

EASING THE PAIN

Nikki was released the next day, just before noon. Wesley had remained at the hospital by her side.

“Where are we headed?” she asked as she continued to stare out the passenger side window of his sleek, black 2011 Camaro.

“To my place.”

“For what?” Nikki suddenly whipped her head around to stare at his profile. She wondered what he was up to.

“I’m not going to infringe on Mrs. O’s hospitality when I have a place of my own. And you need to be constantly watched over. So consider me your bodyguard as of this moment.”

“You, sir, are out of line,” Nikki said, pointing her finger in his face.

“Whateva. I’m not taking you back home so you can end up dead, next. And that’s exactly what will happen if I take you back to Mrs. O’s. You’re gonna leave like you did before. I’m not stupid, Nikki. And I don’t want to play your games.”

They rode the rest of the way to his apartment in silence as she sulked in her pain, and he in his confusion.

The pain was easing up somewhat as Nikki and Wesley entered the breezeway at his apartments. Unlocking the door, his eyes softened when he looked at her face once again.

She saw a mixture of anger and compassion nestled there.

“What?” she asked when he continued to stare at her longer than what she deemed comfortable.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head. Wesley led her into a galley kitchen and pulled a sandwich bag from one of the cabinets, filled it with ice, and then wrapped it in a paper towel before applying it to her face.

She was in awe at the tenderness with which this man handled her. Every time he touched or said a word to her, it was with such protection, like she had never known. This was a side of Wesley that she had not seen in the five years of knowing him.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing her by her free hand and leading her to the back of the apartment. She looked around at his bedroom; not at all what she would have expected for a single man. Decorated in oranges, greens, browns, and yellows, it had a Caribbean look and feel to it. The room was small, but neat and exhibited a nice décor. The full-sized bed sat directly opposite the black-framed, chestnut-colored dresser. To the right of his bed was a small nightstand in the same black framing and chestnut top as the bed and the dresser. To the left of his bed was a double-paned window, with orange, brown, and green curtains blocking out the midday sun. He walked over to the window and opened the curtains halfway and then opened the blinds to allow the sun to stream through.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” she asked with a look of apprehension in her eyes.

His eyebrows lifted slightly. “Just to the bathroom, Nikki. I’ll be back.”

Exhaling a deep breath, she realized that a new fear had come over her. In all the altercations she had endured with Carlos, he had never left her for dead. Why did he leave like that? What if the neighbors didn't come? I could've died in that bathroom, she thought.

She tried to fight back the tears, but they betrayed her. Sucking in her sobs, she stood and walked to his dresser and began looking at his pictures, anything that would take her mind off her problems. There were a couple of him and his father at various stages of his life, a few of some children, and one of a lady she assumed to be his mother. She stood up and walked to the bed, staring at the amazing likeness he had to this woman.

"That's my mom."

She jumped at the sound of his voice; she hadn't heard him return to the bedroom.

"Oh, I didn't hear you come up. Are you always so quiet?" she asked as he came and stood beside her. She still had not looked at him, wishing she could make the tears disappear from her eyes and face.

"No. Are you always so scary?" he teased. He regretted the words almost the moment he said them. Her body tensed up, and she looked down. Her fear had come as a result of the relationship she was in. She was always tense and on edge, because she never knew what fuse Carlos was about to blow.

"Hey, it's okay. I'm sorry. Here, look at me," he said, turning her face up towards him. "Why are you crying?" he asked as he wiped her tears away with his fingers.

"I'm sorry. I just...I don't know." She couldn't explain if she wanted to. No one would understand her confusion or pain. She could forgive Carlos if he just had not left her. Didn't he love her? Didn't he want to work things out? Maybe he didn't love her, after all. If he did, he would not have left her there like that.

"Don't be sorry. You haven't done anything wrong. I have the feeling you have spent many years apologizing," Wesley stated.

He lovingly caressed the bruise that had formed on the right side of her face.

"Too beautiful," Wesley said, being drawn into the power of her presence in his bedroom.

"Huh?"

"You. You're too beautiful for this. I don't want you to be scared every time people come near you. Relax, okay? Just be...I promise I won't ever do nothing to hurt you," he said as he drew her nearer to him. Looking down into her big, dark brown eyes, he felt himself getting lost.

Nikki didn't know what she was feeling or what was happening between the two of them. And she couldn't contain herself as he pressed his full firm lips against her soft, lush ones. As their foreheads touched, he continued to gently apply pressure to her lips, asking for permission to enter in.

She slightly parted her lips allowing him to tug her bottom one between his teeth. He wrapped big hands lovingly around her small waist, rubbing his thumbs in little circles on her sides. She grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him closer. Her slight moans of encouragement had him pressing her back against the bedroom door. She could feel the rising pressure of his penis pushing against her crotch.

The heat rising in her body and the firmness of his hands encircling her was enough to drive her over the edge. Yet, it wasn't her who pulled back first, it was him.

"Damn!" he said, slapping his palm against the doorframe.

“What, Wes?” she asked, in a tone riddled with desire. She was shocked to realize she hadn’t wanted him to stop. Just being here with him in this moment was more than she had ever dared to think about in her wildest dreams.

“I can’t do this, girl. You got my head all screwed up. All I wanna do is take you in that bed right there,” he said, turning sideways to point at his bed. “I want to love away the hurt and the pain.” He still had not released her and had his right arm circled around her.

“Whaa…” she couldn’t find the words to speak. How could she tell him she wanted that, too, when she knew it was so wrong? She knew, as a married woman, she shouldn’t be in this situation. She had no reason to be yearning for any man other than her husband…even if he did beat the crap out of her.

“Look, it’s unfair for me to do this to you right now. Some would say I’m taking advantage of you, and I promised you I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you. Right now, you just went through some stuff with your husband, and your emotions are fragile. I gotta step back. You gotta get your situation cleared up. I’m sorry, I’m supposed to be one of your closest friends.” He searched her eyes, imploring her to stand strong with him.

They both were aware that the first sign of weakness she showed, would cause him to lose control. That’s precisely why she grabbed the back of his head and pulled him down towards her. This time, it was her turn to press her soft, pliable lips against his full ones.

“Mmm, Wes, I need you,” she murmured between kisses. Nikki needed to feel beautiful, loved, and desired. She had not felt this way in such a long time. And standing here at this moment in her friend’s arms, she found everything she craved from her husband.

He held her face between his hands as he trailed his chocolate kisses down her caramel-colored face to her neck. She squirmed against him as she wanted to feel his desire for her pressing against her once more. When his hands pulled her tight black fitted t-shirt free from her Khaki pants, he eased his hands up her back and around to her breasts.

“Oh, God, I can’t do this,” he said, pulling away from her once more, as if he had just been seared by a branding iron.

“Why not?” she begged to know. She wanted him right now more than she had wanted anything else, of that much she was sure. It was a struggle she knew she needed to fight off, because she knew it was wrong. She never expected to find herself in this situation. Now that she was, it was too difficult to turn back. She wanted and needed love and protection.

“Damn, girl, you’re married. I can’t do this. I’m not the type of man that can go creeping around with another man’s woman.”

“Wesley, you’ve been a good friend to me. And I thank you for that, but tonight…tonight I just need to feel desired and wanted. I need you to want me; don’t you want me?” she asked. Nikki didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as the words fell from her lips; it was so unbelievable.

“No! I mean, yes. Damn! That’s not what I’m telling you. I do want you, girl, more than you can even imagine. We both been flirting with each other a long time, but we were just playing. If I take you tonight, I’m gonna want all of you, Nikki. I can get any woman I want to in my bed. That’s not what I want. I’m not that man. If I take you now, I want all of you. I’m going to want you to be mine. If we take this step, ain’t no going back. You understand?”

She blinked back the tears that were suddenly stinging and demanding to be released.

“Aww, please don’t cry on me,” he growled. Using the pads of his thumbs, he rubbed away her tears and then pressed soft kisses against her eyelids.

She grabbed his face between her hands and began kissing his lips softly, at first, and then with more fervor, trying to communicate her desire for him.

Nikki could feel the rapid and loud thumping of his heart in his chest as the heat of longing for each other threatened to burn them up. “Nikki, girl, I want you so damn bad...you hear me? Just one more word, and it’s over baby.”

She didn’t need words. Nikki unclasped her bra and threw it to the floor, allowing her breasts to pop loose, teasing and taunting him.

“Nikki!” he exclaimed as his hands fumbled with his belt buckle. Coming out of his shoes and then his jeans he didn’t tear his eyes away from her as she undressed herself and stood before him in all of her caramel glory.

Shapely, childbearing hips mocked him as his eyes roved over her body. Thick luscious thighs begged to wrap themselves around his strong, muscular, chocolate back. Nikki walked to him, full 36 double D breasts swayed with each step she took that brought her closer to him. When she finally reached where he sat on his bed, he allowed his big, thick hands to grip her small firm waist as he drew her nearer to him. He squeezed her high round behind in his hands and let out a soft groan of desire.

“Turn around; let me look at you,” he commanded as he eyed her up and down after pressing a kiss to her belly. She turned around so that he could admire her body from the rear. He silently traced the eagle’s wings tattooed across the lower portion of her back. Wesley wanted to spread her from behind and watch the wings take flight.

Nikki bent down to touch her toes, teasing him as he lovingly stroked her behind. Softly, with hardly a noise, Wesley stood and entered her wet and warm cavity. Rubbing his left hand up and down her back, he used his right hand to squeeze her butt cheeks.

“Mmmm...girl, you feel so damn good,” he groaned as he continued to sink his length in and out of her. He pumped her with a few, steady strokes, pushing all other thoughts out of his head for the moment.

“Ohh, papi...you laying it down,” she moaned as she scooted back closer against him, encouraging him to speed up the pace.

Wesley’s head was lost as he enjoyed the warm feel of the inside of Nikki. Just feeling himself inside of her was everything he dreamt about and so much more.

Wanting more of her, Wesley pulled out, stood Nikki into an upright position and took her to his bed. Shyly, she lay on his bed as she reached out her arms to pull him down to her. His eyes met hers, and she could see the sincerity in them as he uttered the words that scared her, “Nikki, I need you, girl.”

She couldn’t afford to repeat those words back. Instead, she covered his mouth with her own. Letting out a deep moan, she shivered when he entered her once more.

Wesley gently placed her legs around his shoulders, giving him full access to her inside. His hands softly caressed her thick, luscious body. Stopping at her breasts, he let his fingers tease her nipples as he continued to slowly pump in and out of her, allowing her to feel every inch. Her head thrown back in

pleasure, she continued to moan out his name, causing him to become more excited, almost to the point of explosion. Holding back, he promised himself he wouldn't leave her.

Needing to reposition herself after a while, Nikki lowered her legs from his shoulders, and her firm thighs tightened around Wesley's back as she bucked with his every pump. Gyrating her hips allowed her to receive the fullness of him and feel every inch on the inside of her walls. She squeezed enjoying the contracting and releasing of her PC muscles. She knew Wesley felt it, too, as he took deep breaths in each time she contracted.

"Ahhh, girl...do that again," he requested.

He lowered his head to take her sweet kisses, once again. The intimate play their tongues engaged in kept them both on fire with desire, and the thought of the sweet wickedness they were engaging in became too much for them both as she began to cum. Her body shivered, and tears came to her eyes as she rolled her head back and forth on the pillow. "Ohh, Wesleeeey," she cried out as she squeezed her nails into his lower back.

He let go of the control he barely had reigns on and released with her. It wasn't until that moment that he realized he had broken his cardinal rule...always wrap it up. It seemed as if in this one night of wanting to protect and erase all the bad things that happened to her, he lost the use of his brain. Pulling out of her she unwrapped her legs from around his back. He stroked them from the thighs down to her ankle, and it was then that he saw it. Turning her foot in his hand, he took in the floral tattoo around her ankle, which had Carlos' name intertwined in the flowers.

They both went to the restroom to clean themselves up afterwards.

"I need a few moments alone," she said after he finished cleaning up. Wesley nodded his head and left the bathroom, closing the door behind him. She just had to gather her senses, and she would be okay, she told herself.

When she came out the bathroom, she heard the TV at the front of the apartment and the sound of water running in the kitchen. She followed the sounds and found him washing a piece of fruit.

He walked around the divider to be near her. Grabbing his keys from the counter, he came to stand in front of her as he dried his apple on a paper towel.

"Look, I got some errands to run. I want you to sit here and chill. Make yourself comfortable, I won't be too long. Here's the remote to the TV. You can watch whatever you want. The fridge is full, and if you get tired, you can go in my room and take a nap. If you need me, hit me on my cell. I'll be back," he detailed.

"Can't I go?" she asked, looking like a frightened kid who was about to be left all alone at home.

"I would rather you not. Just trust me on this. I'll be back. You're safe here, alright?"

She shook her head and wrapped her arms around herself. Wesley tipped her chin upwards and planted a soft, firm kiss on her lips. Before she could respond, he walked to the door, unlocked it, and left.

She was still rooted in the same spot when she heard the clicking of the lock mechanism moving into place. Now what to do with myself, she wondered.

Curled up in a corner on the sofa, Nikki hugged a throw pillow tightly against her chest as she stared at the TV in front of her. Mercer Cartwright and Rhonda Washington were on channel six blabbing away

about some house fire in Southeast Atlanta. The story did not penetrate through Nikki's brain waves at all.

She was second guessing her decision to involve Wesley in her marital problems. Not to mention the fact that she had just had sex with the man. In all the years she had been with Carlos, they had never cheated on one another. No matter what they were going through, she had always prided herself on that one fact. And now she had just committed adultery with a man who was supposed to be one of her closest friends.

Nikki pulled out her cell phone and called her sister, Yamile.

"Hey, chica!" her sister exclaimed answering the phone.

"Que es la que?"

"Nothing much, sitting here watching TV with nothing else to do," Yamile replied. "You sound down. You and that loco marido fighting again?" Yamile asked.

"My husband is not crazy, Yamile." But even as she said the words, Nikki knew that was far from the truth. "It's worse than that, actually. I need somebody to talk to, Yamile. But every word I say to you has to be kept between us."

"Since when have I ever told anything you told me?" Yamile asked, sounding offended.

"Never."

"Okay then, so what's up?" Yamile pressed.

"I did something that I know I shouldna'"

"What the hell? You killed that loco bastardo?" Yamile shouted in the phone.

"No! Would you hush, and let me finish my story?"

"Okay...go ahead. Although I wish you'd get to the point," Yamile whined.

"We had another fight. But this time Carlos hurt me bad. I ended up in the hospital."

"What? ¡Voy a matarlo!" Yamile exclaimed in anger.

Nikki could hear her sister stomping around through the phone. "Yamile! Yamile!" she called again as her sister continued to curse in rapid-fire Spanish.

"What?" she screamed.

"Listen, please. I really need you to listen. I've got something I need to get off my chest."

Yamile blew a breath out, "I'm listening, but I'm still gonna kill 'im!" she exclaimed.

"So anyway, the police got involved. I know they're looking for him now. But since I didn't implicate him, and it's really just my neighbors' words against his, there's nothing they can do."

"You loco, too, Nikki! You need to stop taking up for him! He betta pray to God I don't find his ass before they do. Cuz I'ma be the one they got the APB on next!" Yamile declared.

Nikki blew out a breath, trying not to get frustrated with her sister. Maybe she shouldn't have called her after all.

“Okay, I won’t say another word. Go ahead...go on,” Yamile urged after Nikki remained silent.

“So anyway, the hospital called Wes, because his number was the last one in my phone. It’s a long story, but he had taken me to Mrs. O’s place after the wedding. Wes called me after dropping me off to make sure I was okay. But what he didn’t know at that time was I was leaving to go back home. He got me out the hospital today. He brought me back here to his house so I don’t sneak out again and go back.”

“Good! Least somebody got some sense,” Yamile replied.

“Well...I don’t know what happened, but I kinda lost my mind over here. I just had sex with Wes,” Nikki confessed.

“Oh my God! Nikki? What’s wrong with you, girl?”

“I don’t know. I just needed to feel okay. I needed to feel protected, and somehow, that was the only way I could feel it.”

Yamile laughed. “Yeah, I bet you felt it, alright.”

“Shut up!”

“Nikki, you betta talk to God about this. You gotta make it right with Him,” Yamile chastised her big sister.

“What? Since when did you start believing in God?”

“I never stopped. You were the only one who stopped. And anytime someone says something about Him to you, you start snapping. So I just quit talking about Him to you. But I got my life together with Him. I mean, I still got some straightening out to do, but I’m letting Him work on me. Dang, Nikki. So whachu gon’ do now?”

“I don’t know. But my problem is, he was straight up. He told me he wasn’t looking to get another woman in his bed. He said if we did it, he would want more. I pressed it anyway, and then we did it. He just left not too long ago, and I don’t know where he’s at.”

“Where are you?”

“At his house.”

“So he didn’t just get the booty and drop you off, huh?” Yamile asked.

“Really, Yamile? You gotta be that crass?”

“I’m just saying...he might be a good guy.”

“Wes is a great guy. Throughout the years, I won’t lie, I’ve been attracted to him. I mean, he’s good looking, he’s fine, and he’s got so much going for him. And he’s cool, he’s so cool. Sometimes I have fantasized over the years what it would be like to be in a relationship with him. But only when me and Carlos are going through it.”

“Well, hell, that’s every day, so you must be thinking about him all the time,” Yamile suggested.

“Girl, shut up! Seriously, he’s been a wonderful friend for five years. But that’s all it can be. I let my emotions take over, and I know it won’t be easy to break away from Wesley. He ain’t the type of man to

give up so easily. Especially now that we did it. It's like there was this look in his eyes, which told me he won't quit until he has my heart."

"So you go from one loco to another? Yep, that's my big sis," Yamile teased.

"I know it's unfair to involve him in this drama between me and Carlos. I could have called mom, or you, to pick me up from the hospital. But, truth? I didn't want to tell y'all what happened."

"So why you telling me now?"

"Cuz I need someone to talk to, Milli," Nikki said, calling her sister by the pet name she had given her when they were children.

Nikki reflected on her feelings. Maybe Wesley was right; maybe she was getting her sexual desire for him mixed up with what she was dealing with in her marriage right now.

Nikki turned to Wesley because he was there, and she knew he would come through for her like no one else outside her family would. But now things appeared to be beyond her control. She had no idea where Wesley had headed off to; the fact that he didn't want her to go with him did not sit well with her. She was unsure what he was going to do, but she was aware of two things: he was pissed at Carlos, and he knew where she lived.

The only way to possibly solve the problem that was Carlos' was to go back home. She couldn't escape him. It's not that bad; besides, I've handled him in the past, she thought. But if he finds out that I slept with Wesley, he's going to kill me, she thought.

"Well, sounds to me like this might be the best thing to happen to you, if you can get away from that loco husband of yours," Yamile stated, as if she had read her sister's thoughts.

In the midst of her conversation, she heard a click as the lock on the front door turned before opening. "Hey, Milli, he's back; let me call you back." She clicked off the phone without hearing her sister's reply.

Because she had been expecting Wesley, Nikki was surprised when the door opened to reveal a strange man entering the apartment. He threw his backpack onto the floor as he entered the living area.

She knew the moment he spotted her on the couch, as he came to a complete standstill, and then slowly showed his appreciation as he took in her body, starting from her feet and working his way up.

She figured it must be Wesley's cousin James who was also his roommate, because they both had those hooded, dark-brown bedroom eyes. This man stood at approximately 6'4" to Wesley's 5'11" and outweighed Wes by at least 50 pounds. His bulky stature made him look like a linebacker ready to tackle someone.

He turned around, almost as if he were headed back to the front door. Before he could leave, she decided to speak up.

"Hi...um, I'm a friend of Wes'," she introduced herself. She could see him taking in the bruise on her face. But the look of mild curiosity, and then aggravation, turned into derision at the realization of who this strange woman sitting in his home might be.

"He...he said he would be back shortly," she stated. She wanted to reassure him that she would not be his burden, hoping that would take some of the menacing attitude out of his stance and glare.

"Oh, yeah? Why he leave you, here?" he grunted in rough tones, giving her another once over.

“Umm, well, he said he had to run an errand.” Although she was certain he was related to Wes, she wasn’t sure how much she should reveal, just yet.

“Look, I’m James, I’m Wes’ cousin...your name wouldn’t happen to be Nikki, would it?” he asked with what sounded like irritation in his voice.

“Yes, Nikki Vincent, I’m Wes’ co-worker,” she replied with a smile realizing Wes had been talking about her.

“Aw, hell n’all, you that married broad right?” he clarified, shaking his head in disappointment and putting both his hands on top of his bald head, in fear of her answer.

Nikki shook her head in assent, making James’ worst fears a reality.

James cut straight to the chase in his gruff voice, cutting off any attempts at small talk. “What kinda errand he running?”

“I don’t know; he just said he had to run an errand and he would be back soon,” she stated, beginning to feel some discomfort at his reaction.

“Damn! You ain’t got my cousin caught up in some stupid shit, do you?”

“No, I just needed a friend, and he came through for me,” she said, fighting back the tears.

“So what’s up, you and yo’ man got into it, and you got my cuz caught up in this?” he asked. Not waiting for her reply, he went back to his backpack, pulled his cellphone out, and dialed a number.