Multiples

The Unloved One

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# PROLOGUE

“What happened to my mama? What happened to my mama?” JP asked the police officers standing outside of his house. The officers couldn’t find a quick enough response to his inquiry. Their slowness led JP around the officers. The officers closest to JP grabbed him.

JP kicked and screamed for the officer to let him go. “I live here!” he shouted, reaching outward. A piece of him knew something had happened to his mother. He didn’t know what but he was fully aware that the police weren’t there for nothing. “What happened to my mama?” he asked one last time. When the officers wouldn’t answer him, he completely shut down.

An officer stood off to the side talking on the phone.

JP stood away from three of the officers, and felt her heart beat increase. Looking at his wrist, his pulse thumped wildly against his skin. Dropping his head, he snapped his head up, and looked the officer before him in the eyes.

“What the fuck happened to my mama?” he asked, balling up his fist.

The officer glared down at the little kid, and wanted to smack the taste from his mouth. But he couldn’t. Special Agent Mark Blair was pulling up, and his baby-sitting duties was over. The officer grabbed JP by the arm, and pulled him towards Blair.

JP snatched away, and tried to push the officer. The officer crotched to JP’s level, and eventually caught a jab to the throat. The officer shoved JP to the ground, crawled on top of him, and wrapped his hands around JP’s neck.

Blair marched up. “That’s enough!”

The officer hadn’t heard the order. He tightened his grip around JP’s neck.

JP tossed and turned in his sleep as he relived a part of his past. For years now, he’d been faced with the demons haunting him. They wouldn’t let him rest. Every chance they got, they tapped into his psyche and presented an alternative ending to the horrible memory of the day he came home from school to learn of his mother’s death.

The realization of the incident didn’t need the alterations for it to be completely understood. The revelation of his father’s girlfriend killing his parents had cemented a reality into the pit of his stomach that he couldn’t pass. It constipated him and placed a lock on his bowels.

Over time, the intimate disclosure of what his father’s crimes were opened a different door of understanding for him. The man they longed for him to believe murdered Winter’s relatives wasn’t the man he knew. His father wasn’t the type to lift a finger and hurt anyone. At least, that’s how he portrayed himself to his son. With that picture painted, JP couldn’t have phantom the understanding so many others had of him.

Yet, as he grew into a man, he began to come to a different understanding of who his father was. But it didn’t derive from the stories told about him. It came from acknowledging the man he was growing into himself.

JP rolled onto his side. The sweat from his brow dripped onto his pillow. He clutched his chest by folding his arms, and tried to fight off the cold sweat. There was no use. This nightmare was far from over. He held himself tighter as he waited for the fat lady to sing.

Winter James’face eased into play.

JP bit his bottom lip. This was the time he’d been waiting for. He’d purposely etched her face into his mind for the day their paths crossed. On the surface, she was very elusive when she appeared in his nightmares. She didn’t crave to engage him. That frustrated him. He wanted a piece of her for what she’d done. She’d not only killed his father, she killed the only woman he could see himself ever loving. That lost hurt him tremendously.

He chased Winter until he couldn’t take it anymore. She stood a good distance away, and taunted him. That drove him crazy. She done this every time she showed up. By the way she haunted his nightmares, he sincerely hoped she was still alive so he could make her feel his pain.

He called out her name. She walked away from him. “WINTER!” he screamed. “Either face me or leave me the fuck alone!”

She turned around, and marched towards him. Her face was distorted, and a trail of blood lingered around her neck. As she neared, her contorted features resonated a surprise he hadn’t been expecting. A calm came over him, and he could see the truth for what it was. 

His mother stepped to his right. “Son, you must let this go if you want to live a healthy life.”

He kept his eyes on Winter’s approach. “But she killed everything I had.”

Winter smiled, showing blood-stained teeth. “And I would have taken you out too if they hadn’t killed me too.”

Natalie moved in front of her son. “This dog and pony show will end right now.”

Winter raised her Glock, and leveled it at Natalie’s chest. “This would mark the second time I killed you, bitch. I wouldn’t have expected you to be so dumb the second time.” She pulled the trigger, and the explosion jarred JP from his sleep.

Awakening abruptly, he shook uncontrollably. Rocking back and forth, he sought to calm his nerves. The toll of the same nightmare was eating away at his sanity. He truly feared closing his eyes at night. The thought of having the nightmare brought him tremendous pain and suffering.

Looking to his left, his predicament hadn’t changed. Where he once could enjoy the company of a cellmate, it was a terrible idea to do such a thing now. Upon settling in, they would request to be moved because they were scared or they would get a beating for attempting to awaken him. The latter was what kept him in solitude.

That didn’t faze him. He’d been on his own for so long, he expected to be alone for the rest of his life. He would prefer it that way. With no dependents, there wouldn’t be anything anyone could use against him.

He planted his feet on the cold floor. *Nothing will ever break me!*He’d promised himself that years ago when dealing with the foster care system.

He slipped on his commissary shower shoes, and stood. Stretching his limbs, none of that mattered. He was coming to the end of another journey. He walked over to the toilet to relieve himself. Placing his hand on the wall, he held his tool. Shaking it and returning it to his boxers, he scooted over to the sink and makeshift mirror.

Staring at himself, today would mark his last nightmare in that cell. It was January 15, his birthday. His stay at the Haller House Madison County Detention Center was at its end. He was now eighteen, and they couldn’t hold him any longer.

He splashed some water on his face, then chuckled.

“It’s on to the big house for another three years.” He put some toothpaste on his toothbrush. *Then my debt to society will be paid. But I doubt they’ll be ready for my release. And I seriously doubt I’m gonna give a shit.*

# Chapter ONE

JP sat on the edge of his bunk, and mentally prepared himself for the next leg of his journey. This had been the day he’d longed for. Sliding into his gym shoes, he laced each one with the same meticulous arrangement he had since arriving at the juvenile facility. Pulling his pants leg over his ankles, he looked around one last time.

*Yep! My days of residing here is over.* He rose to his feet, and something within stopped him. A part of him found it hard to separate the time he’d spent in the facility. He’d spent the last six years confined to those walls. When he had no one to turn to, it was those walls that provided him with a comfort he could confide in.

*If these walls could talk.* He ambled over to the make-shift mirror and studied his reflection. His reflection gave him more than an image of himself. It allowed him to take stock of the person he was, and how he came to that day.

Like he’d done so many times, he gripped the side of the sink and took the time to reflect over his life. In reflecting, the rumination reverted him back to the day everything changed for him.

At the tender age of nine, he woke up like any other kid and went about his daily activities. Nowhere in his young mind did he think he would return home from school to find his parents murdered and him becoming a ward of the state. The shock of that day had remained embedded within him every step of his journey. On that day, he vowed to never let anyone else take anything of value from him. And if he could remember, he stood on that promise.

That still wouldn’t quiet his raging heart. In his mind, the only thing that could provide him peace was putting a slug or two in Winter’s face. He didn’t care that she’d disappeared and no one had seen her. In his heart, she was alive and in need of his services. If she wasn’t alive, he simply craved the knowledge of her death so he could sleep well at night. Without knowing for sure, he knew the nightmares wouldn’t stop. And that’s something he so dearly needed.

“I can’t let those small things get to me,” he mumbled, knowing his inability to let go would prove to be detrimental. Still, he wouldn’t let it hold him back from becoming the man he would become regardless.

He smirked at the rebellious kid he was at nine. No one could tell him anything. He had a chip on his shoulder, and he dared the toughest of souls to take a bite out of it. His attitude kept him in trouble. It didn’t matter if it was at the foster center or in the homes of the families’ kind enough to take him in.

No one could handle him. He was simply uncontrollable.

At the age of twelve, he was placed in his final foster home. Time after time, the foster center attempted to find him a suitable home but the awaiting parents wouldn’t take him due to his blemished record. The foster center felt their hands were tied. They didn’t know what else to do. Years prior, they’d tried breaking him by introducing him to the torture chamber. That only made matters worse. Once he was freed, things grew worse for everyone around him.

Then one day a man came in and was willing to take him.

The man could relate to JP and the issues he had. He was once in JP’s shoes, and recalled how so many had turned their back on him. He didn’t want JP to grow up with a feeling that no one wanted him around. That feeling could be damaging to a young fellow heading into his teenage years.

Unfortunately, the man’s approach to providing JP with stability and structure would ultimately backfire.

The foster father, a man with military background, believed he could whip JP into shape in the same way the army had done him. When JP done things contrary to the father’s beliefs, he would attempt to put his hands on JP. That was a big mistake. JP didn’t take physical abuse well. As a matter of fact, he didn’t take anything too well. He’d vowed to stand on the principle that nothing would be taken from him, and that’s what he had meant. At his age, he was the giving type, and when he gave, he donated 100% so all involved would know he’d given his all. It didn’t matter if it was a tongue lashing or an ass-whooping, he performed accordingly with everyone he came in contact with.

The father wasn’t receptive to JP’s retributions. Switching his approach, he went from an aggressive nature to a passive one, then mixed and matched when they were needed. It still didn’t deter JP from standing his ground. Every time the father instituted another tactic, it was given right back without a second’s hesitation.

Feeling disrespected and rejected, the father left JP alone and instead released his frustrations on his wife.

To JP, that was a no-no and a cowardly way to handle his personal issues. Over time, he’d tried relentlessly to contain his urges to deal with the man beating his wife. But it wasn’t his fight. He understood the man’s reason behind pouring out his anger upon her despite it not being right.

One summer night, JP couldn’t take it any longer. He’d been awakened from a dead sleep by the wife’s screams. She was in the middle of explaining her love to her husband when the first slap resonated through the house. The more she begged for him to listen, the more he smacked her back and forth across the room. Through the semi-silence, JP counted the slaps, and knew if he didn’t interject, the man would kill his wife.

Sliding into his hand-me down shoes, he grabbed a 7 ½” ice pick he grown to love and calmly walked into his foster parents’ bedroom. The father hadn’t heard him enter. He was too busy putting his beat down. Standing over his balled-up wife, he rained down blows as she attempted to protect herself. It was all to no avail. The man was putting his hands and feet on her with no desire to quit. She was being severely beaten, and blood was oozing from her cuts.

JP closed in on his foster father, clutching the ice pick in his right hand. *I shouldn’t have to experience this kind of life.* He also knew he shouldn’t have the kind of thoughts he was having. He had death on his mind, and as he zeroed in on the foster father, he came to grips that the knocking out or torturing someone wouldn’t continue to suffice. That was unrewarding after he’d done it so many times. What his mouth watered for was to taste the blood of the person he killed. The foster father grabbed a hand full of his wife’s hair and landed a flush right to her jaw.

JP aimed the ice pick at the man’s right kidney and poked him. The first insertion straightened the man up. But it didn’t slow him. He continued to plummet his wife. That upset JP.

Unleashing a series of pokes into the man’s side, JP leaned into the man and pushed him into the wall. The puncture wounds had weakened the father but he couldn’t understand why. He reached for his side and felt the blood. Looking down at his wife, she was balled up so he was confused to what occurred. Pushing himself off the wall, his legs were unstable. He fell back onto the bed and for the first time saw JP.

Jason went in for the kill. He hit the scumbag multiples times in the neck and face. Blood quickly squirted from the tiny holes at an alarming rate. The father gargled his own blood. Clutching his throat, he sought to catch his breath, and clear his sight. But it was too late. He was done for. It was all she wrote.

JP watched the bastard take his last breath. Gritting on him, he wiped the soiled ice pick clean with a clean piece of the man’s t-shirt.

The foster mother wept in the corner.

JP stepped towards her. “It’s gonna be alright. He’ll never put his hands on you again.”

“That’s not what I wanted!” she spat, jumping to her feet. “He was a good man. I loved him.”

JP was confused. “I just saved your life and you’re telling me I’m the one wrong.” He gripped the ice pick tighter. “You stupid bitch!” was all he said as he grabbed her hair and jabbed her seventeen times to the throat. Letting her fall, he couldn’t understand her stupidity. He’d done what he felt was the best for a child in his position. He put the abusive man out of his misery. What more could she have asked for?

Wiping off his ice pick, he exited the bedroom to clean himself up. Entering his bedroom, he laid down and tried to sleep. He couldn’t. His adrenaline was at an all-time high. The kill made him feel different. Laying upon his back, he stared at the ceiling. He felt no need to rush from the scene. The neighbors knew the man beat his wife so the cops were never called. For all they knew, he’d gotten tired of beating her and went to sleep.

For JP, it wasn’t that simple. The sleep he needed was some he longed for considering he would be homeless and on his own. He laid his ice pick on his chest. Going back to the foster center was not an option. He weighed his options.

They were far and few. He wished things could have been different. His mind returned to the taking of his foster parents’ lives. He figured the incident would affect him differently. However, it didn’t faze him. The rush was a high he was coming down from but one he couldn’t stop thinking about. Closing his eyes, he repeatedly replayed the incident over and over in his mind. Each time appeared to be better than the last. He’d even went so far as to go back into the room to view the bodies again. From that moment, he was hooked. He knew what he’d been born to do.

*But I can’t stay here,* he reasoned, knowing there was no way he could be there when the bodies were found. The police would automatically assume he done it.

So, he hit the streets. It was rough at first. With his ice pick and the clothes on his back, he would sneak into a friend’s house at night or break into a shed to catch a dream. When he’d ran out of friends, breaking into houses became all-too common for him. What he first had to do to eat and possibly sleep transitioned into finding something of value to steal so he could put money in his pocket.

While out one night, he tried his hand at breaking into a known drug dealer’s house. He’d been watching him for about a week and seen a familiar routine form. The drug dealer always seemed to come home around the same time every night, and he always brought along a bag with him.

JP hoped the bag contained what he needed the most: cash. He was tired of stressing over when his next meal would come or if he could break into someone’s house for something of value. It was time to step up his game.

The drug dealer had been home for about an hour when JP decided to make his move. Entering through the garage, he heard no noises inside. Entering the house, the voices from the t.v. coerced him to pull out his ice pick. Rounding the corner into the living room, he spotted a naked woman with her legs cocked and a needle hanging from her arm. *She won’t be any problem,* he surmised. Whereas, he didn’t know how long she’d been in that state so he made it his business to hurry up.

Checking the closets, he was unable to find anything of value or the bag he came for. Creeping upstairs, the sounds of a bed squeaking stopped him. From his position, he thought he heard a young girl refusing the advances of another. It wasn’t long after that did the advances stop and the sounds of grunts filled the air. The thought of a rape in progress infuriated him.

Easing the door open, he seen he’d been right. The drug dealer he’d came to rob had forced himself on top of a little girl, and he seemed to be enjoying himself. The little girl underneath him laid there motionless and stared off into space.

Taking two giant steps, JP was within striking distance immediately. He poked the drug dealer over ten times. Like a bitch, the drug dealer tried to run but JP was on him like white on rice. The pursuit of his prey heightened the kill. It elevated the game exponentially and JP subconsciously counted off the hundred times he poked the rapist. Raising his head, he licked his lips, and tasted the rewards of his victory. Taking in the scenery, blood was everywhere. It was so much of it, it was all over him, the little girl, and the walls of the room. JP was covered in so much of the man’s blood, he looked like he had bathed in it.

JP glanced over at the little girl. When her eyes met his, he looked off as he thought of his foster mother. *I have to let that go.* He looked over at the little girl to find out she wasn’t a little girl at all. She was around his age or even older.

He stared into her eyes. “Why would you let him do you like that?” he asked, hoping not to get the same reaction he received from his foster mother.

She shrugged. “Why fight it?” she asked. “It would only cause me more pain when he beat me and take it. Been there, done that.”

He realistically surveyed his work. “I can’t be here when his body is found.” He rose to his feet. “You can stay here and deal with the aftermath or you can bounce with me. What you gone do?”

She jumped at the opportunity of a new life. “I’m riding with you!” she exclaimed.

“Put some clothes on while I look for what I came for.” He turned to walk out then stopped. “What’s your name?”

“Justine. What’s yours?”

“JP!”

She smiled. “Nice to meet you.”

He walked out the bedroom. “I don’t know about all that,” he muttered. Searching the other rooms, he found the bag he was looking for. It had both drugs and money in it. He didn’t bother counting the bread. By the way it was bundled, it was enough to last him a while.

He returned to Justine ‘s bedroom. “You ready?” he asked, catching her stuff the last of her clothes in her book bag.

She slung the bag over her shoulder. “Yep! But where are we going?”

“I’ll figure that out soon enough.”

They eased out of the back door, and headed towards the gas station. At the store, they bumped into a crackhead. JP pulled him to the side.

“Ah, I need you to do me a favor right quick.”

The crackhead looked at JP strangely. “What?”

JP didn’t know how to approach the subject. “I need you to get me a motel room for the night.”

The crackhead looked over at Justine, and smiled. “You trying to get ya freak on, youngsta.”

“Naw!!” JP replied. “I need a place to lay my head.”

The crack head peeped the duffel bag in JP’s hand.

“I’m telling you I’ll make it worth your while,” JP added.

The crack head wanted to know what was in the bag.

“It’s something you want. I can tell you that,” he concluded not knowing what the drugs were.

The crackhead rushed into the deal without fully knowing himself. At that point, he would have sold his mama’s soul to get high so the promise of being blessed clouded his judgment. He done JP a huge favor. He pulled some strings and got him a room for the whole week.

With a place to lay their heads, JP and Justine were set to go. The only direction they seemed to be traveling in was forward and everything in the past was obsolete. That’s how JP wanted it. As he sat on the edge of the bed counting his money, Justine slipped in close to him.

“JP, I owe you my life for what you done. What can I do to repay you?” she asked, trying to sound sexy and seductive.

He licked his fingers. “You don’t owe me anything. It was something that had to be done.”

She scooted closer to him. “Let me repay you anyway.” She forced herself on him.

He pushed her off him and gave her a *stay the fuck off me* look.

She felt rejected. “What’s wrong with you, fool? You gay or something?”

He could have smacked her.

“Here it is I’m trying to show you how much I appreciate what you did and you pushing me away. What’s up with that?” She nodded and thought about it. Her willingness to give herself to him made her look bad.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“13!”

“Here it is, you’re only a year older than me but you don’t have the mentality I have. Forcing yourself on somebody doesn’t show appreciation. It shows insecurity and weakness.”

“How the hell would you know. You’re only twelve!” Her tone was nasty. She walked away rolling her neck and eyes. He’d hurt her feelings but she knew nothing else but to act sassy. Folding her arms, she flared her nose as she glared at him from across the room. Something about him intrigued her. Plus, she couldn’t understand how a boy younger than her could be so much smarter than her.

He put the bulk of his money back in the duffel bag. Watching her, he had to address her question. “For the record, I know a lot more than you think I would, should, or could. But that shouldn’t be the question you ask. The question should be, do you want to learn?”

Inhaling her hurt, she figured, *what the hell.* Life with him couldn’t be any more strenuous than it had already been. None of the guys she’d previously dealt with had the mentality he had. If he was willing to kill for her, the sky was the limit for what else he would do. Liking those odds, she opted to take the plunge with him.

“She moved towards him. Can I be truthful with you?”

“Of course,” he stated, wanting nothing different.

She scratched the back of her head. “I don’t know where you will take me but I’m willing to ride with you to the end. Just promise me that you won’t leave me if things don’t turn out how your plan.”

JP looked at her and understood her worries. “You got that, Justine. That’s my word!”

Chapter TWO

“Here you go,” Justine stated, handing JP a slice of pizza and taking a seat next to him.

“Thanks,” he replied, looking at the toppings to make sure she hadn’t sprinkled anything on top of them. Finding it suitable to eat, he bit into it, and as he chewed, thought about his life and the direction he was likely to go in. He figured the time would come when he may have to answer for the crimes he’d committed. If that was the case, he wouldn’t worry about doing the time. Doing a prison term couldn’t be any worse than the time he spent in the foster system. In prison, he would be provided with a bed, three meals a day, and plenty of time to plot his next move. That was something he hadn’t been guaranteed from anyone over the last three years.

He placed the pizza crust on the paper plate, and cut his eyes at Justine. At thirteen, she was beautiful. Her skin tone had a toffee appeal to it and she exhibited a maturing frame many kids her age wouldn’t develop until later in life. She would surely grow up to be something special. All she needed was a little grooming and she could be the best contender for the next top model.

She noticed him checking her out. That put a smile on her face. She hoped he would come around and at least act like he liked her. She knew she liked him but didn’t know how to express her feelings. She instantly took a liking to him when she seen how he carried himself. The task of saving her simply heightened those emotions. Looking down at her hands, she wanted to repay him in some way; whereas, she didn’t know how to approach the situation. Throwing herself on him hadn’t worked so she was stumped on what to do. Trying a different approach, she engaged him in casual conversation.

“So, what’s your story, JP?”

He looked at her. “Starting with when?”

She rolled her eyes and laughed. “Starting with why you broke into my house.”

He smiled, and could see through Justine’s laugh. She liked him but didn’t know how to show him. He found that cute. But to him it didn’t matter if she knew the truth or not. Her decision to be there with him had established her as a ride or die chick. She could have nutted up and stayed behind to tell on him but she didn’t.

“Recently I was placed in a foster home where the man tried to physically and verbally attack me. When that wouldn’t work, he started taking his anger out on his wife, and that wasn’t something that worked for me. I got fed up and poked him. I thought I was helping her but she was dumb enough to defend his actions so I poked her dumb ass too.”

He stopped to let her absorb all he’d said. While doing so, the whole scenario replayed in his mind. He studied her. His revelation hadn’t fazed her one bit so he continued.

“I had no choice but to hit the streets. I’ve been in and out of foster homes since I was nine and my rebellious attitude has tarnished my record.” He shrugged. “When I needed money or food, I’ll break into a house and do my thing.” He looked her in the face. “But I’ve been seeing dude at your house coming and going with that black duffel bag and I needed to know what was in it. You know inquiring minds need to know so last night was the night I made my move.”

She grinned. “I’m glad you finally did. I been tired of that shit,” she confessed. That confession felt like a ton of bricks falling from her shoulders.

“Why would you allow him to do that to you?” he asked, thinking there was something she could have done to stop it.

She hung her head. “You seen my situation. I didn’t think I had a choice. My mom’s a junkie, and he keeps her high and out of her mind all the time.” She paused. “I don’t know who my father is and I have no other family to go to.”

He slipped his forefinger under her chin. “Hold your head, baby doll. NEVER and I mean NEVER let anybody tear you down and make you feel less than a person ever again,” he spat, and gripped her chin to make her look at him. “Do you hear me?”

Nodding, she slowly moved in for a kiss but he ducked it. She felt rejected again. Her body language gave off an aura of insecurity.

Sensing that, he gave it to her in the raw. “Justine, I’m not one of them clowns that just want to fuck you for the sake of fucking you. Our time together is limited and it would be only right if I try to help you rather than hurt you. Me having sex with you would continue to scar you, mentally and emotionally. Just be easy on the sex right now.”

##  She picked at her fingernails. “That’s all I know. I’ve been getting raped and taken advantage of since I was eight or nine. Every guy I meet only wants to fuck.” Years of pain flowed down her face.

He wiped at her face. “But that’s not love, Justine. A guy humping on you doesn’t constitute love.”

She raised her head “Then what does?” she questioned, sincerely needing to know.

He shook his head. “I’m not sure exactly but from what little I saw with my parents, that had to be close.”

She sucked her bottom lip. “What happened to your parents, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“They were killed!” he snapped.

Her countenance softened. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be!”

The seriousness of his tone pushed her to leave it alone. “Come on, JP.” She scooted over. “Let’s talk.”

For the rest of the day, they sat on the bed and talked about their lives. There wasn’t a topic that was off-limits. They opened up about everything. They even made a pact to be there for one another no matter what life threw at them.

“You pinky swear?” she asked, holding out her pinky.

He hooked his with hers. “I vow that nothing will come between us.”

Days passed and their bond grew stronger. They even had sex several times and Justine found out that he had been a virgin. Finding that cute, she took it easy on him. But with each experience, she pulled more and more of her inner freak out. She literally blew his mind with some of the stuff she wanted to do. He merely went with the flow and enjoyed the ride.

Life for them was seeming to have some sense of normalcy to it. He’d begun selling the crack he found in the duffel bag, and business was booming. With the making of money, they both were happy. So happy, they had the crackhead who rented the motel room to find them an apartment to move into. Luckily for them, the crackhead’s girlfriend’s name had recently come up on the Section 8 availability list so they gave the apartment to JP.

Unfortunately, on the morning they were set to move, the state drug task force kicked in the motel room and shut down JP’s operation. Like a man, JP stepped up to take the weight and was sent away to do the time at Haller House Madison County Detention Center. Due to the large quantity of drugs he possessed, the judge handed down the severest punishment he could — juvenile time until he was eighteen plus three years in state prison. The judge hoped the nine years would provide the young lad with enough time to change his ways. If nine years wasn’t a good criminal deterrent, the judge didn’t know what would be.

The time wasn’t what made JP nervous. Months had passed since the slaying of his foster parents’ and Justine’s stepdad. Up to that point, no one had been apprehended so the case was still open. Fighting with himself about it, he couldn’t rationalize if he left anything behind that could tie him to the crimes. He figured if he had, when they ran his prints, something would have come back. But nothing had. That didn’t ease his worrying mind. He believed he could still be brought to justice and if they tacked that time on top of the nine, that’ll sit him down for a long time.

*Fuck it!* If it was a long stretch he had to do then so be it. He wouldn’t let it get him down. He would come out on top of any situation he was placed in.

And that’s how Justine looked at it. Like promised, she stepped up and played her part. Moving forward with their plans, she took over the operation with no problem. Taking everything he taught her, she couldn’t see failure in her future. Upon moving into the public housing apartment, she enlisted the service of several female crack heads to handle the hand—to—hand transactions. To minimize the traffic to one spot, she connected with several other fiends for them to obtain a place in the same projects. Her scheme of things was on-point, and regardless of having to start from scratch, she quickly took over the projects before venturing out.

With JP gone until his twenty—first birthday, she was the Queen Bee holding down her King. JP wanted for nothing while away. His books stayed fat. She kept letters in rotation, and pictures stayed on deck. She even kicked the visiting room door down every weekend to show her face. Across the board, she was the epitome of what a loyal woman stood for.

Months eventually turned into years with the two of them growing together. She was now twenty and he was nineteen. He’d finished his juvenile time and was a year into his adult sentence. Justine was counting down the days and months to his twenty—first birthday so they could return to how it once was.

Over the years, they’d begun to make plans of getting married and starting a family. Once they got their private life in order, the next step was to clean up their illegal profits and venture into something legit. She’d already begun purchasing low—income houses and had them renovated. Her mother had even knocked the monkey off her back and was the face of their affairs.

Still, as low—key as Justine was, that didn’t halt the haters from surfacing. They loathed seeing her coming up the way she did. They hated it so much, many of them went to great lengths to throw salt on her name. At that stage of the game, she knew to keep her hands clean. Any issue that got too out of hand, she let JP handle that. Even from prison, his reach was becoming long.

JP had constructed a team of killers to stand in for him in his absence. Most of those on his team were guys he’d met along the way and broke bread with in the joint. He promised them, *if you stay true, I can hook you up upon your release.* These dudes knew he wasn’t playing. They witnessed how he carried it in the joint, and knew he was about his business. If he said he would look out, he meant that. And he stood true to his word. Those that stood up was welcomed to a piece of his pie, while, the fake and the phony got what they deserved: a cold shoulder.

JP sent a few guys home with access to get whatever they wanted. Their only requirement was their loyalty. He was very upfront about that. The first sign of disloyalty would mean off with their heads. Everyone understood that. And if that was clearly understood, their business could go off without a hitch.

As those dudes touched down, JP’s power soared to new heights. He was the DON on the streets and in the prison system without having touched the streets in seven years.

With another birthday passing, he was twenty and he felt as if he was sitting on top of the world. He’d made quite some name for himself. Nothing moved if it wasn’t okay’d by him first. In the joint, he could sit back and laugh at himself as he recalled what he told Special Agent Mark Blair at the tender age of nine.

“I’m Jason Price! The one YOU will need to watch out for.”

True enough, he was well on his way to etch his name in the history books as one of the greatest to ever do it. Liking that accomplishment, he laid back on his bunk to meditate.

Relaxing his mind, an unusual shift of sound in the dayroom interrupted his peace.

Jumping up, he hurried over to the door to find a short, light—skinned dude with glasses surrounded by a group of cats. It was close to chow-time and the new guy’s manhood was being tested.

“I’m not in the mood for this stupid shit,” JP mumbled, exiting his cell to diffuse the situation.

Walking into the thick of the crowd, dudes backed up at the sight of his naturally cocky build and harden features. He cleared his throat. “Now is not the time for this,” he said, raising his voice so everyone could hear him.

One of the guys looked at JP as if he was a nobody. Turning his back to JP, he muttered something slick.

JP had no desire to ask him what he said. He simply moved in for a kidney shot, wrapped his arm around the guy’s neck, and began to choke him out. It didn’t take long for JP’s guys to spring into action. Before the other guys realized what had happened, they were wrapped up in a similar fashion.

JP whispered in the guy’s ear. “This my muthafucking house. You better respect my shit. You must need to ask somebody about me and find a lane to ride in. Swerving in mine will get you poked!” He twisted the guy’s neck and shoved him. Those standing around thought he had broken the guy’s neck. The crackling sound was heard by all within earshot.

Like a wounded dog, the guy hobbled away with his crew.

JP strutted up to the short dude, and introduced himself. “They call me, JP. What’s your name?”

The short guy pointed to himself. “Me, Marco!” he responded in broken English. 

 JP’s face wrinkled. “Where you from, fam?”

“Colombia!”

JP smiled from ear to ear. Snapping his fingers, he signaled for his homies to get Marco a care package. “From now on you don’t have to worry about shit. You with me. You understand?”

“Comprender,” Marco stated, looking around for the other guys.

One of the homies came back with the care package. Marco held up the clear trash bag, and took inventory of the soap, shower shoes, new boxers, t—shirts, a pair of gym shoes, and some food items. Moving the bag again, he noticed a toothbrush, some toothpaste, and a stick of deodorant.

JP waved Marco over to his cell, and invited him in.

Marco held up the bag. “Gracias!” He bobbed his head. “That means thanks in Spanish.”

“Don’t worry about it. You good?” JP sat on his bunk. “If you ever need anything, let me know. I’ll get it for you.”

“I would like to pay you back for your kindness.” He held the care package with both hands. The bag was getting heavy.

JP noticed him struggling. “ Sit that on the table, and have a seat.” He offered the empty chair under the desk.

Marco sat on the edge of the seat. “I see how you operate around here, and I’ve heard stories. You are a good man,” he explained, searching for JP’s reaction.

JP looked him squarely in the face. “That’s what’s up, fam. But, you don’t owe me shit.”

“But I want to repay you. It would by my pleasure if I could,” Marco insisted.

This was pissing JP off. “You don’t have to repay me. We good! I’m telling you we good. Leave it at that, fam.”

“But I can make you a very rich man,” he said, putting emphasis on *rich* man.

That raised JP’s eyebrows. “You got my attention. What’s on your mind?”

Marco looked around the cell, and lowered his voice. “Cocaine!” he said, looking around again. “And plenty of it.”

JP leaned back and studied Marco. “Are you serious?” he thought he was full of shit.

Marco grinned from cheek to cheek. “I’m dead serious, my friend.”

“Tell me more,” JP instructed, sitting upright.

Marco started with his father’s routes out of Colombia, the prices of each shipment and the benefits of dealing with his family.

“And you can do this for me when I get out?” JP asked.

“It’ll have to be when I get out. I would have to take you to meet my father. After that, everything will be a go. Your helping me will keep you set for life.”

JP couldn’t believe this. A real Colombian connect fell right into his lap. But he didn’t want to get too excited about it. He still had six months to do, and Marco wouldn’t get out until six months after that. This could all be a ploy for protection now but a stiff-arm later. He would keep that in mind and watch Marco’s every move.

Marco reached out and touched JP’s arm. “Don’t worry about the particulars, JP. I am a man of my word. If I say I can do it, I will do it.”

That didn’t put JP at ease but he put on a face that it did. “I have no worries, my friend. I’ll be waiting for your call when you get out.”

“And you’ll be sure to get it.”

Chapter Three

Sitting in the dayroom, JP looked up at the clock, and saw it was well beyond the time for Justine to have arrived for their weekly visit. In fifteen minutes, visitation would be over. This would mark the first time she hadn’t made it. Since his incarceration, she’d been on point with her weekly visits, letters, pictures and keeping money on his books.

Whenever he needed something done on the streets, he would inform her on visit and his orders would be carried out to the fullest.

Her missing a visit made him wonder.

“Jason Price, you have a visit!” the Correctional Officer hollered over the intercom.

He wanted to be upset but had to quickly get over it. Justine had been the epitome of a good woman over the years. She could have easily road off into the sunset with everything they’d established and left him holding his nuts. Taking that into consideration, he rationalized the situation. Anything could have come up and he didn’t need to be inconsiderate of what caused her to be late.

Getting dressed and heading to the visiting room, he walked in but didn’t see Justine. Placing his ID on the guard’s desk, he ambled over to Darlene, Justine’s mother. Sitting down, he considered the river of tears flowing down her face.

He instantly thought the worse. Outrageous thoughts ran through his mind. His first thoughts surrounded Justine having been kidnapped or found dead somewhere. If anything close to that transpired, there would be hell to tell the Captain. He wouldn’t rest until everyone involved perished.

Darlene reached across the table and grabbed his hands. She felt the coldness of his skin, and released them. There was something about his touch that frightened her.

“Where’s Justine?” he asked.

She dropped her head. The thought of what she came to tell him broke her down.

He slapped the table. “Tell me what happened, Darlene,” he demanded, leaning forward. “I can’t help her if I don’t know what happened.”

She raised her head, and wiped at her tears. “She’s locked up, Jason.”

His face scrunched. “Locked up?” He hadn’t heard that right. “Where?” he asked then followed with, “For what?” He was ready to fire off as many questions as he needed. He wanted answers and that required intimate details of what happened. He cocked his head to the side when she didn’t seem to talk fast enough.

“Calm down, Jason. I know you’re upset. They came and got her this morning,” she confessed. “They came and got my baby on her birthday!” She broke down.

He was at a loss of words. He was two months to the door and now he had to deal with this. Looking off, he realized the answers he needed wouldn’t come from her. He would need to talk to Justine.

He placed his elbows on the table. “Who is they, Darlene?”

She wiped under her nose. “The FEDS!” she replied, sniffling. “She’ll be arraigned today so call me later and I’ll know something hopefully.”

The officer at the desk signaled that visitation was over.

Darlene stood to leave, walked around the table, and hugged JP. He didn’t attempt to raise his arms. He needed to get back to the unit. He walked back with his head down. Once inside, he headed straight for his cell. He had a lot to think about. When he meditated, he liked to be alone. But his alone time wouldn’t give him the answers he needed. Understanding that, that would drive him crazy.

Unable to sit still, he got on the phone and made a few calls. Someone needed to tell him something. However, no one he called knew anything. They were in the dark like he was.

They were on pins and needles about the unexpected pick up. It was well known that when the FEDS came for one, there was a list of others as well. They weren’t sure how long that list was but it had them on high alert. They couldn’t see this turning out good for any of them. There would surely be a domino effect.

And that’s exactly what happened.

That same day, the FEDS continued their onslaught of arrests They weren’t holding back. They arrested everyone from the bottom to the top. They spared no one associated with JP’s operation. In a matter of hours, JP’s inner circle had dwindled to a few individuals.

JP sent word to those remaining few that shop was closed until everything smoothed over. Before another piece moved on the board, he required a full analysis of the situation. He couldn’t fret over the missed money. The flow of cash had been cut with Justine’s arrest. His focus had to remain on what went wrong.

He watched the clock until it was time to call Darlene. Picking up the receiver, his hands were sweaty. Putting the phone to his ear, his heart beat out of his chest. He had never been this close to the edge about anything in his life. He dialed Darlene’s number. As it rang, he was beyond upset with himself. He could have pulled her out a long time ago. They’d talked about that; but, her reason revolved around him not being able to fully trust anyone else with that position. Thinking about it, he figured he had time. How wrong that was?

Now Justine was in a position he couldn’t get her out of if he wanted to. That weighed heavily on his heart. To lose her to the system would paint his world black.

In that moment he realized his love for her. The feeling was strange. Never in a million years would have he thought he was in—love with another besides himself. Love was hard for him give. He’d seen no reason in partaking in that emotion. From what he’d seen, it was an irrational experience that could get him killed. He seen no place for it. On the flip side of that, he couldn’t truthfully say that he’d seen too many handing it out in bulk anyway.

The only exception was Justine. He could see that now. He could also see that the love he did receive from others weren’t given from their hearts. It was given out of fear.

“Hello?”

JP was in his own world. He reflected upon the life him and Justine talked about having. They wanted to start a family, maybe having two or three kids. They wanted to take their money and put it to good use. They also wanted to travel the world. But now this.

Where their separation brought them closer, he questioned whether he could be strong enough to save the bond with the tables turning. He never wanted to question her loyalty, and vice versa. He simply understood there was a difference between her holding him down and him holding her down.

“Are you there, Jason?”

“Um, yeah. What happened?”

“It’s not looking good.” She picked up the criminal complaint. “They’re pushing for charges ranging from her being the mastermind of a continued criminal enterprise, conspiracy, distribution of cocaine base, and some gun charges.”

“Got damn!” he mumbled. It appeared the government sought to throw the book at her all in the name of love for the money. “Read off the names of everyone else.”

As she did, he didn’t recognize a few names. There was fifteen in all but three he had no idea of who they were. Writing the names down, he planned to make it his business to find out.

“Read the criminal complaint again from the beginning,” he suggested.

As she read it, the drug amount stuck him in the chest.

“Did you say twenty—five kilograms, Darlene?” he asked, wanting to make sure he heard that right.

“Yeah, that’s what it says, Jason. Is that a lot?”

He scratched his head. *Damn!*

His silence worried her. “Why aren’t you saying anything?”

The phone beeped. In sixty seconds, the phone call would end.

“Darlene, everything is gonna be alright. You hear me?”

“Yeah.” Her tone didn’t agree.

“I’m a need you to make a copy of that compliant and send it to me. I need to dissect that thing.”

Darlene started crying. She balled her motherly eyes out. She was extremely hurt about her daughter having to go through this.

But before JP could quiet her fears, the phone disconnected.

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“Justine Adams! Visit!!” the female guard screamed at the door of the cell block in the county jail. “You ready?”

“Yeah!” Justine shouted, making her way down the range.

Walking into the visiting room, the guard directed her to the number six phone.

Justine sat down and considered her mother’s face. The excitement dancing in Darlene’s eyes touched her heart. Grabbing the phone, Justine could only think of JP.

“Have you talked to JP, mama?”

Nodding, she thought about the brief conversations with him. “Justine, he’s tripping. They about to release a fucking untamed animal back into society. It’s about to be hell on these streets in less than two months,” she explained with a lot of concern in her eyes. “You need to send him something and tell him to be easy.”

Justine shook her head. “He knows what he’s doing, mama. He’ll figure this out, and we’ll be alright.”

Darlene looked at her child dumbfoundedly. “Are you listening to what you’re saying. You’re facing God knows how much time and you’re talking about he’s gonna figure it out.” She lowered her voice. “You better think about yourself, Justine. He’s on to the next bitch as soon as he gets out since your ass won’t be there.”

Justine couldn’t believe her ears. “Really, mama?” She processed what had been said. “You’re telling me to worry about myself. You must have forgot who turned your funky ass life around. Now you want to bite the hand that feeds you. She put her free hand to the window. Get you a big chunk for the road, boo, cause bitch, you about to be starving from now on. It’s back to where your no-good ass should have remained.”

She slammed the phone down, stood, and stared down at her mother. What little respect she had for her had flown out of the window. How could she tell her to go against the very man who took her from nothing and gave her the world? She would have been lost in the world of predators without his tutelage. True enough, he didn’t force her to remain hustling but being picked up wouldn’t be the driving force behind being disloyal. She’d come this far with him so she was riding with him until the wheels fell off.

The guard stopped Justine in the hall, and informed her of an attorney visit.

She dreaded this day. She prayed the day would come when all the charges would disappear, and she could walk out Scott-free. Seeing that wouldn’t happen, she swallowed her fears and put up an indestructible wall.

Walking into the small attorney’s visiting room, Justine was greeted by a young, attractive and vibrant young woman. The woman’s energy made Justine’s pussy thump. She’d never had that kind of reaction before. *If we could have met under different circumstances, I would have invited her into our bedroom.* A threesome would have been a great present for JP coming home.

The attorney extended her hand. “Hello, Justine! I’m Danika Jacks from the Federal Public Defenders Office.”

Justine was lost in the softness of Danika’s hands. She had the softest pair of hands she’d ever felt.

Danika released her hand, opened her briefcase, and pulled out a stack of papers.

Justine crossed her legs, and openly stared at her attorney. “I have a question.”

Danika looked up. “Ask me anything.”

“What are you mixed with, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Danika grinned. “I’m Puerto RICAN, Black and Hawaiian,” she answered, and glanced at Justine. “What about you? You look mixed with something yourself.”

Justine looked off. “I’m not sure. I know black and something. Maybe Colombian or Cuban.”

“That’s a great mix but let’s get to the topic at hand.” She moved some pages around. “There doesn’t seem to be a lot of evidence against you. At least not on paper. That leads me to believe their evidence is circumstantial.”

“Circumstantial?” Justine asked, not knowing what that meant. “What does that mean?”

“In these kind of cases, it means they’ll have to rely on the testimony of witnesses. Many of those witnesses will be informants working for the police and/or prosecutor.”

“Snitches!” Justine shrieked. “I don’t fuck with snitches.”

Danika found the piece of paper she looked for. “You’ll never know who snitching these days. It could be the last person you would ever think. It could turn out to be your mother and it has in some cases.”

Danika’s comment snapped Justine’s head back. She shook her head. The conversation from their visit looped on repeat. She didn’t approve of the things her mother fixed her mouth to say. For Danika to generally reference the snitch could be her mother made her wonder. *Who could it be?* When she thought about it, it could be anybody. That bothered her. Anything was possible. But could she convince herself that her mother had it in her to go against the grain.

She tried wrapping her mind around a rat being that close to her and her not knowing. She thought of her immediate circle. She couldn’t look there. Those close to her were handpicked by JP himself. He was a good judge of character. She hoped one of them cats didn’t think they were bigger and badder than the infamous Jason Price.

*It has to be someone outside the circle,* she concluded.

Danika slid a copy of the indictment across the table.

Looking it over, three names stood out. “Who are these three people?” she asked, putting her finger next to them.

“At this time, I don’t know. I have to look into that. I’m not sure I’ll be able to find anything unless you plan on going to trial.” She hesitated. “Speaking of trial, what are you plans?” she asked, seeking to gauge Justine’s mindset. “You do have the option of going to trial or pleading out.”

Justine rolled up the indictment. “Plead out? Why would I plead out when you said they have nothing against me?”

“As your attorney, I have to present every option to you. It was damn sure better than presenting the option of you cooperating with the government.”

“That’s definitely not an option!”

Danika gathered her paperwork. “Look at it this way. In a few weeks, everything will be on the table, and I’ll have more information to share. When that time comes, you can lean towards whatever direction you like. Fair?”

Justine could live with that.

Danika rose, pushed the call button, and closed her briefcase.

“Thanks for coming,” Justine voiced, wished she could leave with her.

Danika half-smiled. “Just doing my job. But we’ll be talking soon.” She ambled to the door.

As Danika strutted out, Justine watched her hips sway from side—to—side until she was out of sight. *She wearing the fuck out of that skirt.* It caused Justine’s mouth to water. Sitting down, she felt ashamed of the way she drooled over her lawyer.

*This shouldn’t be happening.* She should be more focused on her case. Instead, her mind wanted to see Danika’s fine ass butt naked. Leaping to her feet, she rushed to the window. *I bet that’s a sight to see.*

Chapter FOUR

The day of reckoning had arrived. It was January fifteenth; the day of JP’s release. This was the day he had been waiting for. The last month and a half had been very stressful. He’d allowed Justine’s case to worry him beyond repair. He’d had dreams of the FEDS picking him up from the state prison and subsequently remanding him into their custody. That was a dream he awakened from hoping it didn’t come true.

He thought of the three names on Justine’s indictment. Over the last month, he hadn’t been able to find out too much about them. No matter how hard he tried, the results were minimum or non—existent. That didn’t matter. He believed those three were the weak links and the ones he would have his eye out for. Once he could get his hands on them, it would be impossible for them to utter another word to anyone.

He popped his neck. *The streets are about to get a good glimpse into who the real don is.* He was prepared to flex every muscle he had, and if that meant killing off those in his way, they would meet a horrific end.

A guard walked JP to R & D — Receiving and Discharge. At the front desk, he went through the formalities of signing his John Hancock on various forms before he could stroll free. Signing his last signature, he headed out of the state prison a free man. It was a refreshing feeling to step outside of the prison to inhale the fresh air of freedom. The idea of the air being different on the other side of the fence permitted the freshness of the freedom air to tingle his lungs.

Exhaling slowly, he released the days, the months, and the years of which he had been confined. That was a part of his past now. The last nine years had come and gone. There was no getting them back. He wouldn’t fret over that. That was water under the bridge. He had a chance to move ahead with life, and make sure his future was just as bright as his present.

Ambling away from the building, he found Darlene parked out front. He’d expected one of his guys to pick him up but at that point, it didn’t matter who came. He simply yearned to get as far as he could from the place.

Darlene stepped onto the sidewalk, and wrapped her arms around him. Squeezing him tightly, she kissed him on the cheek. She was glad he was home. But she couldn’t be as happy as Justine. She looked at him, hoping he could do something to get her daughter out of jail.

“Happy birthday, son!!” she exclaimed, taking a good look at him. “Wait until you see what I got for you.” She had a wicked smile on her face.

He could sense something wasn’t right. He tried dismissing it but it lingered too closely to the surface. His ability to read people cast him to take a step back. *What is she on?* he asked himself, getting an odd tingling in his gut. Whatever it was, it would cause him to keep a close eye on her.

Snapping out of it, he brushed by her. “Let’s ride. I need to holla at a few people. You can show me your surprise later,” he stated, climbing into the car.

She wanted to fly off the handle and give him a piece of her mind. Breathing deeply, she held fast. This wouldn’t be the time or place to upset him. Hopping in the car, she drove away from the prison wishing she could have left him. With her daughter in jail, he didn’t deserve to be free.

The tingling in JP’s gut intensified. Staring out the passenger window, he couldn’t get over the feeling he initially received from Darlene. Unsure of how to take it, he opted to open the floor with a little small talk. This wouldn’t be the time to indulge in his feelings. That would turn out bad for them both.

“What’s up with Justine?” he asked, without looking her way.

She clutched the steering wheel. “She’s doing fine.” She introduced an awkward silence. “She should be calling any minute now.”

“What’s up with her case?” he asked, feeling the awkward tension. “Any new developments?”

Her throat clammed. “Not that I know of. I’m sure you two can talk about that later.” That was her way of telling him she wasn’t trying to talk to him.

He sensed her attitude. “What’s your deal?” he asked. “Why you acting all shitty?”

She glanced at him through her peripheral, and shook her head. “You’ll be acting shitty too if your daughter was locked up because of a piece of dick.” She stopped suddenly because her true feelings weren’t supposed to slip out. Looking straight ahead, she knew the mistake she made.

“JP, I’m sorry about that.”

He silenced her with a hand. He didn’t want to hear it. She’d said all she needed to say. He now understood her position. With that understanding, he pondered how he wanted to deal with her.

“So that’s what you think. You think I had her doing what she did.” He shook his head. “If you only knew the half.” He let his last statement linger.

She didn’t dare respond. She’d already said too much. To engage any further in the conversation would open a flood gate of emotions, and she would end up a loser. Instead, she turned down the street, and pulled in front of his friend’s house. Her cell phone rang as she put the car in park. She knew it was Justine so she accepted the call and handed JP the phone.

“Yeah,” he said, dryly.

“Hey baby! Happy birthday. I’m so glad to hear your voice.”

“Thank you, baby. It’s good to hear your voice.” He glared at Darlene. “You know I’m a get up there to see you soon.”

Justine blushed. “I can’t wait to see you. I miss you so much. Did my mama tell you about the surprise?”

“Naw, but she told me about some other shit though.”

She caught the tone of his voice. “What?”

He let his eyes cut through Darlene’s face. “We’ll talk.”

She knew something was wrong. “Jason, you cool?”

He chewed his bottom lip.

“What’s up, fool? Talk to me! When we start doing this shit.”

“We’ll rap. Now is not the time.”

“Let me talk to my mama right quick!” she demanded.

He handed Darlene the phone, hopped out and walked up to the house. Knocking on the door, he stood to the side as someone made their way to the door.

The door flung open, and a heavyset guy smiled at JP. “MY dude finally made it out of there.” He stepped out on the porch, and embraced JP. “What it do, playa?”

JP got right to it, pulling out Justine’s criminal complaint. “What can you tell me about these three names, fam?” he asked, paying close attention to his eye movements and body language

Parks grabbed the complaint, and scratched his head. “Who is these cats, fam?” he asked with a silly look on his face. “I don’t know these names, J.”

JP didn’t like what he saw. Parks knew something and the scratching of his head gave him the time he needed to find a lie. But the lie wasn’t good enough.

He moved a little closer to Parks. “Who know these clowns then, homie?” he asked, a hint of venom escaping his voice.

Darlene knocked on the door before Parks could answer. 

Parks hurried around JP to answer the door.

“Jason, what you gonna do?” she asked.

Without turning to acknowledge her, he waved her off. “I’ll catch up with you later. I got some shit to do. It’s gonna take me a minute.” He thought of how strange Parks was acting.

She held out a cell phone. “Justine said take this phone so she can call you later.” Her voice mimicked a child talking to her father.

He turned to face her. “Keep it!” he spat. “I’ll holla at her when I go see her. “

Feeling scolded, she turned and left.

He watched her rush off, and had a feeling that a day would come when she would get in his way. He simply hoped Justine could forgive him if he had to do something to her.

He turned to Parks. “Let’s ride. I need to holla at the others.”

Parks lightened up, strutted to his Metallic Grey Bubble Chevy, and cranked up 2Pac’s Gangsta Party.

As they drove off, JP didn’t feel right without having Justine there with him. This hadn’t been part of the plan. He wasn’t supposed to have been picked up by Darlene nor should he be riding with Parks. He was supposed to be in Justine’s arms, feeling the warmth of her kisses, and possibly diving into her well. As he listened to 2Pac, he needed her out with him and he had to do whatever he could to make that happen.

Parks turned onto a side street. As he did, JP spotted Spark and Tuck standing by the sidewalk talking. With Parks system diverting their attention, they walked into the street as he pulled up. Peering inside the car, their eyes popped out of their face when seeing JP.

Parks parked, and JP clambered from the Chevy.

“My muthafucking, big bro. What it do, family?” Tuck screamed at the top of his lungs.

JP didn’t respond. He walked pass them and directed them to the house. Following suit, they knew he was all business. With him back, they knew he would make something happen. He always had. From the days at the juvenile facility to the days he plugged them upon their release, he was the one to go to when it came to getting money.

When everyone entered the house, JP closed the door and pulled out the criminal complaint. He handed it to Tuck. “Who is those three cats highlighted?” he asked, studying the three of them.

Tuck scanned the highlighted names and shrugged. He passed the paper to Spark.

He recognized one of the names. “Yeah, yeah!” he stammered. “I know this cat right here,” he said, pointing to the last name. “I don’t know who the other two are.”

JP eyeballed Spark. “Where you know this fool from?” He seriously hoped he wouldn’t lie.

Spark contemplated his approach. JP didn’t play. He’d personally seen how he handled dudes that couldn’t keep it real. He surely wouldn’t want to go out like that. Those were consequences he’d been taught when JP came to them about getting with his team.

“I met the cat right before my stay with you.” He started to sweat. “I got out and he was doing his thing. I saw an opportunity to use him as a stepping stone so I did.”

JP cut into him. “That’s all fine and dandy but your carelessness got my bitch popped.” He pointed to the complaint. “And it’s because of these chumps.” He eyed Spark. “Where is this cat now? Who is his people?”

“I don’t think he’s out but his people are from the other side of the river,” Spark responded, with a slight hesitation.

JP shook his head, closed his eyes, and pinched his nose. He was ready to snap; but, he would refrain for the time being. He would need to them to find the snitch and his peoples.

Snapping his fingers, he pointed to Parks. “Man, let’s go! I got somebody I need to talk to.”

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“Mama, what you are doing answering this phone?” Justine asked; her confusion set the tone.

“He wouldn’t take the phone, Justine!” she said, raising her voice. “He’s acting weird, baby. I told you what he was gonna do.”

“You don’t know shit!” Justine seconded. “You done did something and I’ll find out soon enough. When I do, your ass grass.”

Darlene wouldn’t put up with her disrespect. “You better watch who you talking to. I’m still…”

Justine didn’t give her time to finish. She slammed the phone down and stormed off. She knew her dumb ass mama done something she shouldn’t have. She knew it. *Thursday won’t get here fast enough.*

Almost to her cell, a guard opened the outer door, and screamed Justine’s name.

“Attorney visit!”

Justine quickly made it out of the block hoping Danika had something good to tell her. Rounding the corner, Danika’s scent flowed up Justine’s nostrils. She’d never been this mesmerized by a woman. It was driving her crazy. Looking at the beautiful creature through the glass, a part of her welcomed the crazy thoughts circling her mind.

Entering the room, the pleasurable images floating around Justine’s head disappear when catching Danika’s expression.

“Don’t tell me it’s bad news.”

“I’m afraid it is.” She placed a single piece of paper on the table. “Someone else has proffered on you,” she reported.

Justine sat. “Who?”

“I have no idea. Maybe you can tell me from what it says.”

Justine picked up the proffer. All the names were blacked out except hers. As she read it, she couldn’t believe what she was reading. Nothing stated in the proffer was anything she’d ever done or knew about.

She stared Danika in the face. “This is a fucking lie!” she explained, stabbing the paper with her index finger. “I have never done this. Where is they getting this shit from?”

Danika looked off. “I have no idea. Apparently, it’s out of thin air but it’s similar to the others. I’m in the process of filing a motion to dismiss indictment based on insufficiency of evidence. Once that’s filed, we’ll have a hearing and hopefully get to see what else they have.”

Justine placed her head in her hands. “This can’t be happening.” Exhaling heavily, she tried to put on a face of strength. “Please let me know. I could use a favorable ruling of some kind.”

“I’m doing all I can.” Danika could see through Justine’s tough exterior “Because of the nature of your case, they’re playing hard ball. With these type of cases, they deny everything initially.”

Justine heard similar stories from those in her cell block.

Anything anyone sought to file was immediately shot down. No one was given a bond. The prosecutor would cry that every defendant was a flight risk, a danger to the community, and a menace to society. Even the attempts to get to a facility with an adequate library was denied. The government surely stacked the deck when seeking to maintain their high conviction rate.

Slouching in the seat, Justine tapped the edge of the table. “I guess the only way to preserve my rights, and find out who made these proffers is to go to trial right?”

“That’s exactly what you would have to do. But if you go to trial and lose, you may face harsher punishments. You do know that, right?”

Justine stared at the leg of the table, and nodded. “I understand the dangers just like I understood the dangers of what I was doing. I need answers though. And I can’t get them unless I’m willing to go to trial.”

Danika packed up her things. “I’ll gladly begin preparing for trial. If you have any questions, give me a call.”

“You still gonna file the motion to dismiss, right?”

Danika pushed the call button. “It’ll be filed first thing in the morning.”

“Then what? What happens after that?”

“The gloves come off, and we’ll be embarked in a war.” The look Danika gave resembled one of uncertainty.

Justine became nervous. “Let’s wait then. I don’t want to piss them off if I don’t have to.”

“Are you sure?” Danika asked.

She wasn’t but she wanted to speak with JP first. She couldn’t tell her attorney that, and if she could, she wouldn’t. “I’m not sure about anything for real. Let me sleep on it. I’ll call you next week. Is that cool?”

Danika nodded, and strutted from the room without looking back.

Chapter FIVE

JP’s return home wasn’t what he had expected. It had been more stressful than glorious. It had been easier when he called the shots from behind bars. With Justine gone, the chain of command had fallen apart, and everyone looked to him for guidance. That’s what they were used to but he hadn’t been there to see that. He assumed by instructing Justine on what to do, he was keeping himself out of it. But those on the streets knew better. They were aware of where the orders came from and they respected that. Now that he was home, they required his guidance even more.

He wasn’t seeing it that way. From his initial day home, he looked at everyone with suspicion. He didn’t know who to trust. They couldn’t give him the simple answers to his questions. He immediately started playing everyone sideways.

With his operation in shambles, JP submerged himself into Justine and her case. He had to get her home as soon as possible. He wasn’t up to dealing with those chasing their tails. He had bigger things to worry about. He wasn’t the people’s person they sought. That was Justine’s job.

He stopped by Justine’s lawyer’s office for an afternoon talk.

She met him at the door, and sat him down near the water cooler. “I appreciate you coming but I have to be completely honest with you. This isn’t the state. The FEDS can’t be bought. When they sink their teeth in, it’s hard to break free. Their bite is vicious and their lock is equivalent to a trained pit bull.”

“I thought you said all they had were circumstantial evidence?” he asked, staring at a bubble rising in the water cooler.

“Even with circumstantial evidence, it could still get her convicted and sentenced to a long time. Because she had no criminal record, she will be looking at the low-end of the guideline. Even still, that equates to a lot of time.”

He really didn’t want to know how much time but he had to ask. “How much time are you talking about?”

“Thirty years is the low-end.”

He was floored by those numbers. She didn’t deserve that.

“What if she goes to trial?” he asked.

“The possibility of winning depends on how the juror receives the witnesses. The success rate of going against the government is slim. They have a laundry list of people ready to take the stand.”

JP fell silent. *If there are no witnesses, there is no case,* he reasoned. He looked to Danika. “You said her trial would start in two months?”

“Roughly. Depending on when we can get a suppression hearing and when I get all the statements from their witnesses.”

He nodded. “We’re moving forward with trial.” He stood. “All I need you to do is put forth the best defense possible.” He looked down at her.

She gazed up at him. “That’s my job, Jason.”

He turned to leave. “Then make sure you do it.”

Leaving Danika’s office, he hit the streets hard trying to find out who the three guys on the indictment were. The info Spark gave had no veracity. It seemed that Spark thought he knew what he was only made to think he knew. Something was wrong with that picture. *I hope he didn’t do what I think he did.* Then it dawned on him that out of the inner circle, Spark, Parks and Tuck were the only ones who hadn’t been pinched. “How in the hell did they get skipped?” he asked himself. “What is their play?”

With the snap of his fingers, the light popped on. The answer had been in front of him the whole time. They were planning on taking him down. Only a hand full of people knew of his intricate involvement within the operation, and they were three of them.

JP attempted to play the situation out. For them to be free, they had to have made an agreement that required them to remain free to see it through. He thought of what they could have told them about him. IF they gave them the full rundown, he was destined to rot away in a Federal Prison with Justine.

“Bullshit!!” he snapped.

He pulled over, let a car pass him, and busted a U—turn. It was time for him and Spark to have a one-on-one talk, face-to-face.

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“Man, here go this crazy muthafucka now!” Sparks exclaimed, looking at his phone. He swore JP could see him meeting with the FEDS.

The Calvin Klein wanna-be model watched Spark. “Do you think he thinks you turned informant?” the agent asked, hoping Spark would be honest with him.

“Who knows what he knows,” Spark retorted. “All I know is that if he finds out, I’m dead. Parks’ dead. Tuck’s dead.”

“Would you guys be better off in witness protection? I know you originally declined but it’s always an option.”

“On some real shit,” Sparks began. “We might!”

The agent stood. “Talk it over with your buddies. You have my card. Don’t be afraid to use it.”

As Spark walked the agent to the door, he called JP back. “What’s good, homie?”

“I need to holla at you. Where you at?”

“At the crib,” he stated, watching the agent walk to his car. “Where you be?”

“On my way!” JP spat, hanging up.

Hitting the corner, JP peeped the white man jumping into his car in front of Spark’s house. As the car pulled off, the government plated became visible, and that drove JP to the edge. He had the feeling they weren’t right and that had just been confirmed. He slowed to let the agent drive out of sight. When he bent the corner, JP swiftly pulled into the empty parking spot, hopped out, and left the engine running.

The loud banging on the door startled Spark. He hadn’t expected JP to be there so soon. He wondered if the agent drove off before JP could see him. Making his way to the door, he prayed he was in the clear. Opening the door, the fire burning in JP’s eyes could have burned him.

JP didn’t say a word. He rushed by Sparks, quickly turned and hit Sparks with his trusty ice pick.

“AWWW!” Spark screamed, seeking to get away. “JP, please don’t do this. I’m sorry!!”

“You should of thought about that before you turned on me. DISLOYALTY MEANS DEATH! Remember that, muthafucka?”

Spark remembered the vow he made. It was a vow he planned to adhere to until the FEDS wrapped their hands around his neck. When under their spotlight, that disloyalty means death mantra held no weight. He couldn’t spend the next twenty years in prison while he stepped back on the streets as a free man. That didn’t make sense to him. So, he done what was more logical to him. He snitched.

JP stood over Spark’s lifeless body, and savored the kill. The freshness of it had his adrenaline rushing. And he was ready to do it again. Ransacking Spark’s house, he bounced before someone found Spark and alerted the others. He knew once they found out, they would quickly sign up for the witness protection program. It would be hard to get them then.

Hopping in his car, he called Parks. Pulling off, he contemplated how he wanted to handle it. If it was possible, he would handle it in a similar fashion but he needed Parks to be alone somewhere.

When Parks answered the phone, JP got right to the point. “Where you at?”

“At the crib,” Parks replied. “What’s up?”

“YOU alone?”

“Yeah, what’s good?” A click was all he heard.

JP raced to Park’s, parked down the street and walked the rest of the way. Walking up on the porch, Parks was waiting at the door. He instantly knew something was wrong by the way JP was sweating and breathing hard.

JP greeted Parks with a pound. “Have you talked to Spark?”

“Naw, I ain’t heard from fat boy all day,” he replied, turning to go in the house. “But why you sweating, fam?”

“I need to get everybody together so we can go over my future plans. It’s time to get back to the money.”

Parks face lit up. “That’s what I’m talking about. Let’s get this bread,” he voiced, slapping his hands together. He turned to walk towards the kitchen.

“First thing first though,” JP mumbled, running up on the dark—skinned fellow.

Parks continued into the kitchen. “What’s that, fam?”

The tip of the ice pick pierced Parks’ kidney then his lung. “Disloyalty means DEATH, fam!” he spat venomously. “I told you fools what it was if you went against the grain. You bitches thought them people could save you. Where they at now?”

Parks attempted to run but his legs gave out, and he fell flat on his face. JP grabbed a handful of parks’ dreads and repeatedly poked him in the neck, ear and mouth. Parked tried to breathe through the holes but his attempts were short—lived. He was dead within a matter of seconds.

With Parks out the way, JP quietly exited the house, and made it to his car unseen. Looking down, his shirt was completely covered in blood. Taking the shirt off, he tossed it on the back seat. He called Tuck. The line was busy. Ending the call, his phone rang. It was Tuck.

“Yeah,” JP said, casually.

“Someone killed Spark, fam!” His voice was full of hysteria.

JP smiled. “What makes you think that?” He now knew where he could find Tuck.

“I just found him at his crib,” he replied. “Fam been slaughtered!”

JP ran a stop sign. “Stay right there. I’m on my way!”

Tuck mumbled something. The phone seemed to be fading in and out.

“Tuck!” JP shouted.

“Fam, I’m not staying here,” was all he said before ending the call.

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Tuck took finding Spark hard. Immediately upon leaving, he called Parks but wasn’t getting an answer. Maneuvering through the streets, he headed to Parks’ spot. Turning on his street, a bunch of police and ambulances were in front of Parks’ house. At that moment, he knew JP had figured it out.

*How could have we been so dumb?* he asked himself. *I have to turn myself into witness protection.* He called the DEA agent without hesitation. He was on borrowed time. He couldn’t sit around playing. Had he stayed at Spark’s house, he knew what JP had for him. It would have been silly of him to go out like that.

The agent couldn’t answer the phone fast enough before Tuck was talking a mile a minute.

“Calm down, Mr. Watkins, so I can understand you,” the agent told him.

“Spark and Parks are dead! JP has put it together and struck with no hesitation. I can’t be on the streets or else I’m dead too. You gots to help me,” Tuck explained; fear oozing from his pores.

“I have to make a few calls. A safe location will be set up for you shortly. For now, make your way to the Federal Court Building.”

Tuck ended the call, made the next right, and headed toward East St. Louis. The phone continuously vibrated on his lap. He didn’t need to look at the screen to know it was JP calling.

He slapped the steering wheel. “Why did you agree to go against this fool?” He checked his rearview mirror. “We knew he was dead serious about that disloyal shit but we go against him anyway.”

Running a stop sign, he almost found himself in an accident. Good thing the other driver had been paying attention. He pulled over to gather himself. Checking his side mirror, he shook his head, and had to admit, he couldn’t see there being a happy ending to his story.

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The agent Tuck spoken with entered his boss’ office and slammed the door behind him. “Sir, we have a problem!” He waited for the aging white man to look up. “Two of our witnesses against Justine Adams were killed and the third one wants entry into Protective custody.”

A set of wrinkles filled the man’s face. “That takes time. They had a chance to come in but they said they could pull it off.” He lowered his eyes. “Fuck them. Let whoever killed the other two kill him too. “

“Mr. Watkins said Jason Price is the killer, sir. That’s who we’re building the case against. Justine was just the sacrificial pawn.”

The department head looked up at the colored agent. “Like I said, fuck them, Calmwell. Our objective was to cripple Jason Price’s drug dealing operation, and we’ve done that. While we’re giving it to his bitch, he’ll lick his wounds and eventually start over. Once he’s back on top, we’ll stick it to him good, and I mean really good.”

“What should I tell Mr. Watkins, sir?”

The department head laughed. “To do a very good job of watching his back. That’s what you tell him.” He waved Calmwell off. “And for good measure, pick up Mr. Price just for fun. Rattle his cage a little then let him go.

Calmwell smirked. “Yes, sir!” Exiting the office, he didn’t like his orders but he had to follow them. Where he hated to be the bearer of bad news, it was what he had to do. Calling Tuck, he received no answer. He hoped JP hadn’t gotten to him already. His phone vibrated.

“Where you at?” Calmwell asked.

“Down the street from the court building.” He sounded fried. “What am I supposed to do when I get there?”

“Mr. Watkins, I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do for you. Your failure to submit yourself to the program has left you on your own.”

“WHAT?” He couldn’t believe what he was told. “We helped you, muthafuckas, and that help put a target on our backs. When we need your help, you turn your back on us. We HELPED you! Without us, you wouldn’t have a case.”

Calmwell felt bad. “I’m sorry, Tuck. Those are my orders.”

Tuck hung up, and counted down to his death. With JP on the prowl, it wouldn’t be long before he bumped into him. He had nowhere to run. His safety net had been snatched from underneath him, and now the world seemed a whole lot bigger.

“If I’m going out, I’m going out on my own accord.”

Swerving into oncoming traffic, he drove head first into an approaching UPS truck. It happened so fast, the driver of the truck hadn’t been able to slam on the brakes. But he felt the front bumper of Tuck’s car smashing his legs, crushing his pelvis, and rearranging his organs. He felt every ounce of pain, and he wished the impact could have killed him instantly. However, he wouldn’t die until ninety seconds later.

Tuck, on the other hand, was dead on impact. He’d accomplished his goal. It was all she wrote for him.

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Jack Anderson, a graying older gentleman with prestige, wandered into his brother’s office and found him in deep thought. “There’s an update on Lil Price.”

Richard Anderson, a cunning mastermind with a head full of white hair, looked up slightly. The mention of his great-grandson grabbed his attention. Placing a stack of papers on his desk, he gave his little brother his undivided attention.

“Do tell,” he insisted, picking up an unlit Cuban cigar.

Jack rounded the desk chair across from Richard, jacked his slacks, and copped a seat. “I can tell you he’s been quite busy. That’s much for sure.”

Richard lit the bottom half of the cigar. “And?”

Jack crossed his legs. “The three witnesses against his girlfriend is dead. Two, he killed himself and the other decided to kill himself by driving into oncoming traffic.”

Richard smiled. His great-grandson was a chip off the old block. “What’s the status of the potential meeting we set up?”

“That went off without a hitch. That fruit will fall from the tree soon enough.” He swiped at some lint on his slacks. “Did you have to put his little girlfriend in that predicament? That was kinda harsh, don’t you think?”

Richard removed two drinking glasses from the tray sitting to his left, and placed them on the desk. Removing the cork from the crystal vase containing the finest cognac in the world, he poured himself and Jack a drink. Downing his, he refilled the glass.

Jack nursed his drink. “It’s not like you to not have a response.”

“I definitely have one, Jack.”

“Spit it out then. Was that necessary?”

“Yes, especially if the rest of the plan goes how it should.”

Chapter SIX

Usually, Justine would have been delighted to see Danika but she wasn’t in her usual jovial mood. The news of Spark, Parks, and Tucks’ death placed her in a bind. She wasn’t sure what kind but she was sure it was one she didn’t wish to be in.

The county jail guard escorted Justine to the small visiting room for attorneys and their clients.

Danika sat in one of the two chairs in the room with her head down. She didn’t attempt to look up when Justine entered. She had a lot on her mind, and she was trying to process most of it. Three of Justine’s co-defendants had been murdered, and she knew how the government would view that.

Justine sat, leaned back and admired Danika.

Danika, looking up, stared at Justine as she gathered her thoughts. She had to approach this right. She didn’t need to splinter the trust already built. To do that would kill the case before it could gain traction. Coming on too strong would cause Justine to regress.

But she wasn’t the kind of person to bite her tongue. “It appears you have been playing the innocent role all too well, Justine. You even had me fooled, and it’s extremely hard to fool me. At least, that’s what I thought.”

Justine scrunched her eyebrows, not understanding.

Danika continued. “I received a call this morning from the prosecutor and he believes you’ve been quite busy lately.”

Justine glared at her attorney with wondering eyes.

Danika tilted her head to the side. “You have nothing to say for yourself?”

“What is it you want me to say?”

Danika placed one hand on top of the other. “You can start with the truth. I’m only here to help you.”

“I wish I knew what you were talking about. Would you get to the point?”

That upset Danika. “The POINT? You want the point?” she asked, raising her voice. “The point is that the little stunt you pulled will most likely get you LIFE in federal prison. That’s the point!”

LIFE. That word consumed all of Justine’s attention. She sought to shake off her nervousness. Placing her hands on the table, she leaned forward.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I haven’t pulled any stunts. If you haven’t noticed, I’m locked up with no access to the streets so until you explain to me what you’re talking about, miss me with the accusations.” She sat back, crossed her legs, and folded her arms over her chest.

Danika evaluated Justine’s response and body language. From what she seen, Justine was telling the truth. *Or this little bitch is good at what she does.* Taking what she seen, she figured she had to come correct. There was no need to play with her. That would be unethical and unprofessional.

“Justine, I have some bad news. Yesterday, three witnesses the government planned to use as material witnesses against you were killed,” she stated, allowing it to soak in.

Justine quickly assessed the situation. “That should be good, right? No witnesses, no credible testimony, right?”

“Wrong!” Danika said. “The government will seek to use these deaths to paint a picture against you by elaborating on your charges and the conduct surrounding the case. You are looked at as a mastermind of a criminal enterprise. To have that kind of picture painted to a jury would be damaging. They will have no empathy for you.”

Justine stumbled into a deep thought. Her mind couldn’t fondle the idea of not doing anything but would have to pay for it. This was nonsense. This wasn’t how the justice system was supposed to work. The innocent was supposed to go free when there was no evidence against them, and the guilty should rot in prison. Not the other way around.

She inhaled her options. “What do you propose?”

Danika sucked in air. “I suggest you take a plea. The whole reason the prosecutor told me about the witnesses is so you will lean towards copping out and possibly cooperating. I’m a tell you now, I don’t represent clients who cooperate.” She briefly eyed Justine to gauge her reaction. “But I wouldn’t recommend going to trial. There is nothing you can say to diminish the picture they’ll paint of you.”

Justine lowered her head, and thought about it. “Fuck it!” she snapped, flinging her head up. “Come on with it. Ain’t no use in bullshitting.”

“Are you sure?” Danika asked, wanting to make sure.

“Yeah,” Justine replied, feeling at ease with her decision.

“With the plea, how much time will I be looking at?”

Danika pulled out the sentencing guideline chart. “Based on the drug amount, you are currently at a level forty—two.” She turned the book around so Justine could see it. “You’re looking at nothing under thirty years.”

Justine homed in on the word LIFE. That frightened the day lights out of her. She couldn’t imagine doing the rest of her life in prison for drugs. She couldn’t see doing thirty years either. However, her options were bleak.

Danika watched the transformation of Justine’s mood. “There is a light at the end of the tunnel. By taking a plea, you get three points for accepting your responsibility, and I’ll be filing some motions in hopes of minimizing some of the damage. You just may come out better if you went to trial opposed to copping out. I need to look at some case law to see what the precedent is and if it may change.”

Justine had no idea what she was referring to. All she zeroed in on was the sentencing guideline range of 360 months to LIFE. “Do what you can, if you can do anything.” She clutched her stomach. “I have to use the bathroom so I need to get back to my cell.”

That was understandable. Danika packed up, pressed the call button, and waited by the door. When the guard came, she urged her to take Justine back to her cell immediately.

Justine thanked her. Upon entering the cell block, she rushed to the toilet, and released the flurries spinning around her gut. Hunched over, she thought of Tuck, Spark and Parks. They were like her big brothers. She couldn’t believe they were all killed in one day. Then it dawned on her what Danika said. The prosecutor said the government’s three material witnesses were killed.

She wiped herself, hopped off the toilet, and searched the block for the recent newspaper. Finding it, she flipped to the local news section. There it was big as day. Tuck, Spark and Parks pictures all on the same page but with different headings. She peered over her shoulder. To the outside world, there was no connection between her and them. If only they could see the thoughts running through her mind. Now she realized why Danika was so upset.

She folded up the paper. *Could this be real. I treated them dudes like family. How could they cross me like that?*

That question opened the door for many more and it made her accept what she was up against. Out of everyone from her inner circle locked up, they were the only ones who remained free. It was all making sense now. She needed to talk to JP. Heading for the phones, she dialed his number. It went straight to a disconnection recording. She dialed it again, thinking she may have dialed the wrong number. She received the same recording

*Damn, Jason!* She hung up the phone. *It didn’t take you long to figure it out.* She wandered to her bunk and sat down. Before she knew it, she had laid down. As she stared up at the bottom of the top bunk, she visualized standing before the judge on her judgment day, and heard the word LIFE as her judgment. A sea of tears skated down her cheeks. *Got damn, Jason. How could you do this to me?* She rolled onto her side, and covered her face with her pillow.

*All I’ve ever tried to do was love you, and you go and fuck me like this.*

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Days passed and turned into weeks. Those same weeks turned into months and it was time for Justine to take her time. The motions Danika had spoken of had been filed, and denied. She’d done all she could but she was up against a greater entity. They had it out for Justine and there wasn’t a motion she could have filed to lessen the blows. As much as she liked Justine, she knew some cases couldn’t be won. It didn’t matter how much the case law was in the defense’s favor. When the government wanted to railroad a defendant, they pull out all the stops. As a defense attorney, she had to back down before she went too far, that’s if she wanted to keep getting cases in that district.

The Marshals walked Justine into the courtroom with shackles on her wrist and ankles. She smiled when seeing her mother. Scanning the courtroom, she knew JP wouldn’t be there because of reasons previously discussed; but, he was always there in her heart.

The judge exited his chambers and everyone rose. He instructed everyone to sit before he rushed through the formalities, and proceeded with their purpose of being there.

The change of plea hearing went a lot smoother than Justine anticipated. She expected it to be long and drawn out. But once she relaxed and disclosed her involvement in the conspiracy, she left certain issues open so she could want to raise on appeal.

The judge seen no issue with that. They’d agreed to a binding plea of twenty—five years with the option of challenging the mastermind enhancement if she disclosed her involvement. The prosecutor had pushed for Justine to inform on JP but she wouldn’t.

The judge looked at his calendar, and picked a sentencing date. “I’m setting sentencing for two months from now so the probation department can prepare the pre—sentence report. Once that is established, we’ll bring everyone back and wrap this case up for good.”

Justine looked at Danika. The thought of another dreadful process made her head hurt. She peeked over her shoulder at her mother. Darlene fought back the tears. She hated seeing her only child going through this. She was too young to spend the rest of her life in prison. She bowed her head to keep from crying

Justine looked away so she wouldn’t see her mother falling apart. To see her losing it would bring her to the brink of tears. She didn’t need that. She needed to remain strong. The process was stressful enough.

She checked the crowd one more time. There was no JP. *I hope things don’t change when I get my time,* she told herself, rising to her feet. She’d heard about how people turned their backs on those with long prison sentences, and how that forced them to become bitter. *I doubt that’ll happen to me. Me and him go back too far.*

The Marshals walked her onto the elevator. And as the door closed, she knew that only time would tell.

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The ringing of his cell phone awakened JP from his sleep. Checking the time, it was four o’clock in the morning. *Who in the hell is this?* He put the phone to his ear.

“Hello, my friend!” was all he heard.

The unfamiliar voice confused him. Sitting up, it came to him with a snap of the finger. “Marco, this you?”

“Si, Jason.”

“What’s good, fam?”

“I’m good, my friend. Glad to be home. How about you?”

JP thought about all that had happened since he been home. “I’m making it. Been going through some shit but overall, I’m good.”

“How is the business side of things?” Marco wanted to know.

“MY business is slow business, fam. If you know what I mean.”

“I understand. I understand very well. That’s why I called. I want you to come visit me in Miami.”

JP perked up. “Just say when and I’m there!”

“I’ll set up a private jet for you Friday morning. Would that work for you?”

JP smiled. “You already know.”

“I’ll see you Friday then.” Marco abruptly ended the call.

JP clambered from the bed, and felt good about himself. *Things will be looking good from now on.* He really needed it too. His stash had taken a tremendous hit without any incoming revenue. The real estate money kept him hungry and craving more. With Marco out, it was time to live the life he wanted to live. He could see his financial independence around the bend. And it looked lovely.

He flexed his shoulders. *This go round, I have to tread lightly with who I personally deal with.* He’d learned a lot from breaking bread with loyal representatives who folded under the slightest pressure. When putting a team together, they would have to put some work in first before being labeled loyal comrades, and if they couldn’t, it would be off with their heads.

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Friday came and so did a Lincoln Continental promptly at nine o’clock in the morning. The driver pulled up to JP’s doorstep and blew the horn twice.

JP exited his townhouse while talking to Justine. Lately, they’d been talking more and more. While he didn’t like that she copped so soon, he would support her through it all, no matter what.

“How long you gonna be down there?” she asked, fully in tuned with what was going on.

“Probably the weekend. I’m trying to get in and out so I can come back and get to it.”

She hadn’t wanted him to jump back into the game but it was a choice he had already made. Nagging him about it would be like beating a dead horse. He would do what he wanted. He was used to the fast money, and the daily grind of being a landlord didn’t have the perks of being a drug dealer. She hoped he would have looked at her situation and want something different. Except, that didn’t happen. When he got the call from Marco, his excitement went through the roof.

She talked to him about not getting comfortable. 

“I got a goal, Justine, and I’ll be adhering to some of the plans we previously made. I’m getting in and getting what I need to I can get out. I got to get my safety net established first.”

She knew what that meant. He most likely wouldn’t get out of the game. The chasing of that safety net blinded most hustlers, and the number originally established may or may not find itself being reached.

The phone beeped. “Jason, you know the rules of this game. You taught them to me so don’t forget what you’re up against.”

“We gone be good, baby. I promise!”

The phone hung up before she could reply.

JP relaxed in the back of the new Continental and admired the scenery around him. “It may look like this now but it most definitely won’t when I return,” he muttered, knowing how elaborate his plans were.

Arriving at the airport, the driver entered a separate section.

JP spotted a gas truck driving away from a Challenger 600 private jet. “Fam wasn’t lying when he said he would charter a private jet, was he?”

The driver stopped a nice distance away from the jet, got out, and opened the door. The pilot of the Challenger descended the steps and trotted over to JP.

“Mr. Price, I’m the pilot and we’ll be ready for take-off in ten minutes. If you would please accompany me, we can get you squared away minutes prior to departure.” The pilot ascended the steps, and awaited JP’s arrival.

JP felt like he had arrived. He truly felt like a king as he approached the jet. Climbing the steps, he turned the corner and was in awe of the reclining chairs, long couches running along the outer walls, and the coffee tables filling the aisle. This was a living room stationed on an airplane. He’d never seen anything like it.

Two of the reclining chairs spun around, and occupying them were two attractive women smiling at him. The sight of them cut a smile across JP’s face from ear—to—ear.

“Welcome, papi!” the Colombian beauty chimed as she rose from her seat. “We will be your entertainment for the next couple of hours so please come with us so you can enjoy your ride.” She let her finger trail the seam of his collar as she strutted around him. “Let’s get you comfortable, Jason.” She massaged his shoulders.

The other princess wasn’t too far behind her friend. The darker complexed Colombian stood and sashayed over to JP, and guided him to her seat. Before he could sit, she grabbed at his shoes, and removed them. Slipping them off, she yanked off his socks and massaged his feet.

The touch of her hands was one of the best feelings in the world. He reclined the seat and fell into absolute relaxation.

A pair of lips kissed his neck. Those wet kisses heightened the sensational state into which he had fallen into. With each kiss, his nature rose to the tip of the mountain top. The sexy creature massaging his feet noticed the bulged and slithered up his leg to get to it.

She pulled out his erection, lathered it with her spit, and shoved all she could down her throat. He’d never received head like that. Within seconds, he erupted in her mouth. She didn’t seem to mind. She merely swallowed his dessert then invited her buddy over for her share.

That was only the beginning for him. The young ladies tagged team him and gave him the ride of his life for almost an hour and a half. Halfway through, JP tapped out but the ladies had no plans of stopping. They literally drained him of every ounce of energy God had given him. Unable to take anymore, he fell into a deep coma—like slumber, and the next thing he knew, they were landing in Miami, Florida.

Chapter SEVEN

JP stepped to the door of the jet and was met with the sunny skies of Miami, Florida. It was truly a sight to see. Taking it all in, he descended the steps, and admired the luxury car parked at the bottom of them.

The driver of a steel grey Mercedes-Maybach S600 clambered from the luxury car and opened the rear door. She let her hand linger on the door handle as she watched JP step off the last step.

JP homed in on the driver. The sight of her was mesmerizing. He had never been around so many beautiful women before in his life. Admiring her openly, he looked her up and down. She was holding onto something special under her chauffeur outfit but it done her little justice. Her curves were busting at the seams. Dipping his head, he was so enthralled with her beauty, he missed Marco climbing from the car. JP licked his lips and wondered what kind of things the driver was into.

“Jason, my friend!” Marco yelled, seeking to get JP’s attention. “Welcome to Miami!”

JP hadn’t heard a word. He was stuck and in awe of the driver. The attention he gave her made her blush.

Marco snapped his fingers and snapped JP out of his trance.

“My bad, fam. Shorty nice!” he said, giving Marco a manly embrace.

“There’s more to see, Jason. Don’t let the first thing you see drain you completely,” he said, laughing faintly.

“I’m excited about what else I’ll see.” He strutted by the driver, and climbed into the back seat of the Maybach.

With Marco joining him, they rode through the streets of Miami and talked a little bit about the past, the present, and the future.

Marco crossed his legs. “Tomorrow will always have the potential to be the best day of your life, Jason. That’s how I look at it.”

JP admired the city. “That’s a good way to look at it. That’s the only way I’m gonna look at it from now on,” he stated, catching the driver checking him out in the rearview mirror.

Marco poured himself a glass of wine. “Speaking of tomorrow, we will be traveling to Colombia to meet my father.”

JP’s neck snapped in Marco’s direction. “Colombia?”

“Yes, Jason! Colombia,” he said, fighting the smile stretching his face. He passed JP his glass and pulled out another. “Right now, let’s toast to a day of shopping.”

As they stopped by one store after another, JP was introduced to a new style of dress. Previously, he’d heard of Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Tom Ford in rap songs but now, it was on his back, and in the bags he carried. Never once had he expected to rock a suit for the sake of rocking one but he had been personally fitted for several that day. He seen he would have to step his game up. This new introduction got him to thinking. He hadn’t been flown to Miami to get sucked and fucked along with shopping. It was a good gesture but he would trade the material possessions in for the real reason for being there.

He leaned on Marco once back behind the drawn curtains. “Man, fam. I appreciate the gracious hospitality but what’s really good?”

Marco didn’t feel the need to indulge the conversation. “Be patient, my friend. You’ll get all your answers in due time. Everything you want is near.” He looked JP in the face.

“But right now, let’s have some fun.”

JP exhaled the blow-off, and bobbed his head. Looking off, he would let it come as it may. He had to. He hadn’t come to Florida for no reason.

Marco, on the other hand, understood JP’s anxiousness. Pouring himself another glass of wine, he understood the time would come for business, and as he saw it, JP would be more than happy with the outcome.

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The private jet landed safely in Colombia and a steel grey Mercedes-Maybach awaited Marco and JP.

JP looked at the car then Marco. “How many of these do you have?”

Marco smirked. “There’s one waiting on me at any airport in the world, Jason.”

JP took note as he climbed into the Mercedes.

As usual, Marco poured himself a glass of wine. Sipping as they navigated Colombia, the ride was peaceful. Marco was lost in his own translation, and JP kept a watchful eye on the scenery.

Once they pulled up to an opening gate, JP was at a loss of words. The Maybach sped around the circular driveway and cruised onto the grounds of a massive estate. JP thought this was something out of a gangster movie. The estates from Scarface and the Godfather came to mind. On the side of the driveway, armed guards patrolled the perimeter with a host of guards politely walking the grounds closer to the estate itself.

Marco drew back the curtains. This was his comfort zone. His entire body language spoke a different language as they pulled closer to the mansion. Easing the sunroof back, he allowed the sun to shine in and the breeze to flow through his hair. JP could see a different person. This wasn’t the person who walked into that state prison years ago. Today, he was a man playing in his own arena, calling his own shots, and abiding by his own rules. JP closed his eyes as he briefly thought of the day he would be in such position.

As the Maybach stopped, JP opened his eyes to see the most gorgeous woman he’d ever seen in the world approaching the car. He thought he’d seen some beautiful women already but this one took the cake.

Marco jumped out and wrapped his arms around the woman. She pecked his cheek with a kiss. He returned the gesture then turned to face JP. Waving JP over, “Come on, Jason. Come meet my sister,” he insisted.

His sister’s face lit up once making eye contact with JP. A fire blazed in her eyes, and the spark flickering had hazardous implications. It was something JP instantly picked up on.

Marco motioned for JP to hurry. “JP, this is my lovely sister, Stefany,” he said, pointing to the short, petite woman with toffee skin.

JP stepped up to her. “Lovely is an understatement. She’s more like heavenly,” he expressed, gazing into her eyes.

Stefany extended her hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Jason,” she said, giving him a wink and a bigger smile. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” She looked to her brother. “He didn’t tell me how handsome you were though,” she added with a giggle.

He directed his attention to Marco. “Oh really?” he asked. “So, you left out the best part, Marco?”

Marco smiled. “Come on, guys. Papa’s waiting!” he claimed, dismissing the conversation.

Turning towards the front door, they were met at the door by the man of the house. His short stature filled the doorway with a towering shadow. Looking younger than his age, his chest swelled with excitement upon seeing his only son. Stepping away from the door, the tight button-down shirt showed off his great physical physique.

“Marco, you made it!”

Marco broke away from JP and his sister. “Yes, papa. I’m here,” he pointed towards JP, “and here is the guy I told you about.” JP stepped up to Marco’s left. “Jason, this is my father, Saul.”

JP firmly shook Saul’s hand. “Thanks for inviting me to your home.”

Saul waved him off. “That’s no biggie, Jason. It’s my pleasure. He gave him a serious look. “For what you did, I would have come to you,” he stated, and placed his hand on JP’s shoulder. “Let’s go inside for some drinks. I’m sure you’re thirsty after the long ride.”

JP followed Saul to the back deck, and took in the surroundings. The back yard was grander than the front. Upon stepping out of the house, the architecture took his breath. The patio was set up like an intimate living space. Pass the elegant patio furniture was a private sitting area with a fireplace and a waterfall. But that’s not what caught JP’s attention. It was the openness of the grass and how it flowed into the rolling hills. His mouth watered as he thought about the day when he could live like this.

Saul offered JP a seat next to him at the patio table under the canopy. Before JP could sit, Saul called one of the housekeepers from the kitchen.

JP glanced up at her and found a resemblance to Justine. Shaking his head, he had to be tripping. He was in Colombia, and she was locked up. That couldn’t be her. He looked away, and chalked it up to missing her.

“What would you like, Jason?” Saul asked.

JP shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Saul chuckled. “Bring us a tray of fruit, some bottle waters, and I’ll personally have a shot of Patron.”

The housekeeper hurried off, and returned with several trays of fruit, cakes and crackers with square slices of cheese on them. Another housekeeper appeared with a tray of beverages ranging from bottle water to different kinds of Mr. Pure juices.

JP opted for some grapes and a water. Saul knocked back his shot of Patron, and his kids politely refused to have anything.

Stefany gripped the arms of the patio chair. “Please excuse me, papa. I have something I need to tend to.”

JP yearned to watch her walk away but didn’t want to appear disrespectful.

Saul watched him. He knew the young fellow would have loved to check out his daughter but appreciated the level of respect he held. That made him like JP even more.

With Stefany out of earshot, Saul jumped right into the swing of things. “Jason, how has life been treating you since your release?” He fired up a cigar. “Is business up to par for you?”

JP set his water down. “Not at this point in time. There were some things I had to take care of and- “

Saul held his hand up. “I don’t mean to interrupt you but what kind of things are you referring to?”

JP looked Saul squarely in the face. “There were some matters of disloyalty I had to deal with.” His skin tightened. “I am a man of honor. Everyone who deals with me understands that so when a few fell to the wayside, they had to be dealt with me. Feel me?”

Saul exhibited a face of stone. “I feel you, Jason. But is everything solid on your end now?”

“As solid as it’s gonna get,” he stated, comprehending the line of questioning. “I’m at the head of my table so nothing happens without me knowing.”

Saul threw back another shot. “What about your friend who’s locked up?”

JP looked at Marco. “Shorty 100! She’d holding it down and gets nothing but respect from me.”

Saul rested his elbows on the table. “I’m inquiring because of the path I would like to travel with you. It will put a lot of responsibility on you and the results you can produce,” he calmly stated. “I’m a business man, first and foremost. The things you’ve done for Marco is what got you in that seat.” He nodded towards the ground. “I have to admit, everything I’ve heard about you thus far is great but what happens pass this point is what makes all the difference.”

“I can understand your concern but I’m one—hundred with mine. I only let my actions speak for me. I’m beyond what is said but what is done,” JP explained, taking a sip from his water.

Saul smiled. “I knew I liked you from the moment I saw you. You have similar characteristics as myself and those traits will take you far, Jason.”

JP’s hand itched. “So, where we go from here?” he asked, worried about only the outcome.

Marco chimed in. “We’ll start you off small.” He waited until JP looked at him. “Our gratitude will place in your possession fifty keys as retribution for your trouble. On top of that fifty, you will get another fifty at 13.5 per key. First time shipping and handling is on us. After that, it will be included in the price.”

JP wondered about the increase. “What would be the price then?” he asked Marco. “And how much would a shipment consist of?”

Saul interjected. “For you, fifteen per because I like you. They usually go for a few thousand more but with your drive and determination, I know our profit margin will be tremendous.” He lowered his voice. “The size of the shipment depends on you.”

JP was curious about the ins and outs of the overall deal. “What do I need in preparation for the shipments and the exchange of money?”

“Shipments will arrive monthly.” He pointed to Marco. “You and him can figure out those details. The money will be picked up separately by a separate entity. You will be given a satellite phone. It will have two numbers programmed into it. One for the shipments and the other for the money. Once you receive a call, you will be informed of the pertinent info surrounding pick-ups and drop-offs.” He nodded to Marco. “I’m giving him the go-ahead to supply you with whatever he feels you can handle.” He leaned in so JP could hear him. “You only have one chance to fuck up. After that, you’re done. I don’t care how much I like you,” he explained with a faint smile.

JP knew he was dead serious so he responded in kind. “I don’t fuck up!” he spat, letting Saul know he wasn’t playing. “You can believe that.”

Saul rose and extended his hand. “Let’s do great business then.” After shaking JP’s hand, he excused himself from the table.

Marco tried to make small talk aside from business. Amid that, Stefany walked up. JP leaned back and gave her a once over. He was happy to see her, and the thumping in his chest seconded that. She had a twinkle in her eye that zeroed in on him. The way her body swayed permitted him to acknowledge that she wanted him too. She stopped a foot away from him, and struck a pose.

Marco sensed the tension. “I’ll leave you two get better acquainted.” He excused himself, and walked off.

Stefany removed her hand from her wide hip, and eased into the chair next to JP. Crossing her thick legs, she openly eyed him. “Now that we’re alone, I need to talk to you about something.”

“And what would that be, beautiful?” he asked, seeking to play it smooth.

“US!”

That caught him off-guard. “What about us?” he asked, thinking she was bullshitting.

She licked her lips. “Don’t tell me you don’t feel the energy, Jason.” Her accent was heavy. She uncrossed her legs and arched her back.

“What I feel is that I shouldn’t mix business with pleasure,” he asserted, trying not to give in too easily.

She slid to the edge of the chair. “This is not business, papi. This right here,” she pointed to the space between them, “is for pure pleasure.”

The look she possessed melted him instantly. He shook his head at her boldness. Her confidence was comparable to his, and that was unbelievable. But he had to think about getting involved with her and how that would look from Saul’s point of view.

She watched him deliberate her proposition. “Just keep thinking about it, Jason.” She rose to leave.

Stepping away from the table, she strolled away slowly. Gazing over her shoulder, she stared at him as she made her way into the house. She wasn’t willing to let him get off that easy. Still, she didn’t want to be overbearing. She knew he would come around. She merely hoped it would be soon.

Chapter EIGHT

JP ogled Stefany’s every move as she walked away. A part of him wanted to chase her down and make her his; but, he was too cool for that. He’d come to conduct business so he would keep it as professional as he could. As she disappeared, he knew it would be hard to resist her. She held an air of confidence that was unmatched. Her boldness revolved on the motion that she would get what she wanted, when she wanted it.

That excited him and made him want to see her action.

He found himself sniffing the air for her scent. He’d become a dog in heat that quick. He couldn’t ascertain where the sudden change came from. He had to shake off the feeling. If he didn’t, he would fall into a trap that he would be happy to fall into.

He pushed away from the picnic table, and walked into the house to find Marco. They had to get out of there as soon as possible. If they stuck around, he would ultimately fall into Stefany’s bottomless love abyss. He didn’t need that.

He entered the mansion, not knowing where to go so he wandered around. The estate was so big, he got lost and couldn’t find his way back to where he began. *Fuck it,* he thought as he continued to wander the halls. Turning a corner, he heard the faint sounds of what could have been moans. Coming upon a cracked door, the moans grew louder. Someone was getting their freak on.

A woman blurted out something in Spanish. Unable to comprehend the language, JP dismissed what the woman said and keyed in on the man’s reply. Slightly pushing the door open, he received a full dose of Saul stationed behind a woman clutching her large breasts.

Saul gripped the woman’s shoulder—length black hair, and smacked her behind. She rambled something in Spanish. His response was to dig deeper into her pudding pop. She loved the intrusion. Gripping the sheets and moaning his name, she threw it back at him, knowing he could handle it. Saul hunched over, and worked his magic. His pumping harder brought out another Spanish outcry.

JP had seen enough. To stay a second longer would invite him to join and it didn’t seem as if Saul was in the sharing mood. Stepping away from the door, he strolled down the hall until he stumbled upon someone talking.

Two maids were in the laundry room folding clothes and chatting. JP startled them upon entering. Hearing his voice, they damn near jumped out of their skin. They both held their hands over their hearts and said a prayer in Spanish. He laughed at the way they were acting.

“Does either one of you speak English?” he asked.

Both nodded.

JP recognized one of the maids from earlier. She appeared younger than before but she did resemble Justine a lot. “How may we help you, senor?” the older maid asked.

He peeled his eyes from the younger maid. “I’m looking for Marco. Do you know where I can find him?”

“Marco’s section is on the other side of the compound,” she stated, placing a stack of clothes in a basket. “This is Senor Saul’s section right here.”

JP was confused. “Sections?”

The maid tossed a clean t-shirt back in the basket. “Yes, let me show you which way to go,” she insisted.

After a few turns, they were in a totally different part of the house. That blew his mind. He checked out the decor from the last section to the current one. It was more feminine and had its own distinctive smell.

“Whose section is this?” he asked.

The maid peeked over her shoulder. “Senora Stefany’s. Senor Marco’s is next.”

JP wanted to linger around a bit in Stefany’s section. Hesitating, he realized it would be best to keep it moving. Inhaling her scent was bad enough. If he were to see her, that would place him in a precarious situation. He wouldn’t be able to shake her intensity.

The maid stopped in front of Marco’s door. “Here you go, Senor.” She walked off, leaving him to knock on his own.

JP barged in, and found Marco sleep. “Ain’t this about a bitch.” Not wanting to wake him, he closed the door and wondered where he should go. As he was about to walk off, Stefany rounded the corner. There was no getting away from her. She seemed to be everywhere.

She smiled upon seeing him. “You don’t look so happy to see me, papi. What’s up with that?” she asked, purposely invading his personal space.

He couldn’t play it off. “I’m more excited than you think. As a matter of fact, I was just looking for you.”

“Liar!” she replied playfully, placing her soft hand on his face.

He laid his hand over hers. “I’ll never lie to you, beautiful. I was looking for you but I was also looking for Marco.”

She let her hand fall. “He’s always asleep when he’s here.” She cupped his hand. “He’ll be up later but for now, go for a walk with me.”

That was the last thing he wanted to do. “I hope you’re not trying to take me somewhere and seduce me,” he commented with a slight grin.

She tugged on his arm. “That wouldn’t be a bad idea, now would it?” She let his hand go. “Follow me, papi!”

He watched the sway of her hips. “I have no problem with that.” It looked like she didn’t have any panties on. “None at all,” he mumbled when hoping she didn’t.

She strutted ahead of him while momentarily peeking over her shoulder at him. Behind her, he’d fallen into her spell. The way she rotated her hips would make any man follow her into the depths of hell. This was the spot he didn’t wish to be in. He’d told himself that this would not end well. He slowed, and tried to gather himself. *You moving too fast, Jason. You need to get a grip.* But he couldn’t. She’d enclosed him within her stronghold, dressed him with a dog collar and was whisking him away.

She slowed when noticing the large gap between them. “Come on, Jason. Hurry up!”

The demand opened a sore spot for him. He wasn’t used to taking orders. The alpha male within him would surface soon, and when it did, he would assume control of the situation. Not wanting to think of that, he allowed her to lead the way for now.

And that way lead to a secluded place on the outskirt of the estate that many never visited. It was a world unto itself, and it gave them exclusivity. When taking in his surroundings, he knew he was in trouble. He shouldn’t be alone with her. Whenever in her presence, he needed a chaperone, a guardian, or a third-party present for a witness. Unfortunately, that wasn’t so.

Stefany dipped under a tree. “We’re almost there, Jason.”

JP noticed a small brook up ahead. The fresh scent of the mist calmed him. The atmosphere of the secluded area had a relaxing connotation to it.

She stopped at a hammock tied to two trees, and fell into it.

He stopped in front of her. “This must be your place of retreat, huh? Or is this where you bring all the guys you seek to seduce?” he asked, giving her a wondering eye.

She slowed her swing, placed her feet on the ground, and grabbed his hand. She pulled him to her. “This is where I come to gather my thoughts. This is my place of solitude. This is my hideaway.” She massaged his fingers, one at a time. “I have never shown anyone this place. I don’t believe anyone knows about it but me. Their only concern is worldly possessions and money,” she explained, drifting off to a quiet thought.

He saw something was bothering her. “What’s wrong, Miss Stefany?”

She looked up at him. “There’s more to life than money and what it can buy, Jason.”

He wasn’t sure where she was going with that statement. “But money makes the world go round,” he said, truly believing that.

A flash of anger filled her eyes. “Who’s world, Jason?”

He raised his arms. “This world!” he spat, spinning around. The world we live in.”

She scooted back into the hammock. “Money is the root to all evil,” she expressed. She’d seen what the love of money done to those who acquired it.

“There’s a lot of good being done with money all over the world,” he added, hoping to strengthen his argument.

She sat Indian style. “So, Jason. What good are you planning to do with your money?”

The question caught him off-guard, and he didn’t know how to answer it.

She picked up on his hesitation and shook her head. She concluded his intentions were no different than the rest. The gathering of his wealth wouldn’t lead to any good for anyone but himself. That upset her. She hoped he could have been one of the different ones. To continue the pointless conversation would upset her even more. She wasn’t dumb. She understood his purpose for being there. Marco hadn’t brought him to their home for vacation. He was there on business.

JP looked at Stefany and was bothered by the question. He contemplated a sensible response, and had to admit she was right. “To be honest, I’ve never looked at the purpose of getting money beyond getting it,” he said, moving closer to her. “Moving forward, things can be different for me. I can have a good slate with the money I’ll make and can do some good with it.”

She reached out to him. “The question remains, Jason. What good are you planning to do with it?”

He grabbed her hand. “I can show you better than I can tell you.”

She displayed a soft grin. “Please sit with me, Jason.” Her voice barely above a whisper.

He held the hammock and spun around. She laughed at him. When he was settled, she inched closer to him. She sat so close, she was basically sitting on his lap. A ton of invigorating energy soared between them. It could be felt in real time, and it pulled them closer to one another.

She grabbed his chin and went in for a kiss. That shocked him at first but he quickly recovered when his tongue met hers. She moaned softly. He gripped the back of her neck. She eased up to catch her breath. Going in again, they embarked on a slow but passionate kiss that left them both longing for more. They remained stationary in that embrace for what felt like hours.

JP broke the lip lock and traveled down her neck and back up to her ear. She released deep growls of pleasure. She couldn’t hide her delight. His lips on her skin produced sounds of their own. Sounds that sent a whirl of tingles up and down her spine. The feeling was intoxicating. No one had ever touched her in that manner before. This was what she always hungered for. The four play. The romantic feel of a tender embrace. The physical caress of her body by that special someone. And she felt she’d found that in JP as she bit her bottom lip.

“Yes!” she hissed, wanting to give her all to him.

She ran her hand over his head, and enjoyed his tongue gliding over her skin. She didn’t it to stop there. She wanted to give him her mind, body and soul. The emotions circling her body twirled on an axis of completeness. She felt included into something for first time in her life.

“I think I’ve found what I’ve been looking for,” she whispered under her breath. *I have found my true love,* she told herself.

JP kissed her collarbone.

“Jason,” she moaned. “I want to feel you inside of me.”

She grabbed the side of his head, and looked him in the face. “I want you to be my first.”

That stopped him in his tracks. He straightened up to get a clear view of her face. The twinkle in her eyes gave him the confirmation he needed. No other words needed to be spoken.

They went at it like two hungry animals in the wild. He didn’t mishandle her though. He entered her slowly while allowing her to get a feel of what was ahead. In the end, they ended up making passionate love. It was a young, tender love but a love that they could only cherish. Their time together was magical and it connected the dots for all the pieces to align. Both separated from the altercation just as happy as ever.

Smiling from ear—to—ear, they walked hand—in—hand back towards the house. Upon approaching the backyard, JP spotted the young maid cleaning up. Stefany noticed her too and pulled him towards her.

“Ayisha! Ayisha! she screamed.

She had to get a little closer before she caught Ayisha’s attention. Meanwhile, her screams caught Saul’s attention as well. As he peered from his window, his eyes locked on Stefany’s hand interlocked with JP’s. That was a tell—tell sign that they were getting too close too fast. He couldn’t permit that.

Stefany approached Ayisha “Come here, Ayisha. I want you to meet someone,” she said, unable to hide her smile. “This is Jason, Marco’s friend from the states. Jason, this is Ayisha. She’s like my little sister. Her mom helped raised me when my mom passed. Shortly after that, Ayisha was born and we’ve been inseparable.”

JP thought back to watching Saul banging that woman. He was willing to bet that the woman was Ayisha’s mom.

He extended his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Ayisha.”

She let her fingertips linger in his palm. “How long will you be with us?” she asked, curious with the way he looked at her.

“I’m not sure,” he said, spotting Saul coming their way.

“It probably won’t be that long.” He let his hand slip away from Stefany’s. He casually glanced towards Saul.

A hawk—eye glare returned ten—fold. Saul stopped a good distance away. Glaring at JP, he gestured for JP to break away from the young ladies and come speak with him. Nodding in agreement, JP excused himself and strolled towards the back of the house. Saul, wandering ahead of him, entered the house, and hurried towards his office.

JP could see the distasteful expression written on Saul’s face as soon as he seen him. This summons had everything to do with Stefany. The protective father had surfaced, and JP knew the lecture wouldn’t be good. It wouldn’t go according to what JP hoped it would. Whereas, the seed had been planted so there wasn’t much Saul could do.

Saul waved JP up the steps. *This may not have been a good idea,* he reasoned. The things JP done for Marco could have been repaid from anywhere. It didn’t necessary call for him to personally travel to Colombia.

JP wasn’t midway up the steps when Saul smelled the effects of a sexual encounter. Saul angrily eye-balled JP, spun off, and headed to his study. At the door, he held it open for the young man. As JP entered, Saul followed behind him, and slammed the door. JP turned to look at Saul. His anger was evident.

“Is everything alright?” JP asked.

Saul shook his head. “Nope, and that’s why we need to talk.”

Chapter NINE

Saul rounded his large wooden desk, and took a seat. “Jason, I’ll get straight to the point. My daughter is off-limits.” He recalled the stench looming from JP’s body. “I would hate for you to think you can play for a position with me by trying to get close to my daughter.”

“Saul, I respect your position. If I put myself in your shoes, I would be protective of my child as well.”

“It’s more than that, Jason. When you’re a man of stature, certain sins of mine could affect my children. I’m trying to minimize that at all costs, if I can. Karma tends to wreak havoc on those around you if you’re not careful.”

JP nodded. “I’m not the one who would bring you that kind of pain.” He thought of the pain Saul may have brought to countless of women, and realized he didn’t want that for his own.

“For all its worth, my mother raised me to be very respectful of women. I wouldn’t disrespect those morals and values to gain an upper hand. I respect the law of karma to the fullest.”

Saul slouched his shoulders. “What are your intentions with my daughter?”

JP kept it real. “I’ll be lying if I said I didn’t like her. I believe anybody walking this earth would agree that you have a beautiful daughter and would want to have her on his arm. That doesn’t undermine the respect I have for you and your family. I would do nothing to jeopardize that respect. What you saw was innocent to say the least.” He wished that was true. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Saul, I’m here on an invitation from you. It was not my intention to come and meet your daughter. But I can’t control if certain feelings surfaced,” he explained.

Saul interlocked his fingers. “So, you have genuine feelings for my daughter?” he asked, desiring to reach the truth.

JP scratched his chin. “I just met her this morning but something is there.” He sought to downplay the truth.

Saul scoffed. “Something is there, huh?” he asked rhetorically. “I know about something being there, Jason. I’ve been your age and know the thoughts of a young man and what they’ll like to do to my daughter. Please miss me with the *there’s something there* crap,” he retorted.

JP wasn’t liking Saul’s tone. “With all due respect, I’m not you. I’m me and when I tell you I’m one-hundred about mines, I’m one-hundred about mines. It’s far from being watered down or sugar coated,” he reiterated with authority.

That brought a smile to Saul’s face. JP had the guts to tell him what was on his mind. He had to give him the upmost respect for that. Not many had the audacity to face him in that manner, and since JP did, he would tip his hat to him. Still, he would keep a close eye on him. He was so much like the younger Saul, and that wasn’t a good thing. If JP approached Stefany how he’d approached so many other women, he would play with her heart, capture it, then break it when he grew tired of handling it. As her father, he couldn’t permit any man to bring her that kind of harm. That wasn’t something he would JP know.

He sat upright. “Jason, I like you! I like your style. I like your upfront personality. Your strength. Your poise. But let’s not forget your main concern will be our business.” He eyed J P. “You will become a man with plenty of money and with money comes plenty of women. Play with the hearts of those and leave my daughter’s alone,” he paused, “at least, until you’re truly ready.”

“I can honor that as long as you can honor that I’m ready now,” he quickly replied.

Saul threw his hands up. “I give up! You’re one determined young man and let that bring you great success in life and in love.”

The word love caused JP’s mind to go black. He couldn’t recall any memories of experiencing real love beyond the motherly love he received as a child. He thought of Justine. That love stemmed from what he’d done for her back in the day. That wasn’t the kind of emotional attachment he felt with Stefany. Justine’s love was a depiction of repayment, not something that came from the heart. When he compared what he had with Justine, and what he felt with Stefany, the two didn’t compare. He didn’t possess the kind of love for Justine that left him only wanting her.

That left him understanding the real idea of love. However, the feeling clutching his heart kept him clueless to how to explain or express those feelings. His young mind was unaware of what to do with the feelings. It was confusing. Not to the point that he didn’t want to embrace it but to the point where he had to get a grip on them before they got out of hand. This was a feeling he’d never felt before. He reflected upon the animated look in Stefany’s eyes. It resembled the only option he could identify with. He wanted to assume it was something else, but whatever it was, it was clearly written across the both of their hearts.

Saul watched JP drift into a deep mental state following his last comment. The mention of love sent JP spiraling into an unknown and uncharted emotional state. But it was clear that what JP felt for his daughter was pure and absolute. Knowing his daughter, he could see her pursuing JP. The showing of affection was in her nature.

He drifted off to thoughts of his deceased wife and the memories they once shared. Bowing his head, he truly missed his first love. Except, it wasn’t in God’s plan for them to live a complete life as one. In his eyes, she was taken from him too soon and he felt cheated by her early departure.

He’d fallen head-over-heels in-love with her upon first glance. He had just returned from the states, and within the few months of meeting, they had married and was expecting their first child. Immediately following Marco’s birth, Stefany was conceived. Everything was good until she became pregnant a third time and there were complications with the pregnancy. Early on, the doctors advised them to terminate the pregnancy but she was too strong-willed to kill their child. That decision would cost her, not only the life of the child, but her own.

Saul was devastated by that lost. He pinched his nose to fight back the tears. His sniffling caused both him and JP to snap back to reality.

Without a moment’s notice, Marco barged into the study. Considering his father’s eyes, he saw something had touched his heart but finding out what that was would have to wait. They had more pressing matters at hand.

“Papa, we have visitors!” he shouted, letting the concern in his tone highlight his anxiety.

JP looked back at Marco. “Visitors?” he asked under his breath. He didn’t understand the implication. 

Saul did. Gathering his footing, he stood, placed his hands on the desk, and inhaled his anger. Standing upright, he puffed his chest outward, and swung his arm upward. Pointing at Marco, he fumbled his words as he jabbed the air.

A split second later, a sniper round pierced the window behind him, and penetrated the back of his head. The round released a slew of brain matter through a gaping hole in Saul’s forehead.

JP rolled from the chair, and realized what kind of visitors Marco had been referring to. These were the unwanted kind.

Marco reached out for his father but it was useless. There wasn’t anything he could do. His attempts to go to his father almost caused him to take a bullet himself.

JP pulled Marco to the ground. “Who are these people?” he asked, blocking out the heavy gun fight taking place outside.

Marco stared off into space. He was lost in translation. His mind might as well had been blown off itself. He had momentarily checked out of the game when the team needed him the most.

JP shook Marco as his mind kicked in gear. He hadn’t come to South America to die. He came to meet the plug and set up a pipeline. Watching Saul’s brains spit across the study was unfortunate. Being a witness to that hadn’t been in the plans either. But getting out of there alive would be.

“Marco!” he screamed. “Where are the weapons?”

Marco gave him a glassy look.

JP shook him again. “If you trying to get out of here alive, you need to tell me where some guns are.”

Marco rotated his neck, and stared at the wall.

JP crawled over to the wall, and could feel the vibrations of the guns erupting downstairs.

Marco laid against his father’s desk without a word to say. He sat and stared at the brain matter decorating the floor. Lowering his head, he prayed for his father, his enemies, and even had a thought of his mother. He should have seen this day coming. Seeming unprepared for it, now was the time to restore order. Placing his hands on the floor, he willed enough inner strength to get up and avenge his father’s murder.

“Please step aside, Jason!” he ordered, assisting JP with opening the hidden door.

The wall slid open, and revealed an arsenal of weapons. Without hesitation, JP brushed by Marco to snatch two hunting knives, a Draco AK47, two seventy-five round drums, and a Sig Sauer P226 40-caliber handgun. Marco’s weapon of choice settled on a few grenades, two smoke grenades, and a HK 416 Special Ops assault rifle.

JP studied Marco. “Are you ready for this?” he asked, slapping a drum into the AK.

“As ready as I’m gonna ever be, Jason.” He wanted to take one last look at his father but that would derail him. Instead, he rushed by JP.

“Hold up!” JP reasoned, not wanting to get lost in the house.

As they made their way out of the study, they were unaware of who was winning the gun fight inside the house, nor did they know how big the invasion was.

Hearing footsteps, they prepared themselves for action.

The footsteps were moving quickly so they held their position. JP could hear the group communicating with one another but couldn’t understand a word they spoke. Marco had moved out of hearing range so he only heard faint sounds of the voices. JP waved him closer. Marco instantly recognized one of the voices. JP still placed his finger on the trigger. The voice could turn out to be someone other than the person he believed it to be.

As the footsteps neared, the talking stopped.

JP eased into a position to spot the first person rounding the corner, and if he believed it to be a threat, he would eliminate it.

The head of Saul’s security team rounded the corner, looking over JP. “Marco, you alright?”

JP kept his eye on the head of security. He’d remembered seeing him briefly when he first arrived so he eased up slightly.

Slipping his finger from the trigger housing, he slipped it back once spotting the rest of the security team ambling down the hall. There was something different about them. Their demeanor wasn’t the same as the rest. He applied some pressure to the trigger, and he was ready to cut them down until Marco responded to the head security.

 “I’m good but papa didn’t make it.”

JP turned to gauge Marco’s location. When doing so, he noticed the head of security’s gun in an upswing. JP had to react swiftly. He was in between the approaching team and the head of security. If he miscalculated, this could end very badly for him and Marco but he didn’t have another second to waste. He let the chopper rounds cut down the head of security. Before he could hit the ground, JP swung the Draco to his left, and let those approaching get it too. He spared no one.

Marco looked on in disbelief. He didn’t know what to do. JP had saved his life again. For that, he would be forever grateful. He slumped his head to silently thank him.

JP waved him off. He didn’t do it because he wanted to. He done it because he had to. He sensed something wasn’t right when the head of security rounded the corner. His intuition had been right once again. He checked those who had approached.

All of them were dead.

“Come on, Marco. We should go. We don’t know how many more there are.” He stopped when faced with the realization of what this was. He looked at Marco. “You do know what this was, right?”

“Si, senor!”

“They were coming to knock you off. They came with the intent of finishing the job.”

Marco dropped his head.

JP snapped his fingers. “We don’t have time for that. We have to find Stefany to make sure she’s alright.” He peeked around the corner, and found the hallway clear. He signaled for Marco to follow him. As Marco was in route, JP heard more footsteps. He halted Marco with his hand, and readied his weapon.

The footsteps turned into an all-out run.

JP listened intently. Closing his eyes, he concluded it was one set of feet pounding the floor. But he couldn’t take any chances. He inched backwards and steadied the Draco.

A darting figure bent the corner, and slid into the barrel of the assault rifle. JP rammed the Draco into Stefany’s face.

She slapped at the stock. JP stepped back.

“Get that fucking gun out of my face, Jason!” she spat.

She was out of breath, angry, and worried about her father.

She looked to Marco. “Where’s papa?” she asked in Spanish. 

“He’s dead!” he replied in Spanish. “He was shot by a sniper round to the back of the head.”

Her knees buckled. Reaching for JP, she looked around at the men on the floor. “Is this our security team?”

Marco nodded.

She fell into JP’s chest, and sobbed.

JP rubbed her back while turning towards Marco. “Who could have done this?”

“No one is powerful enough to even consider such action but—” He stopped mid—sentence. He’d warned his father about their life-long adversary the moment he arrived home. He’d taken everything he learned from JP to heart. It was what he learned that gave him the inclination to put into motion the mindset to look at things differently.

The most important plan had been to eliminate all potential threats. Upon arriving home, Marco could sense his father’s stronghold diminishing. He had become too relaxed. No man in his position could afford to let that happen. Marco seen his father’s lack of concern for the business falter. That was unusual. He normally saw a flame blazing in his father’s eyes. He guessed the fire that once dwelled there had died during his absence. And that’s what costed Saul his life.

“Jason, my father would still be alive if he would have crushed our enemies totally. But he allowed them to lay in wait and strike when the opportunity presented itself. We were infiltrated from within, and that is a painful pill to swallow.” He fell silent, and placed his hand over his heart, “But it won’t stop me from doing what my father should have done. “

Chapter TEN

The private memorial service for Saul concluded with Stefany clutching Ayisha as if her life depended on it. She was torn to bits over the loss of her father. He had been her knight in shining armor; her protector; and the man whose unconditional love warmed her heart. His absence would leave an unfillable void within her.

JP lingered around the first row of chairs, and watched her from a distance. His attempts at being there for her had been dismissed. She had no desire to deal with her lost with him. He reminded her so much of her father that the simplest glance at him brought back her childhood memories of her father. She couldn’t prematurely relive those memories and attempt to grieve her father at the same time. She needed some space, and some time to be alone.

Respecting that, he gave her all the time she needed. Dealing with a lost wasn’t new to him. He knew what it was like to lose a parent. He’d lost the both of his on the same day. He still found it hard to get over not having either one in his life. That absence was overwhelming.

Finding a place to sit, he rubbed the back of his neck. Flashes of the deep wounds the foster care system inflicted upon him revealed themselves. He clutched his hands. These weren’t the demons he yearned to deal with right now. He’d dealt with too many deaths at a young age that the average-minded person wouldn’t mind dealing with another. Not JP. He refused to focus on the past inflictions when there was so much he could accomplish by moving forward. 

Marco stopped near the end of the hall. JP inspected his gait as he approached. The way Marco strutted down the short hall showed how focused he was. Based on his stride, he wasn’t in the mood to mourn his father’s death. He was angry with him. He believed had his father listened, he would still be alive. That’s all he could think about.

He stopped a few feet away from JP. “I’m a need to make those responsible pay for their involvement in my father’s death.” He maneuvered around JP. “His security team had been compromised. Who knows how long that seed had been planted.” He glanced down the hall. “It could have been years that the plot has been brewing. I’m just wondering how my father didn’t see it.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to see what’s right in front of you,” JP stated.

“But I felt it,” Marco expressed, looking at JP. “Upon my return, I felt it. The feeling was right there on the surface to be felt.”

“Did you tell him about your feelings?” JP asked.

Marco nodded. “He dismissed the notion, and look what happened.” He leaped to his feet.

“This isn’t your fault, fam. This could have happened before your return.”

“But it didn’t.” He ventured down the hall towards the chapel. “They wanted to take me out as well so there wouldn’t be a male in their way.”

JP caught up with Marco. He noticed the change in him. Not only had his gait changed, his mentality too. He was coming into his own. JP understood what that meant. He’d done a similar transformation when he’d been left to fend for himself. It was the transformation of a boy turning into a man.

Marco watched Ayisha rub Stefany’s back, and the sight angered him. Turning away, he stormed off and headed to his father’s study. As he entered, the muffled sound of a ringing phone led him to his father’s desk. He yanked open the bottom draw, and snatched the phone out. Picking it up, he said nothing.

He merely listened.

The voice in which came through the line was one he’d heard many times before. It was a well—known voice to all. It was the President of Colombia offering his condolences and his services. It wasn’t a shocker to find out the type of friend and associates his father had. Still, Marco didn’t know who he could trust.

“Marco, I promise you that those involved will be brought to justice. Your father was a good man. He didn’t deserve that kind of injustice.”

“I really appreciate your calling.”

“This is the beginning, Marco. I will be sending one of my top generals to speak with you about the handling of this injustice.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say, Marco. I owed your father a debt, and I’m here to make good on that debt. The general will stop by some time tomorrow. Please be prepared to give him access to anything he needs.”

The President ended the call before Marco could fathom a reasonable response.

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The meeting with the General went well. A plan had been set in motion for Marco to single-handedly seize control of all the cocaine distribution out of Colombia. For decades, Saul had been the biggest distributor; but moving forward, Marco wanted to be the only one. With his plan laid out, it promised everyone backing him a handsome profit and luxurious benefits that no one else could give. His presentation had the aura of a chief executive officer.

The PowerPoint presentation elaborated on details that no one in the room had ever thought of. They merely seen the product going out, and the money coming in. Not once had any of them calculate utilizing their resources to the max as Marco explained.

Marco left the meeting with a green light for his plans, and the military at his disposal. With that strength behind him, he could easily enact guerilla warfare against his adversaries. At the end of the day, he didn’t need or want to be in competition with anyone. Those opposing his plan had one of two options: They could bow down and become aligned with a new world order or be completely crushed. Those who chose to ride with the cause would relinquish their product to him for worldwide distribution. For that cooperation, they would be paid a handsome fee that could potentially increase over time.

His primary goal was to have full control over every cultivating land manufacturing product. And to show he meant business, he instructed the general to assassinate the heads of every organization conquered. He wanted to place the fear of God into anyone with an inkling of an uprising.

Overall, the takeover went according to plan. One plantation after another came under Marco’s fold understanding that it would be better to make money over making a bed they would rather not lie in.

Sitting on the sideline, JP recognized that Marco was a factor to be reckoned with. He’d taken everything bestowed upon him, and put it to good use. The time they’d spent studying *The 33 Strategies of War* and *The 48 Laws of Power* had done them some good. But now it was time for the tables to turn.

JP wanted what was due to him. He’d sat back and let Marco execute his plan to perfection. Whereas, his prosperity wouldn’t come from living in that shadow. He had plans for his own future, and that didn’t entail staying in Colombia. It was time for him to return to the states.

He pulled up on Marco. “Now that you’ve cornered the market on your end, it’s my turn to spread my wings back home.”

Marco nodded. “I understand. And you will be rewarded accordingly for your contribution,” he replied. “Do you know where you’ll set up shop?”

JP had thought a lot about that. “I’m thinking about my old man’s stomping grounds. It could use some life right now.”

“That’ll be great for you.” He placed his hand on JP’s arm. “That’ll be great for us. That location is exactly what I need. What do you think of being my central hub in the states?”

“I’m down!” JP retorted. “You already know.”

“Good!” Marco exclaimed. “But let’s get ready. We’re out of here tomorrow.”

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It had been a long time coming for JP. As a youngster, he’d briefly gotten his feet wet when trying to introduce himself in the game. That had been then. This was now. He was returning from Colombia with a brand-new game plan and mindset. This time around he would be playing at a totally different level. He had finally made it to the big leagues.

Like Marco, JP’s plans surrounded taking the game by storm and doing things no one else had ever seen. With a direct connect and his contacts, the measure of power and respect obtained was unsurmountable. Taking that, and applying his status, his rise to the top should be swift and direct.

He thought of the uncharted territories he would venture into, and how overtaking them would solidify his destiny. He also thought of the resistance that may come with it. He shrugged off that notion. A little resistance would be good. It would give him the chance to flex his muscles a little.

As he finished packing, he came across a picture of Justine. Looking at it, he shook his head at her misfortune and her inability to be there with him. She would fit right into his plans and make her presence known effortlessly. He hated how things were; but, with the amount of time she faced, there wasn’t much he could do for her or she could do for him.

Then it dawned on him that he hadn’t talked to her since being in Colombia. Not once had he dwelled on her or spoken her name. That was odd. It was as if he subconsciously moved on without him knowing it.

An image of Stefany came to him and he instantly felt at ease. The transition was a smooth one. The shift allowed him to realize the truth. He was truly in-love with her.

As if on cue, Stefany strolled into the room as he stared at the picture. She playfully snatched it away from him, and threw her arms around his neck. She was feeling better, and she needed him to know that she was ready to move forward.

With her chin on his shoulder, she looked at the picture, and her chin almost hit the floor. “Who is this woman, Jason?” she questioned, unwrapping her arms from around him. She had a serious look in her eye and a hint of jealousy filtered through her body. She careened her neck back. It was taking him too long to answer. She held the picture up so he could see it.

“Who is this, Jason?” She demanded an answer.

He didn’t like her tone. “She … she’s … she’s a friend from back home,” he replied, hating being questioned.

She frowned and squinted. “Why are you lying to me?”

He bared his teeth. “I’m not lying to you. She’s a friend from back home,” he stated, hating to repeat himself.

She shoved the picture into his chest. “Do you love her?” she asked, looking him in the eye. “And don’t lie!”

“I have a lot of love for her. Am I in-love with her? NO! But based on what we’ve been through, I have nothing but love and respect for her.”

“Is she your girl?” she asked, wanting to know everything.

He shook his head. “I told you she’s my friend.”

She inched closer to him. “When you leave, I’m leaving with you. I can’t stay here.” She lowered her voice. “Something doesn’t feel right around here,” she confessed, and placed a kiss on his lips. But there was more to it than that. She wanted to keep tabs on him more than anything.

She tossed the picture to the side, and pushed him on the bed. Hopping on top of him, she went in for a kiss. The moment their lips locked, their kisses became intense and the temperature between them soared through the roof. There was denying the sparks flowing between them.

JP removed Stefany’s clothes, and inserted himself inside of her.

“Jason, I love you so much,” she purred.

Without hesitation, he seconded that love. His confession wasn’t based on the passion flowing between them, and neither was hers. What prompted the verbalization of their love stemmed from the blood which filled their hearts. Each word uttered was articulated with sincerity. That candor revealed the path of understanding that what they had was real.

And that truth carried them to the mountaintop of climax, and back into each other’s arms for a peaceful slumped next to one another.

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Justine had been trying to reach JP for weeks. No one had seen or heard from him. The last time she’d spoken to him, he was headed to the airport for his trip to Miami. But that didn’t mean he shouldn’t have kept her in the loop of what was going on.

Her mother’s comments plagued her. She hated to let her mother’s words get to her but with them scratching the surface, it was hard not to think about them. She could care less about him fucking other chicks. She would be naive to think he could go without sex. What she focused on was the pact they made. He was supposed to hold her down no matter what. That’s what the agreement was.

She hoped he was truly a man of his word. She hadn’t held him down all those years for him to get out and shit on her. She wouldn’t know how to deal with that. As a woman of honor, she held up her end, and she expected him to do the same. Just like he couldn’t trip off what she done while he was away, she wouldn’t trip off him but damn. She felt as if she had been cut off. They’d never gone weeks without speaking. Weeks was a long time to go without talking to somebody she was used to talking to him every day.

Scratching her head, she seen she had some crucial decisions to make. She waited in line for a phone so she could call her lawyer. She yearned for some clarification of some things.

Hanging up the phone, her lawyer wasn’t available to speak at the moment. Lost on what to do next, she observed a new chick enter the block. The newcomer headed straight for her cell. This was the last thing she needed. She’d come to like her solitude. To get a cellmate at this stage would potentially drive her crazy.

She gave her new cellmate time to get herself situated before she stepped to her. When ten minutes elapsed, she walked to the cell to formally introduce herself. Standing at the gate, she came face—to—face with a fine ass chick pretty enough to moisten her wet box. This was the second time she’d experienced that feeling for a female. She wondered if it was a sign.

Justine gawked at the chick’s long black hair, slanted eyes and caramel skin. She damn near wanted to touch herself, or allow the chick to. The energy brewing between them was that electrifying. *I’m gonna have to get a taste of this chick before it’s all said and done.*

The newcomer began to feel uncomfortable. Clearing her throat, she snapped Justine out of her trance. “Are you alright, ma?”

Justine nodded.

The newcomer held out a fist. “Well, I’m Natasha. And you are?”

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Richard cut into his medium well T-bone steak, and shoved a chunk of it into his mouth. Jack, sitting across from him, drenched his porterhouse steak with A1 steak sauce then sprinkled his loaded baked potato with pepper. Next to him, Lizzie dipped her butterfly shrimp into the cocktail sauce and nibbled on it to the shell.

A text message alert subsequently interrupted their silence. A boss in their own right, all of them wondered whose phone caused the interruption. As they checked their phones, Richard read the message on his screen and smiled.

Setting it down, he returned to his food.

Jack anticipated a different response. He looked to Lizzie. She simply shrugged. They wanted to know what the smile was about.

Richard washed down a half-eaten piece of steak with some red dinner wine.

Jack set his knife and fork down. “So, we’re keeping secrets now, Richard?” he asked, knowing they’ve been waiting on confirmation on some intel.

Richard shoved another piece of meat into his mouth. “Why would you say that, Jack?” He dug his knife into an uncut piece of his steak.

Jack had lost his appetite. “I see you’re all smiles but not freely coming forth with the good news”

Richard stopped cutting, and held the knife and fork up. “Who said it was good news, Jack?” he asked, looking between his little brother and his niece.

Jack didn’t have time to play these mind games. He wanted to know if the next part of their operation was a go. Richard could miss him with the stalling.

“Can you spit it out, Richard!” His irritation was getting the best of him. “Are we a go or not?”

“I don’t care where you go, Jack,” he replied, returning to his food. Chomping on a large piece of meat, he let out a laugh.

Jack threw his napkin on top of his food. “I don’t have time for this shit.” He hurried away from the table.

Lizzie studied Richard. “Was that necessary?” she wondered, seeking clarification herself.

Without looking up, he gave her the thumbs up. “Now go tell him that before he pitches another bitch.”