Ohh, go best friend, that’s my best friend, that’s my best friend!

Cool, see you soon, girl!

I make sure to set up a tiny area at the bar where the TV is so that we won’t have a reason to go all over the house. If Daddy sees me off these crutches, I am sure that he will go into cardiac arrest. So I have to plan to surprise him for treating me so well during this healing process. Kayla finally arrives with many “Get Well Soon” balloons and a twin shirt that says, "These girls turn up!"

 I could not have asked for a more caring, fun, and loving best friend! She walks over to the bar where I have our wine glasses, cheese, nuts, and fruit set up.

 "Girl, I appreciate all of this, but you know a party is not a party until we have a little Chardonnay!" She pulls out her stash, and I hopped to the other side of the kitchen to get two shot glasses.

 "Damn, sis! The D so good he got you on crutches?" We bust out laughing.

 "Girl, now the D is good, but this is the result of that fuck boy, Chris. Let me get this shot and sip this wine; then, I will tell you the whole story."

I go through every detail without leaving out one scene, and I can see the empathy in her eyes, feel the pain that she has for my situation and sense her compassionate spirit. Friends are treasures that don’t come too often.

 "Fuck, Chris! Cuz I don’t play when it comes to my best friend."

"Girl, it’s all good. Antonio has been taking care of me the way a real man should. He is more than I could have ever dreamed of or asked God for."

"Awww! Well, I’m happy for you, sis. Do you think he can train my man? Homeboy is about to get let go! Girl, he doesn’t cheat like the last one, but he cannot keep the house clean for anything in the world! I have to remind him that I’m his girl, not his maid."

We burst out in laughter and laugh so hard that we start to cry until our stomachs ache!

I think about everything that we’re laughing about, and it’s kind of sad. Tears of hurt start to steam from my face, and she wraps her arms around me.

"Damn, girl, you have been going through pure hell for the last few months!"

Girl! I had been begging Chris to tell me about everything, and of course, he refused. That’s why I kept my side piece so I wouldn’t be getting played. Every time I would ask Chris about Claire, he acted as if I was speaking a foreign language.

Kayla sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes so hard that her contacts almost fell out.

"Well, that’s a man for you."

I change the subject because this was starting to dampen the mood.

"Enough about that. I'm going to be alright. You know how I bounce back."

We raise our glasses and toast to new happiness in our relationships.

As soon as we take a sip, I heard a loud noise coming from the backyard. The sound is so startling we both jumped.

"OK, the wind was picking up outside or a burglar trying to come into your pad.”

We stay frozen and don’t hear anything for a while, so we go on chatting, eating enjoying each other company. Before we can open another bottle of wine, Kayla realizes that it’s past 8:30 PM on a Friday, and Grandma still has the kids.

"Girl, let me go and pick up my babies before Grandma Ruth starts to complain about her pressure, diabetes, and the rest of her ailments. Call me if you need anything, girl. I love you!"

 She lets herself out, and I decide to relax and soak in a bubble bath while listening to my slow jams. I start daydreaming about how beautiful my kids will be with Antonio; a girl can dream, can't she? As soon as I start bathing, I hear that loud noise again. This time it sounds closer. It didn't seem like a damn tree branch, so I throw my robe over my sexy Fenty X Savage lingerie. Rihanna must have had me in mind when she designed this tantalizing lingerie set. The robe is thick, so at least I won’t be cold as I hop around to check all the locks.

I call Antonio to let him hear everything that is happening in the house. I go to the bedroom upstairs. Antonio says that he’s ten minutes away from home and will be here as soon as possible.

I hear a loud noise; it sounds like it is coming from downstairs.

Baby, I think somebody is here! I grab the pocket knife off of the nightstand and crawl under the bed.

 I see a tall figure wearing black with a camouflaged mask walking throughout the room and bathroom downstairs. Antonio is still on the phone, screaming my name. My phone alerted me of the dead battery while he comes upstairs.

"Jasmine! Answer me, Jas! Are you okay?"

I don’t respond; I don’t want the burglar to hear me. I crawled under the bed, scared out my mind. He opens closets, searches through. He checks the bathroom and finally snatches my leg from under the bed.

I took this as an opportunity to use my weapon and stab him in the face. I see blood gushing from his cheek, and it doesn’t even seem to faze him.

“You stupid bitch! You’re going to pay for this!"

I drop the scissors and attempt to run downstairs, but this damn ankle hurts so badly. The pain is excruciating, but I manage to bear it so that I can seek help.

He catches up to me on the bottom stairway, places his hand on my mouth, and drags my body down the rest of the stairs with no remorse.

You can have it all! My money, jewelry, anything you want, you can have, just please let me go!" I plead with him and hope he has sympathy for me. I managed to knee him in the nuts. He lets go of me, and I try to escape once again, but he catches up to me yet again.

He pulls my hair and continues to drag me into the middle of the living room floor. He briefly lets me go so that he could hold his cheek. I notice the wine bottle on the coffee table, so when he turns his back, I grab the bottle and try to strike him in the back of his head, but he catches my maneuver, catches my wrist, and the bottle crashed onto the floor.

"This was supposed to be easy, Jasmine. But you want to make this hard! Okay, I’m going to give you what you want." He grabs me again.

I scream at the top of my lungs and resist as much as I can.

"How do you know my name? Who the hell are you? Let me go!"

"Don’t worry about what I know; I know more about you than you do. I’m tired of hearing your mouth. Shut the fuck up!” He slams my body to the floor and punches me so hard I taste blood filling up in my mouth.

He pulls out a zip tie and bonds my hands together. Blood is oozing down my face, and all I can do is scream the pain away. I get a glimpse of his eyes, and something about them looks familiar.

His eyes are dilated and have a red stain in each of them. His voice is recognizable, but I can’t recall my encounter with him. As he picks me up and throws me over his shoulder, I can hear him talking with someone over the phone about my capture.

 *My capture? Is this a plot? What the fuck is going on! The pain is so piercing I drift in and out of consciousness.*

He drives off and blasts his music so loud that I wake up from my mild coma in the trunk. I overhear him on the phone talking with someone, but I can't understand what he is saying.

"Man! Shut the hell up, sis. I’m taking this bitch to the cabin so she and I can have a little fun. I tracked her down, I captured her, and now I must enjoy my prey."

*Tracked me down? What kind of plot is this?*

Once we stop, he opens the trunk, and I spit blood on his face. You have no idea what you’ve done.

You just signed your death certificate, you piece of shit!"

 He immediately put duct tape around my mouth and eyes and carried me to the location.

Once he removes the duct tape from my eyes, he took his mask off, and I immediately recognize this familiar face. It was Dre. He helped me with my tire; if I didn’t know what evil looked like before, I sure do now. Finally, I was face to face with the devil.

*Chapter 15: Antonio*

***Where is She***

 I cannot believe this shit is happening! Jasmine does not deserve this, and I feel like this whole situation is my fault. Man, why am I blaming myself when it was that sorry ass Chris who hurt her? As soon as I pulled into my driveway, I can see an oil leak and a path through the grass. I walked up to the front door and noticed that it is cracked open and that the lights are out in the living room. I run throughout the house, searching for Jas. I head upstairs.

Jasmine! Jasmine! I yelled.

I ran throughout the house and noticed dried blood from the kitchen and broken glass. Jasmine’s leg brace was on the floor in the bathroom.

 There are blood-stained handprints on the walls that are leading downstairs. *If Jasmine is dead*. So help me, God.

I stood in the middle of my house and began to hyperventilate. I try to catch my breath, but I feel my throat closing even tighter. I notice Kisses sitting in the corner; she is afraid and has smeared blood on her paws. I have never cried for a woman so desperately; this pain will be difficult to escape until I find her. I hear Jas’s phone buzzing, only to find it cracked to pieces. I get so frustrated that I throw it across the room so hard that it shattered the picture of us together when we first opened the club. I’m so frustrated that I don’t know what to do with myself. I call Kayla from my phone and demand to know where Jas is and ask her what the hell has happened since I left them a few hours ago. She tells me that she hasn’t heard from her either and that maybe I should check with Chris.

I speed to Chris’s house and dare a police officer to stop me. I finally arrive and push the door open without even knocking. Instead, I grab him by his collar and tell him that I will shoot his ass if he has done anything to my future wife.

 He pushes me off, and I grab my clip. He backs up and asks what is going on. I can tell that he does not have a clue. All I see is an empty bottle of Heineken bottles and cigarette butts around the living room. He must be going through some traumatic shit, but that has nothing to do with Jasmine being MIA.

"Bruh, I haven’t heard from her in weeks. I thought you two had fled and started a life in Canada. I damn sure would never hurt her. She was my rib."

I step back and begin to internalize everything. Where could Jasmine be? I explain to him that I was just on the phone with her and that when I got home, the house was a disaster; blood was everywhere.

 We call the police to file a missing person’s report, only to discover that the person must be missing for at least twenty-four hours.

The police say that we would have a better chance of finding her with the help of detectives.

I retained my anger, stormed out of the house, and sat on the hood of my car. Chris follows me outside. He calls one of his partners at the law firm and contacts the best agency in the city.

Man, this is all your fault, Chris.

 "My fault! You have been lying about where you live and cheating on your wife with my girl. You even manipulated her mind and got her to move into some faraway land so that she wouldn’t be able to see me. You’re a foul man that makes it hard for the rest of us brothers who try to do right by women.”

 *I can see the fury in his eyes, and I don’t have time to catch a case with him while the love of my life is missing.* So I take a deep breath and blow the smoke from my cigarette into his face.

“Listen here, boy, you do not know a damn thing about my relationship with Jasmine,” Chris said calmly.

 He walks in closer and stares me in the eye.

"You do not have a relationship with her, you have a fling, and you may want to end it soon because she’s marrying me." I can feel his breath on my nose.

Bam! I just punched him in his face. Now we’re on the ground tussling when we should be looking for Jasmine. I jab him in his side until he gives in. I know that he’s not about that life, so I reach for my gun and point it to his head.

"You gone kill me? You stole the woman that belonged to me, so I feel dead anyway."

Before I can remove the safety lock, I feel a cold piece of metal behind my ear.

 "Drop the gun, or I’m blowing your head clean the fuck off. I put my piece back into the holster and kick Chris in the side one last time.

“Your wife will have me out of jail before your funeral." Curtis gloated.

Seems like your big brother has come to your rescue yet again.

 As soon as I walked back to my car, the detective arrived at Chris’s house.

She came right on time because someone was about to be on the stretcher, but I digress. She does not look like the detectives in the movies with long trench coats and top hats. No, this detective was fine as hell, tall, slender, and ready to get down to business. Her name is Detective Alston; she created a Jasmine file and has asked that we take her to the scene.

I tell them that I suspect that Jasmine’s kidnapped. Detective Alston begins searching the property.

"Antonio, do those surveillance cameras work?"

I forgot about those; I installed a security system when I was receiving threatening calls. I pull up the footage from the camera, and low and behold, there is the entire ordeal filmed on camera.

 I see a muscular man with Jasmine on his shoulders. The detective thinks that we may track the tag to determine who the vehicle belongs to. She rewinds it to the beginning so that we won’t miss a beat. "Chris and Antonio, you may want to leave while I review the footage; it is pretty graphic."

She tries to warn us, but we both sprint to the screen to view the footage. Jasmine is kicking and screaming while the kidnapper is pulling her by her hair.

He hits her, picks her up, and throws her over his shoulders after trying to escape. That man is twice her size, but she is not letting go without a fight. He opens the trunk and stuffs her body inside, then closes the trunk down.

"Zoom in. Got it! Freeze the clip! Okay, I’m plugging the license number into our database to track the vehicle."

Chris chimes in, "That looks like the car that was in Claire’s garage, a 2013 Altima when I went to her house. That's her brother’s car! "

*I looked at the screen again. See if I recognize the car.*

"Who is Claire?" The detective asked.

Claire is my ex-wife, the woman who Chris was cheating on

Jasmine with.

Detective Alston looks at us in confusion.

"What kind of love swapping did you guys do? Anyway, this model car has detectable Bluetooth and GPS. Hopefully, it synched with the surveillance camera. Does anyone have a spare key to Jasmine’s car? Maybe we can find some evidence there."

I gave her the spare key that I had, and she began a thorough inspection.

Alston found a puncture in her tire, and it has a strange wire installed in it.

They ask if we know anything about the mechanics of her car, and Chris replies,

"She did have a flat a week ago, and a man helped her when

she became stranded on the side of the road," Chris stated.

I begin to get more frustrated, and I blurted out, "You mean to *tell* me that you allowed a random man on the highway to take care of her car? No wonder she cheated on your sorry ass.

"Chill, bro. She said she could handle it. And if you’re so much better than me, then you would not have her out here in the boondocks so that someone could kidnap her in the first damn place."

Detective Alston pulls the long piece of wire out of the tire with a small device attached. She takes the chip out and inserts it into a port in her tablet; it is like a USB drive. It says that the device was registered to a Law Firm on Piedmont. Once the disk is detected, we can see who registered this device.

That’s my ex-wife’s Law Firm. I said.

Detective Alston tells me that she can help to track Jasmine.

“Antonio, I was able to locate the phone that linked to the tracking device. It shows that they are in Blue Ridge, GA, an hour and fifteen minutes from here. There’s nothing but cabins in Blue Ridge.”

Claire has a family cabin there. So I need to go with yall to rescue her.

 "Wait for a second, sir. I need to inspect the scene before I can let you come with us. We will be in contact with you."

I watch them pull out of the driveway, and I remain calm. The officer doesn’t know that I have memorized the address, and I am taking a back route to get to my woman. I am already strapped and do not need their permission on when I can see Jasmine.

I leave Chris in the house because he will only be a distraction. I am sweating bullets on my way to her; I can’t let anything happen to her.

I am building my future with her and have already begun making moves for our future family. I have confided in Jasmine in ways that I have never done with any other woman. Talking to her was natural. I knew she was not into it for the money, but for the vision. There is no way she is getting away from me, I will kill for her, so I hope her kidnapper is ready for a fight.

*Chapter 16: Dre*

# *Time to Play*

I haven’t been to this cabin in years, maybe because I was locked up in the pin six months after my parents bought it. Claire sure has it decorated nicely here; crystal chandeliers, duvet sheets, plush carpet, and mirrors everywhere. So soon as I opened the door, I see the tall mirrors. *I know my sister is vain, but damn, do you have to look at yourself all the time?* I’m about to take one of these mirrors and crack this girl’s skull if she doesn’t shut all that noise up.

Yo, shut the hell up! I don’t want to hear all of that whining. You should have thought about that before you stole my sister’s man. Were you crying then? She lets out a loud cry as if anyone can hear her in the fucking woods.

“Claire is your sister?! You have been tracking me, you son of a bitch! Her eyes widen.

 I do not care that your leg broke or that you are begging me for life; you should have never crossed my sister. Oh, I guess your little boyfriend didn’t tell you, huh? My sister and I have been watching your ass like a hawk. But, Babygirl, this was planned from the beginning. I hope your simple-minded ass does not think that your little bitch ass boyfriend moved you down here to marry you. Claire lured him here, and he brought you along for the ride. Now, who has the last laugh?"

 I can see her heart drop to her stomach, and she sobs quietly. Then, she began to hyperventilate.

"You son of a bitch! Get me out of here! I would rather die than be in here. Fuck you, Claire, and that snake, Chris!"

I don’t have time for this shit, and I need a line. I can feel my high wearing off, and I cannot entertain Jasmine if I am not on cloud nine. She is crying and tugging at her ropes; she tries her best to break the wires and rope around the chair but fails miserably.

I’m built for this life. Hell, all that shit that I saw in prison prepared me for petty tortures like this one. So I take out my stash and start to break it down on the coffee table, which is nothing but a big ass mirror. As soon as I look down, I notice a gigantic gash on my left side.

The blood is already dried, so this happened while I was sky-high, taking her from the house.

 Oh, she is going to get what is coming to her. I remove the seeds from the weed and line up the coke perfectly so that not a speck will miss the blunt.

 "Excuse me, where are my manners, would you like a hit?"

"Hell, no! I don’t want any of that shit. It was your evil ass sister who started this! So why should I have to suffer?"

 I ignore her and continue to roll my blunt, then realize that she is right about one thing: she should not have to suffer.

I feel like a pawn in the scheme that my sister has created, and now it’s too late to end it.

 I spark the blunt inhale the smoke, coughing hysterically because of the pain from the injury. Finally, my mind is at ease, and I can think this shit out without her cries irritating me. I recline back onto the sofa and think about all of the choices that I have made in life. Damn, I’m 35, don't have a high school diploma, never had a real job, and cannot imagine life without my white girl. A fury erupts in my chest, and I flip the glass table over, watching it shatter all over the floor. I took off my shirt and belt.

 She whimpers, "Oh, God."

 "Bitch! God cannot hear you! Do you know how many times I would ask him, why me? While locked up? All the shit I went through, hell, I have to self-medicate to function in this fucked up society. Do you know what it is like to have your manhood taken from you by another man because he is fucked up in the head? You are over here complaining about the agony you are suffering, baby girl. This shit is kicks and giggles to me.

Think about a 200-hundred-pound man-bashing your head into a locker, knocking you unconscious, then blood oozing from your ass down to your feet. No fucking body was there for me! Who was there to protect me? Huh? So, I don’t give a damn about the ‘agony’ that you are complaining about over there. Say one more word. I promise you will eat these bullets.

 *I cannot believe I expressed all of this to her; I have never talked about this to anyone, not even Claire.*

I snort so much cocaine and smoke so much weed that I thought that those nightmares had escaped my mind.

Claire comes in drunk as hell and is ready to get some shit started. She tosses her bottle to Jasmine then says that she looks as if Jasmine needs it more than she does. The first thing she sees is my blunt and the broken table.

 “What the fuck did you do, Dre? That shit was a thousand dollars. That shit is coming out of your cut, I said to destroy her, not my cabin.”

 Sis get your mind right, this is my cabin, too, and not a damn cent is getting deducted from my cut. Or your ass will be tied up with your sister's wife over there.

"When are we getting rid of this dirty bitch? Man, where my line at?"

 No, I’m not giving you any because you are already intoxicated. Calm your ass down. Claire ignores my warning and grabs the mini glassine bag that contains the goods. I can’t believe my sister is chopping up drugs in front of my face. I mean, she is a grown woman and can handle her weight. She can also afford it at a higher rate than I can. But it is time to get back to business and get rid of Jane Doe.

*Chapter 17: Jasmine*

***It’s Either You or Me***

The hollow, dim room yields no hope for my escape from this nightmare that seems to be my reality. I yell as loud as I can and nothing. The only sounds that I could hear were the screaming voices in my head and the bellowing growl in my stomach, convincing me that this was the end of my life. Anybody, can you hear me? Help me! As I yelled for help, the only sound was my echo, coupled with Dre’s plead for me to shut the hell up. The terror that I was experiencing would not leave. It dropped from the pit of my stomach to the soles of my feet.

I was so afraid that this very moment would be my last. Despite my constant pleas for help, I knew that no one would come to my rescue. What have I done to place myself in this position? Was I not walking in the right path, a path that would lead me to eternal happiness? I know that I should not have trusted Christopher to take care of me and my needs. Hell, he’s why I am in this predicament.

I squirmed anxiously from side to side in a desperate attempt to escape from this chair. The damn zip tie was wrapped too tightly around my wrist. Hell, at any second, I felt as if my circulation would be cut off! I jolted my left side, causing the vase that was by me on this antique wooden table to break on my leg. After the glass shattered, I heard footsteps approaching my little area, ensuring me that he had not forgotten about "our special plans." The tiny pieces of glass cut parts of my leg and thigh, making it easier for the tears to stream from my eyes.

The salty tears and chalky spit were the only things that I had to quench my thirst. I suddenly hear a screeching voice coming toward me, asking if I’m ready to die.

Why do I have to suffer like this? If you are going to end my life, then do it now. I cannot take this slow suffering much longer! I hear a pair of stiletto heels clicking, clacking toward me, bringing forth an aroma of cheap alcohol and Victoria's Secret’s Love Spell. With a staggering walk and sluggish words, Claire says, "Damn, you look like pure hell girl, we should bury your body with the roaches and rats. You would fit right in! She comes over with a bottle of water in her hand, most of it spilling on my leg.

“Open up, baby girl!l” I wasn’t sure if she had laced the water, so I declined her offer. She pulls me by the hair to pour the water into my mouth, forcing some to go down my throat.

I know that you aren’t afraid to open your mouth! You sure do open wide enough for my husband, so drink up!

I swallow my pride and open my mouth to receive the water. The refreshing taste revives my body. I begin to open my eyes a little wider. “I must say, you held your little ‘situationship’ under wraps for a long time. I didn’t suspect that my husband could afford to house a random when he could not even afford to put food on my table. Well, aren't you the lucky one, huh? Everyone wants a little piece of Princess Jasmine."

She pulls out a cigarette and lights it in my face, spewing the ashes onto my already cut skin. I jerked around in the chair to avoid the burning sensation from the ashes. After Claire sees that I have not shed a tear, she smears the cigarette butt into my left shoulder.

"You feel that burn? You feel that shit in your soul, don’t you? That’s the same burn that I felt every night when Chris would not leave your trifled ass. That’s the same burn that I felt when my bitch ass husband would not come home or, better yet, when he couldn't bring any money home, leaving me with all the slack! Feel that shit!"

"This shit right here, this shit right here! This takes away all of your problems. It’s the shit that kept me calm throughout all of this chaos."

She laughs a little, takes a pause, reaches into her bra, and pulls out a mini bag of cocaine. She lines it up on my thigh, grabs a straw, and snorts it straight into her nostrils. Her head cocks back, and she zones out for at least two minutes.”

"Dre, come put her in the living room!"

He came to unhook me from the chain and threw me on the couch. As I lift my head, my eyes meet with the barrel of Claire’s handgun. She places the cold steel onto my forehead and cocks it.

"I bet you don’t have anything to say, now, do you." Dre comes over and takes the gun out of her hand.

"Get the hell out of here, Claire! The deal was I can do what I want with her all night. Get out of your emotions and get back into the plan! Then you kill her. Claire storms off into a rage, complaining that she needs more of her favorite white girl. Man, this shit is crazy!

How did I get trapped into this reality that does not seem the least bit real? I can feel my heart pacing two times its regular beat and my eyes becoming glossy, making me feel unusually sedated. What did you put in my water? You could hear the slur in my voice.

"Leave me the hell alone!" I can’t even fight no more; I am too lax, too drowsy.

"Oh, not to worry, dear, the pills will settle in soon. You will be knocked out like a baby. Don’t try anything stupid now; you may have hell to pay." I muster the strength to let some steam off my chest about this imaginary lifestyle she has with Chris.

"You pathetic ass woman! If you think that Chris loves you, then you're delusional. He would never choose your thirsty ass over me; you will never be good enough for him!" I lift my head and reply with a hollow chuckle. “You can’t be serious, Claire; the only reason Chris settled for you is because of your credentials.

On the other hand, your husband is treating me like the woman you could never be. I bet your silly ass didn’t know that we make love in his man cave while you were hosting your little party! I smirked and said under my breath, somebody needed to satisfy him.

Claire’s face is enraged; she slaps me across the head with the butt of her gun. Blood leaked from my temple onto my lips. I spit the blood in her face.

 "You don’t know a thing about Chris and me! While you were trying to graduate from high school, he and I were in a full-fledged relationship in college. Jasmine, you took that away from me."

Her phone rings, and whoever is on the other end had a sense of urgency in their voice.

She exclaims, “I’m in the middle of something!”

The caller informed Claire that the matter was critical, so she obliged.

“Dre, I need to go handle something in the office.”

He smirks at her and then glances at me. Claire’s remarks fill in the silent tension.

"That should give you plenty of time to do what you want with her, and then you can finish her off."

She locked eyes with me one last time, then headed to the office. Dre is hunched over on the side of the sofa, preparing to finish his last two lines of cocaine.

"Yo, you ready for me?"

He snorts his final line, then props my legs on the sofa and begins to finger fuck me.

I felt a rush of terror shoot from my spine to my head as he crept closer to my body. The alcohol on his breath permeated my insides so severely that I could feel my organs deteriorating. He whispers in my ear, "Don’t back away now. You let everyone get a piece, and I’m damn sure getting my slice!"

I close my eyes in an attempt to mentally escape the torment that I was about to experience. Dre slid my panties down and searched my pussy like he was searching for gold.

"I can’t wait to get inside of you. This shit is tight, too."He gushed with excitement.

He inserts his fingers so deeply inside of me that a tear rolls down my face.

I whimper. Please, stop.

He climbs in between my legs, sucking on my neck. I'm so relaxed from drinking that laced water I could barely put up a fight. I kept moving, stopping him from going inside me.

"Stop trying me, yo!”

He grabs my face tightly and says, “You better enjoy this dick because these are your last moments alive!"

He kisses me on the side of my lips. I squirm as much as I could. *I’m so sleepy. Apart of me just want to stop fighting, let me just accept this faith.*

***BANG!***

 "What the hell was that noise!"

He runs to the front then back windows, wondering who could be at such a deserted place.

"Claire! Stop playing, girl! You know you’re supposed to come through the front!"

As he is searching through the back of the house, Antonio slips into the front door. Dre is looking in the backyard, threatening to shoot and kill anyone trespassing on his property.

"Baby! How did you find me? I gasp.

He cuts the zip ties and asks about the blood cascading down my face. I told him about the abuse from Claire while confined to the chair. He asks, did Dre force himself on me.

I didn’t want to answer that question

I can see the fury build in his eyes as tears begin to well into my eyes. He embraces me with a bear hug while he wipes my face dry.

Babe, what are you doing? I ask, watching Antonio handling a gun.

"You know how to use this, right? In case Claire tries something, I need you to fire back."

I gasp, “There he goes!”

He shot at us twice before disappearing into the cabin. We get distracted by the beaming headlights outside of the window. Claire is finally back. Antonio instructs me to hide behind the closet door right before he walks to the cabin's back to confront Dre. Claire bursts through the front door,

"Dre, I’ve been calling your pho---."

She glances at the sofa notices that my zip-tie is cut, and I am not there.

"Dre! What the hell did you do with her? We have to clean this place before it gets too late!" She yells out.

Claire hears scuffling and began to panic.

"What is that noise? Who else is here, Dre?"

She anxiously peeps around the hallway, misses me, pours gasoline she had sitting outside by the utility shed throughout the entire living room and hallway.

Soon as she lit and threw the match, I ran and rushed her with the gun in hand as we both fall. We wrestled on the floor over the weapon as she manages to get loose from me.

"So, you think you're a woman enough to shoot me? Badass! Pull the trigger then, Miss. I don’t have shit to live for anyway."

I stand there, stoic, mostly startled that I am aiming a gun at her face.

"Just like I thought, all you’re going to do is stand there!"

She walks over knocks the gun out of my hand. I push her onto the floor, we tussle until she manages to pull out her lighter. I grab her to hit her as hard as I can, still feeling dazed. She lights the curtain and pulls my leg down and keeps a tight grip on my broken ankle. I scream in pain.

"If you think I’m going to die alone, you have another thing coming!"

I drag myself to the kitchen and look over my shoulder for Claire, but all that looms in the room is a massive cloud of smoke. The smoke blinds me, so I shoot straight into the air. I’m not sure what I shot, but the loud noise caused Claire to release my ankle.

*Chapter 18: Jasmine*

***It’s All Over***

The entire cabin was filled with flames and smoke; I struggled while attempting to escape out of the kitchen. The smoke penetrated my pores, seeped into my lungs, and caused me to choke every time I gasped for air. While I was limping to the back door, I realized that Claire had managed to escape from the living room, trailing bloody

footsteps that inched from the hallway to the kitchen.

*How in the hell did she wake up from that?*

I immediately sensed her presence standing behind me, so I said a silent prayer before turning to face her. She had a knife in her right hand, and her left was balled into a fist. She raised the knife at me and clenched tightly, but I blocked her with the butt of my gun. We tussled on the floor for what seemed like an eternity. She finally lost some grip, so I used the opportunity to shove her off of me while she crawls to the gun. She was like a demon that would not die, but I was determined to give her all of the anguish that she has given me! I had so much rage encapsulated that I blacked out of reality and went to a hurtful place, the same place that led me to cheat on Chris. This is not the Jasmine that I know or want to become. After the bullshit that I have endured, destroying Claire for all of the hell she’s put me through over the last few months. I jump on top of her and wrap the lamp cord around her throat. She is struggling to breathe, so I squeeze tighter. But, before I could finish her, She’s trying to remove my hands from her neck.

You think this is a game, bitch?! I squeeze even tighter. She is gasping for air! I squeeze tighter until I feel her body stop resisting. I cannot believe that I killed her, but this was self-defense. This woman was out to kill everyone because she had died inside a long time ago. I have to get out of this cabin. She and Dre put me in a total danger zone, and I am so grateful that I could escape. I crawl through the open side door, even though my ankle still caused me excruciating pain. I roll onto the porch, feeling lifeless, and suddenly I felt someone pick me up and throw me over their shoulder. I could have detected that scent miles away; it belonged to Christopher.

 "Are you okay? Where is Claire?" He asked.

 I inhale and exhale slowly, staring intensely into his eyes, realizing that the spark of love that I had for him has diminished. His heart was between Claire and me, only Claire is no longer here, and I have moved on with Antonio. My initial plan was to be as spiteful and hurtful as possible, but the hurt in his eyes would not allow me to destroy the ounce of life that he possessed.

Chris, Claire is dead. I killed her.

 He embraces me for one last time, as we both knew that this would be the last time that we would see each other.

 As soon as I draw back from Chris, I see Officer Cyn, Detective Alston, Curtis then we heard a BOOM.

 The first question I ask is, "Where is Antonio? Please tell me that he’s not still in that cabin!"

The paramedics and fire trucks pull to the cabin, put me on the stretcher

"Young lady, you are lucky to have survived this.” He tried to restrain me, but all I could think of was Antonio inside. I feel like dying; As soon as I close my eyes, I hear a strained voice. I tried to jump up from the stretcher.

"Baby, I’m right here. I told you that I would never leave you, right?" I look up at him with an eye full of tears. His eyes are irritated and have a red tint; he is covered in ash and blood.

"Sir, we need to check you out." He collapses into the next stretcher, grips my hand and squeezes it tightly.

 "Baby, it’s just you and me now; no more fighting, conspiracies or psychotic ass people. He stared at my hand a while longer before mustering the strength to climb down from The stretcher to kneel on one knee. My eyes enlarged, and I can feel my heart jumping

out of my body.

"Jasmine, this has been the most turbulent time in my life! But in you, I find refuge and hope. I want to continue to build an empire with you. I need you, baby. Will you marry me?"

Although this was not the glamorous engagement that I had envisioned, it was genuine. I know that marrying Antonio will be one of the best decisions of my life. I shed a tear and nodded yes. He kissed my hand and wiped my tears. I hugged him so tightly that I could feel his rapid heartbeat. I was so full of excitement that I wailed loudly, causing

 the ambulance to rush over to me.

 "Ma’am, is everything okay?"

 Ma’am? You are looking at the future, Mrs. Jennings!

The firefighters extinguished the fire, searched thoroughly inside the house, and brought out Dre and Claire's body bag. I look over at Chris and see the hurt, betrayal and pain in his eyes. His heart is sunken into his stomach, and he is gazing at me, the same gaze that he used to win me over in high school. While Antonio was being examined by the paramedic, I motioned Chris to come to me. I stare deeply into his

eyes, meeting his soul and listening to his silent cries for forgiveness. I whisper to him, ‘It’s not all of your fault.’ There will always be a special place in my heart for you. Let’s move past this Chris, we both deserve true love.

He cracks a smile, plants a kiss on my forehead, then leaves with his brother Curt.

Three weeks later, everything seems to be back to normal, at least in my life. My ankle is healing, Antonio and I about to expanded the Visionz Enterprise. Who can complain when there are several streams of income coming into a happy home? I can’t wait to have my ankle checked, so I cant fully return to normal. I request a physical to join a running group or at least go to the gym. I have to be in the best shape of my life before my wedding. I call Kayla while waiting on my doctor to come back into the room and tell her that we are both going on diets, especially me. I have been eating non-stop since the catastrophe at the cabin. Right now, it’s going to my gut!

Antonio has given me the best insurance offered. My doctor is more than accommodating to my needs.

 As Dr. Anderson walks into the room. "Ms. Butler, I have some news for you. I don't think you will be visiting the gym anytime soon; you’re six weeks pregnant."

 Astonished, I reply, "I’m what?"

 I shake my head no, but then I think about how badly Antonio has been craving a son. If it’s a girl, she can help me decorate homes. I am overwhelmed with emotion and burst into tears.

 "Congratulations; I know your bundle of joy will be grateful to have you as a mother."

 Antonio knocks on the door, Dr. Anderson allows him in. Before leaving, he congratulates Antonio; I am too emotional to focus on what he was saying.

"Baby, why he congratulated me?”

I beam, tears begin to well into my eyes as I think of what an amazing father he will be.

 Babe, I’m pregnant.” His eyes water, but he doesn’t allow a single tear to fall.

We decide to go to North Carolina for the weekend so that Antonio can ask my father for his approval of our union. The men go fishing while Mom and I prepare a meal. She tells me that marriage is not easy, but she has faith in Antonio and me. I wanted to inform her about the new addition, but I know that she will erupt with extreme emotion. I decide to wait until Daddy gets back! After another hour, father and Antonio came home with four huge, largemouth bass for my mother and me to cook.

 "Well, Princess, I just taught my future son-in-law how to catch a fish, so you should never be hungry. I’m proud of you, baby girl. He’ll make a great son-in-law."

While we are preparing the meal, my Mom shares how happy she is that her cancer is in remission. Everything is finally coming together. I am so grateful. Antonio has been so supportive throughout all of this turmoil. While cutting the onions, I became nauseous and ran to the bathroom. When I came out, Mom made a joke about the last

 time she was nauseated with the smell of onion was when she was pregnant with me. She stopped in her tracks.

"Are you pregnant, baby?"

I start blushing excitedly. YES, Mom! We both squealed with excitement. Oh my goodness, my baby is having a baby. She hugged me.

 My Dad gave Antonio the seal of approval and their blessings.

 "Now babe, you know that I’m about to spoil the hell out, y'all right. You’re carrying my prince or princess. I need my Queen to be as comfortable as possible."

 "Are you reading my mind, Mr. Jennings?"

"Well, future Mrs. Jennings, I’m pretty skillful at figuring you out."

Finally, five months later, Kayla threw me a baby shower; she invited my entire family and most of my friends. I couldn’t wait to celebrate my new life. My family embraced and blessed our union. I can only imagine what's next for our future.

To be continued in the sequel, *Toxic II: Antonio’s Revenge*

Please stay tuned for future titles and movies! All reviews are welcome on my site, Amazon, Facebook, Goodreads.