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BELIEVE

PATH TO THE CROWN AIN'T PRETTY

KING BENJAMIN

Believe 3

A King Benjamin Novel

Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons (living or dead), or reference to real people events, songs, business establishments or locales is purely coincidental. All characters are fictional and all events are imaginative.

Believe

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Chapter 1

When Kwon stepped outside into the prison parking lot, it was just him and his father, Ryan, greeted by a slew of cameras and media. Ryan had been firm with the media, forbidding them to speak with his son when he came out, and they obeyed his orders as they moved calmly toward the car. The attention surrounding his case had ballooned over the past week when word got out that Kwon was potentially going to be released from prison for a crime he didn't commit. Everyone wanted to know, how could this happen? A seventeen-year-old sentenced to 37 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit?

They also wanted to know how Kwon felt about it all. Was he bitter and angry with the system? Would he be able to ever trust any law enforcement again? Initially, Kwon had no plans to speak to the media at all, but as he was walking to the car, he realized this could be an opportunity to raise awareness of his plans. He couldn't do it now though. Too many raw emotions were circulating through him to even focus on what to say. He'd get his mind right and then he would talk to them. Right now, all he wanted to do was smell and enjoy the freedom.

Cameras filmed him as he slid into the passenger seat, zooming in as close as they could to capture every expression and blink of his eyes. It was a super uncomfortable scene under normal circumstances, but right now he was too happy to even care.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go, Pop!” he coached, smiling and slapping his fingers on the dashboard. “Get me out of here!” he chuckled.

“Circus ain’t it?” Ryan laughed as he pulled out, headed to the exit.

“I’ll take whatever comes with it though.”

“I’ll bet,” Ryan replied as the media shrank into the background.

“You know... I just want you to know that me and your mom never stopped believing in you.”

Kwon adjusted in his seat, still feeling the rise of guilt that came and went every time he was presented with the truth. He’d had his family spend thousands of dollars, his son’s mother heavily invested, lawyers, his best friend, and now the media all under the assumption he was innocent. He still felt selfish, but his main goal going forward was altruism in its truest form.

“I appreciated everything y’all did, foreal. I appreciate everybody that was in my corner. I just wanna make y’all proud.”

“You already did, son. You kept your head on straight and kept fighting, you know? You kept your nose clean so when the time was right, you could walk up out of there.”

His parents had no idea all the things he had to do to survive in prison, and they never would if he could help it. He was a free man. No parole, no record, and no one to tell him what to do and where to be. He had control of his life again, and it was all up to him what he did with the rest of it. “So, tell me more about this nonprofit you were talking about.”

He shrugged.

“I just wanna try and show the kids in the hood that you can be cool without risking your life and freedom, you know? It’s a lot of kids with no male role models in the hood. I wanna be there for ‘em, you know? I met a lot of guys in prison that were there because they started selling dope just to be accepted. I wanna show young people a different option.”

His father glanced at him then back at the road.

“So, what does that look like for you?”

He rubbed his hand over his wavy hair.

“For me? I just wanna give back instead of taking away. From what I can see, my generation just takes away from the community. We take

lives, we take freedom, we take food off of our family's table with the drug shit—stuff, excuse me.”

“You grown, man,” his father said.

“But yeah, I think I have some valuable information to offer and... you know... maybe even a little guidance. I just wanna do some good, Pop, that's all.”

Kwon had read a lot of books while incarcerated. He was knowledgeable on a lot of things, but the biggest lesson he'd learned was how youth are misguided at a critical age and how it shaped and altered their entire life. He wanted to create a big brother program that was a little unconventional, but he believed could have a lasting effect on the hood. He would target teenage boys, 13-17, and try with everything in his power to keep them on the right path or at least point them toward it. It wouldn't be easy, but he felt in his heart that if he believed in it and gave it everything he had, God just might help cocreate his vision.

“Sounds like an honorable plan, son.”

Staring out of the window at acres of farmland, Kwon replied, “As it should be. I came from the seed of an honorable man.”

When Des' eyes popped open the next morning after the madness, she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, still processing it all. Her mind would sit still, and she felt like her every emotion was being instigated into confusion. It was like being on a mental merry-go-round and right now, she was still angry enough to sniper shoot everyone off the carousel one by one. She was angry at Tino for his blatant betrayal, mad at Tae for reacting how he did in front of the children, and pissed at Endy for not pulling her to the side before revealing Tino's egregiousness. But even with all of this going on inside of her, today was actually going to be a wonderful day. It had to be.

It was a turning point in her and her son's life that only God knew the end destination. Kwon was a free man by now and she expected him to be calling soon. She lifted from the bed, resting on her elbows. The light hangover from late-night comfort drinking greeted her for the first time as she glanced at the time on her phone. It was 10 o'clock already. She turned on the 60-inch television mounted on the wall, and the first thing that popped on the screen was the local news footage of Kwon's release from prison.

"Oh shit." She sat up straight, cranking the volume.

Kwon didn't say anything or even look at the cameras, and they didn't try and talk to him. It was a weird scene that brought back the memory of his initial arrest being announced on the local channels. She hoped he was prepared for all of this. She hadn't really factored in all the eyes and ears that would be paying close attention to him now that he was a free man. Her phone rang with a call from Tino, who had been blowing her down since last night. She snorted and grabbed the phone from her nightstand, sending him to voicemail for the millionth time. She couldn't even think about Tino right now. She was thankful that her thought process was somewhere else.

She wasn't ready to face what last night meant. She rolled out of bed and went into the master bathroom to clean herself up a bit before she went downstairs for coffee. Downstairs, she found her mom eating at the breakfast bar. With a mouth full of food, she nodded toward the stainless steel stove where a full breakfast had been prepared.

“Good morning,” Des said.

“Good morning,” her mom replied when she could. “How did you sleep?”

“Not good. I was out of it because of the alcohol, but I could feel myself tossing and turning all night.”

“Markwon call yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Tino?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Don’t even say that name right now.”

Cynthia shook her head.

“I still can’t believe it. So... out of the blue.”

“He told Endy he’d been wanting to do it,” Des revealed.

“That was probably the alcohol talking. I’m not making excuses for him at all, but do you think this had something to do with the fact that he knows you kissed Markwon? Or the fact that he was coming home?”

“Kwon kissed me. And I’m sure it probably does, but that doesn’t excuse something so wildly ridiculous as trying to kiss my best friend. While I’m right under the same roof with him!” she added, starting to fume all over again.

“Yeah, it doesn’t get worse than that. It’s just odd that all this happened literally hours before Kwon was getting out.”

“That’s because Kwon is who you are supposed to be with,” Kadijah said as she entered the kitchen.

Both her mom and her sister knew she wasn't going to want to be alone after the night before, so they stayed behind and helped clean up while everyone else went home.

"Good morning, sis," Des greeted, sitting at the kitchen table now after getting her coffee.

"Good morning. If you ask me, I think you should just take the opportunity to go ahead and break up with him for good. It would be so much easier now than trying to wait and do it later after Kwon's been home for a year or something."

"This is not about Kwon," Des replied.

"Ain't it though?" Kadijah shot back, squinting her eyes knowingly.

"Dede," Des rolled her eyes. "Shut up, you're not helping."

"So are you gonna talk to him about what happened?" Cynthia questioned.

"I mean, eventually I'll have to talk to him, all of his stuff is still here. It might just be a conversation telling him to come get his belongings, but I will talk to Tino when I'm ready."

Joevonne came into the kitchen.

“I hope he don’t never come back to my house, because if he do, I’ma kick his—”

“Boy, shut up, you ain’t gonna kick nothing,” his grandma interrupted.

“Jevonne, you want me to make you a plate?” Dede asked.

“Yes, please,” he replied as he took a seat next to his grandma.

The hardest part of it all was the fact that everything unfolded right in front of her son. She couldn’t see herself taking Tino back even if she wanted to after that. She had a son she had to set an example for on how he was expected to treat a woman. She couldn’t accept toxic behavior from Tino or any other man. She knew her life was about to change drastically from this point on, but she had no idea just what was in store.

Endy stood in the bathroom brushing her teeth after sending Des a second apology about last night. She realized now how it would’ve been better if she hadn’t blasted Tino in front of everybody, but she was just so angry she couldn’t hold it back. She and Tae argued the entire drive home, which was expected. He blamed her. There wasn’t much she could say, although she’d tried like hell to maintain a position of this not being her

fault. The fact was, Tae was right about Tino, and she was wrong, but she had yet to say it, mainly because he refused to stop yelling.

She came into the bedroom and found Tae sitting on the bed, sliding his feet into his house shoes.

“Are you ready to talk without yelling, Sir?” she questioned calmly.

“Endy, I said everything I had to say.”

Tae was done with it all. He had a hangover, his body was sore from wrestling with Tino, and his boy had just come home. He wanted to focus on the positive. She came over and sat down next to him.

“Well, I’m not done. I have something else to say.”

“Endy, just leave the shit alone, please. I—”

“Let me finish.” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “I just wanna say you were right and I’m sorry. I should’ve listened to you, but you gotta know I could’ve never seen anything like this coming.”

“I could.” He shot to his feet. “But it’s over now, let’s just leave it where it’s at. I’mma go get ready to go see Kwon.”

“Where he at?”

“I don’t know, but I’mma find his ass.”

“I wanna come.”

Tae spun around and shot her a look.

“Endy... we need to split up for today.”

She smacked her lips. Rolled her eyes.

“You just said leave it in the past. What we gotta split up for?”

“I still don’t feel like being around you right now.”

“Boy, fuck you,” she lashed.

“Good. I’m glad it’s fuck me. Go see him on your own time, you got a car,” he said, walking out.

“Sure do. Sure will,” she sassed.

“The fuck?” Kwon mumbled as he sat in his old bedroom at Ryan’s house, struggling with the high-tech gadget they called the iPhone 8.

He’d been using a tablet to access the internet in prison, but this phone was on some next-level shit that would take some time getting used to. On the bed lay a brand-new white and orange Givenchy sweater, some PRP jeans, and white and orange Chanel sneakers still in the box. They were the clothes his mother had bought for him the day after she found out he was for sure coming home. She went all out, knowing he would want to look fly for his release. He fumbled through his property, looking for the

notepad with all his phone numbers. The doorbell rang and he knew it was his mom.

“I got it,” Ryan called out from another room.

Kwon smiled as he heard her heels clicking on the hardwood floors headed to his room. He stood to greet her as she walked in with the biggest smile plastered across her face. Just seeing how happy she was made him that much happier. She reached out for an embrace, and he hugged her tightly.

“Welcome home, son.”

“How much you spend on these clothes?” he replied.

“That’s what you worried about?” she chuckled.

“I’m grown now, Mama. I don’t want you spending that kind of money on me, foreal.”

Chanel had to take a step back and look at him again to make sure it was her son. He was so handsome and physically fit. The way his chest poked out, you would think he was sucking in his stomach. His shoulders were broader, his voice much deeper, and his beard was thicker than Ryan’s.

“You really have grown, huh?”

“Almost eight years, I better had,” he chuckled. “But foreal, I appreciate what you did, but don’t do nothing else for me. I got it from here, y’all did enough.”

Kwon knew that Des would offer him some money to get settled, which he would accept, but after that, his mind was made that it was time to stand on his own two feet for the first time in his life. He also knew that the city would have to pay him compensation for the years he was locked up, but that would be a process that wouldn’t happen overnight. As soon as his identification was intact, he planned to go job hunting. Ryan came into the room and handed him the phone.

“It’s Devonte,” he said.

“What’s up, baby boy! I was just looking for y’all numbers so I could hit y’all on my new line,” he answered, smiling bigger than the Joker after getting over on Batman.

“You at the crib? I’m on my way to you now,” Tae alerted him.

“Yeah man, I’m here, just about to get dressed.”

“You heard about Des and Tino, right?” Tae announced quickly.

“Nah, what happened?”

“They broke up last night.”

“You lying!”

Kwon grew excited before even hearing a single detail.

“Naw, I had to beat that nigga’s ass. He tried to kiss Endy.”

“Tried to kiss Endy!?” Kwon repeated in disbelief.

“Yeah nigga, you know I went crazy!”

“What he try some stupid shit like that for?”

“Maaaaan. We got a lot to talk about,” Tae laughed.

“I see.”

“Go ahead and get dressed, dog, I’ll see you in a minute.”

“Bet it up.”

Kwon ended the call and took his father’s phone back to him after locking Tae’s number into his. Before he got dressed, he called Des to see what time she was bringing his son over. He didn’t mention the news he’d just gotten from Tae. As exciting as it was, he wanted her to be the one to bring it up. By the time he was dressed, Tae was walking through the front door. Kwon wouldn’t put the sweater on until Des saw him in his form-fitting white T-shirt. He’d only seen Tae in person three times during his incarceration, but their bond was completely intact.

“You buff, my nigga.” Tae smiled, looking at how ripped Kwon was now as they slapped fives.

With his thick beard and weight gain, he looked like a completely different person. He was only twenty-two pounds heavier than he was when he left the streets, but at 5’ 10 and 172, he looked much heavier than he actually was because he was all muscle and no fat.

“Lil’ sumn, man. I’m still a little nigga though,” he replied humbly.

“Here you go,” Tae said, handing him a Nike bag with shoes in it.

“That’s love, bro,” Kwon replied before he slid the box out of the bag and peeked inside at the white-on-white Air Force Ones.

“You know you need a pair of those.” Tae smiled.

Kwon laughed, knowing his friend had read his mind.

“Without question,” he chuckled.

They settled into the living room with his parents, and everyone was bombarding Kwon with all kinds of questions about his plans for the future. He didn’t mind one bit. He was back with his loved ones. Within the hour, some more of his family members showed up that hadn’t kept in contact while he was away. He welcomed them as well. Des and Endy arrived about

ten minutes apart. Kwon was stuffing his face with the Domino's pizza he'd been dreaming about for years, when his son walked in.

“Come over here and give your daddy a hug, player,” he instructed, and Jevonne rushed right over, hugging his neck tightly.

The father and son reunion had all the women in the room with glassy eyes as they conversed.

“Do like this, Daddy,” Jevonne said, telling his father to make a muscle, flexing his bicep.

Kwon did as he was requested, and his son followed suit, flexing his bony arm.

“You got a long way to go, bro,” Kwon teased.

He glanced up and spotted Des gazing at him with a look in her eyes that he hadn't seen in a long time. A look he was hoping for. After all these years, it was good to see that his presence still had an effect on her.

Welcome home gifts kept pouring in. On this day, Kwon never felt so loved in his entire life. He didn't want the big party with a bunch of people around that had written him off. Just having his family and friends around that really cared for him was enough. Hours later, when some of the people were starting to leave, Tae pulled Kwon onto the porch to see what his plans for the night were. He wanted to know just what type of night he was in for on

his first day out. By now, Kwon had popped the champagne that Endy had brought him, and the first couple flute glasses had him buzzing as he stepped out into the cool November air.

“Sup, you wanna hit the strip club tonight?” Tae smiled.

“Naw man, I ain’t on that right now. Plus, I’ma have my son tonight. I wanna spend some time with my little man and get to know him better.”

“Oh, right... right.”

“We got plenty of time, baby. I know we gotta have some fun and shit, but I’m here now, nigga!” Kwon said, getting excited as his buzz kicked in more. He struck a pose, as if there were cameras on him. He was rocking his Gucci sweater now. “The real is back!”

“You feeling good now that lil’ champagne done kicked in already.”

“You know I’m feeling like a king right now,” Kwon admitted.

“Fuck that champagne though. I’ma go grab some yack. You gotta take a couple shots with me at least.”

“Shit, I might be one and done, but let’s do it!” Kwon laughed.

A black Chevy Malibu came crawling up the block with three heads in the car. It was going so slow it warranted Tae and Kwon’s full attention. The young, dark-skin passenger had an ice grill on as they drove past.

Kwon could see the look in his eyes was one of pure hatred. Whoever he was, he definitely had a serious issue with them.

“Who is that?” he asked.

“That’s the other thing I wanted to talk to you about. You know Phil got a little brother. He been out here talking shit about what he gone do to both of us since word got out you might be coming home.”

“How old is this dude?”

“’Bout seventeen or eighteen. They say he out here though.”

“So you saying he a threat?”

Tae waved his hand dismissively.

“I ain’t tripping on that nigga. I been out here all this time and he ain’t never said nothing to me.”

He then lifted his shirt, revealing the pistol in his waistline. “I ain’t playing with him either though. And it’s legal,” he added.

The possibility of a real problem immediately after he was released from prison didn’t sit well with Kwon, but he wasn’t going to let it ruin his day. Nothing was going to ruin this day.

Chapter 2

Kwon woke up the next morning with his son lying next to him in the same king-sized bed he had before he went to prison. It was a moment he'd dreamed of many nights, but it wasn't as smooth as he had pictured it in his head. Jevonne was a wild sleeper, which meant Kwon was physically assaulted throughout the night, but he even enjoyed that. He'd had a great time with his family and friends, drinking just enough to wake up the next day without a hangover. He sprang from the bed ready to attack the day... attack life.

He'd been free now over twenty-four hours, but it still hadn't really sunk in. His head was still in the clouds. Jevonne heard him scrambling around in the room and woke up as well. He stretched as he spoke.

“Good morning, Daddy.”

“Good morning, son.”

“What we doing today?” he wanted to know immediately.

“Whatchu wanna do?”

It was still the holiday weekend, so he knew he wouldn't be able to handle any business until Monday. His plan was to spend some time with

his son and hopefully find out what happened with Tino and Des without asking.

“I wanna go see *The Muppets*. No, *Happy Feet Two*. No, *The Muppets*. I can’t decide.”

Kwon laughed.

“How about we go see both.”

“That’s actually a better idea.”

“There it is then.”

Kwon had 1300 dollars from his prison account as pocket change. It was a great relief to know that his first concern when starting over wouldn’t be money. Money had never been his struggle, and the way his future appeared to be shaping up, it wouldn’t be a problem going forward. He threw on some pajamas as they discussed what to eat for breakfast. He needed to go to the mall and grab some things before they headed to the movies. Ryan tapped the door to get his attention.

“What’s up doe?” Ryan said, standing in the doorway.

“Trying to decide what to eat. What’s up?”

“I got an email this morning from this dude from Channel Seven News. He wanna know about setting up an interview with you. What you

want me to tell ‘em?”

Kwon was brushing his hair like he still did every morning.

“Give him my email and I’ll correspond with him about it. It’s not your job to be answering my emails, Pop,” he chuckled.

“I don’t mind. I know you gotta get situated. I’ll do that though.”

His father was about to walk away.

“Hold up, Pop. Jevonne, go brush your teeth,” he told his son to send him away.

Jevonne left the room to do as he was told.

“What’s up?” Ryan asked.

“You got a gun here?”

Ryan’s brow furrowed as he stepped inside the room.

“What kind of question is that? You not on parole or papers, right?”

“Naw, it’s not about that. This dude...”

Ryan folded his arms and gave Kwon his full attention.

“What dude?”

“That guy Phil that got killed. He got a little brother still live around here. I heard he be making some threats or something. I just wanted you to

know so you can protect yourself if it turned out he wasn't just blowing smoke."

"He making threats on you?"

"I guess. Me and Tae from what I heard."

"Because he still thinks you did it?" Ryan asked, confused.

"I don't know what he thinking. But I know how the streets think. If he got a problem with Tae, then he got a problem with me because I'm his best friend."

"And Tae's brother killed his brother," Ryan said, catching on.

"Right, or maybe he still thinks I did it. I don't know." Kwon shrugged.

"So, do you plan to try and talk to him?"

"I would like to. What you think about that?"

Ryan came and sat on the bed.

"I mean... I don't know the guy. Is he the type of person you can talk to? I wouldn't want you putting yourself in a situation."

"Well, we gonna run into each other eventually. I might as well see what's on his mind. Maybe I can dead it before something gets started."

“Well, to answer your question, I do own a gun, but I never had to use it and I don’t plan on it.”

Kwon nodded his head in agreement as his son came back to the room.

“I second that,” Kwon replied calmly.

Des knew that she couldn’t avoid Tino forever. In her mind, there wasn’t much to talk about, but she did want him to come and pick up the rest of his things that she had packed up for him nice and neatly. That afternoon, he came over to pick it up, but she was prepared for things to go left. She let Tino in with a look of disgust smeared on her face. His demeanor was docile, something she had never seen before. Everything was right near the door. There was no reason for him to come any further.

Tino began to carry luggage, boxes, and bags back and forth to the car without saying a word. She sat by and watched, waiting for him to try and speak. When he didn’t say anything, she began to grow irritated by the fact that he knew this was his time to offer some sort of explanation, no matter how ridiculous, but he wasn’t trying. He’d been trying for two days straight, so maybe he was tired of trying, she thought. Just as he picked up the last bag, he turned and looked in her eyes.

“I love you.”

“I doubt you know the meaning of the word,” she responded.

“I know I did some dumb, unforgivable shit, but my head was really fucked up at the time, Des. I guess I was trying to find a way to break us up before you did it. You gotta know that I didn’t really believe that I could kiss her and get away with it.”

“I don’t know what you thought, but clearly you weren’t thinking.”

“I just saw the way your face lit up when you heard Kwon was coming home. I don’t remember seeing you that happy... ever.”

She paused before she answered. For a moment, she almost tried to put herself in his shoes. Almost sympathized.

“I think that’s just the way you saw it because you’re threatened by him. Don’t mean it’s the truth. Am I happy he’s home? Of course, his son needs him. I need him... to help me raise him. On top of that, he was an innocent black man serving 37 years in prison. I had every right to be happy. Ecstatic!”

Tino walked toward her, shaking his head.

“I’m not threatened by no nigga. You made it this way. Your fucking actions are what I’m threatened by. When a nigga kissed you in the visiting

room, and in front of Jovonne like you his bitch, and instead of you telling me you start sneaking off having private fucking conversations.”

She stepped closer to him.

“First of all, watch your mouth. Second, you act like telling you was going to change something. It wouldn’t have changed shit! I told him how I felt about it, so that was that. Telling you was only going to do more harm than good, as you can see,” she finished, throwing her hands up.

“It wouldn’t though. It would’ve made me trust youuuu!” he yelled. “I wanted to trust you the same way you trusted me, baby, don’t you understand? You broke our trust when you started keeping secrets.”

Des was trying to keep her composure, but that statement let her know that he officially had her fucked up. She charged at him, getting right in his face.

“Really? Really? So, it’s my fault that you decided you was gonna kiss another bitch in my house? And not just any bitch, the only real fucking friend I have? And what if she kissed you back? Then what? Huh? Y’all sneak off into the guest room and fuck?”

“I would’ve never took it that—”

“Get the fuck out!” she shouted, mashing his face with her palm as hard as she could.

His neck flew back, but he didn’t budge. Instead, he grabbed Des and held her in his arms.

“Des, you the only girl I ever fucking loved. Don’t do—”

“Let me go!” She pried her body from his arms and shoved him away. “Don’t fucking touch me! Grab your shit and go.”

He stared at her submissively, realizing he was defeated.

“I know you gonna need some time. But this ain’t worth losing what we had if it was real.”

With that said, Tino grabbed his last bag and headed for the door. She was so pissed off she was tempted to give his ass a swift kick in the back on the way out of the door. But she let him leave in peace because the sooner he left, the sooner she could compose herself and gather her thoughts.

The day passed quickly like sand in an hourglass, but Kwon savored every single moment he spent with his son. They went to the mall together and watched both movies that Jevonne wanted to see. A few

people seemed to recognize his face from the news as he moved around the city, but they didn't approach him. Kwon fell asleep on the second movie, but he doubted if his son even noticed. At the mall, he bought matching shoes for the both of them, something he'd always wanted to do. It wasn't like his son needed anything, but he did it just to feel like a real dad for the first time in his life.

By the time they were back home, he could tell Jevonne was starting to miss his mother, plus he didn't have any underwear or clothes left. Des came to pick him up that night around 9:00. She came in and sat down in the living room as Kwon gathered Jevonne's things from the bedroom.

"So, how was he?" she asked when he came back into the room.

"I was good, Mama."

"I didn't ask you, I asked your daddy."

"Yeah, we was chillen," Kwon said, sitting down in the chair to the left of her.

"You ain't seen his alter ego yet then," she teased.

"You know I ain't buying that," Kwon assured her, maintaining eye contact.

She was even more beautiful at twenty-five than she was at seventeen. He wanted to sit next to her. Wanted to see how she smelled. Wanted to touch her and a lot of other things, but he refrained.

“I’m glad y’all had fun. Next week he can stay the weekend if you like.”

“Of course. Guess what though?”

“What?”

“I’m setting up an interview with the media this week. I had two different stations reach out to me. I don’t want ‘em at the crib though. Where you think I should meet with them?”

Des thought it over for a moment.

“You want me to ask Pastor Lewis if you can use the church?”

“You think he’ll let me?”

“I do. He asked about you last time I was there. He knows you’re Jevonne’s dad, and I think he would welcome you with open arms.”

Kwon didn’t have big plans to be dedicated to a church when he came home, but he knew that he owed God his life. It seemed like the perfect fit.

“Can you ask him for me?” he said.

“Come with me tomorrow and ask him yourself,” she suggested.

“You going to church tomorrow?”

“Honestly, I hadn’t planned on it until you just said what you said. I haven’t been in months, but don’t you think it would be a good way to refresh after all you’ve been through?”

He chewed on it. It didn’t sound like the worst idea in the world. It would give him time to connect with Des as well. That’s what he wanted more than anything now. This was his chance to do some fishing.

“Okay. You sure Tino won’t mind?”

She rolled her eyes.

“I don’t wanna hear that name right now.”

“Why not?”

“Come on, boy, get your coat on,” she told Jevonne as she stood to leave.

He stood and began to walk them to the door. Jevonne was in front while Des and Kwon trailed behind. He grabbed her hand as Jevonne struggled to open the door. He gently ran his thumb back and forth over her soft skin, and she glanced back at him.

“I’mma call you, okay?” she told him.

He realized she probably didn't want to discuss anything in front of their son. He left it alone.

“Okay.”

He stood in the door watching them walk to the BMW parked in the driveway. He opened the front door and leaned out before they got inside.

“Tonight.”

“Huh?” she replied.

“Call me tonight.”

“Okay,” she said, without looking back, her attention fixed on getting her son in the car.

She was hard to read right now. He didn't know for sure if he should fall back or pursue her. It could be too soon. His game was rusty. He would have to feel her out when she called. Des blew the horn as she pulled away, and he watched them until the brake lights disappeared. He was thinking about what it would've been like to be in the car with them on the way back to that million-dollar home. He closed the front door, trying to push his wishful thinking to the back of his mind. Ryan was awake now, headed to the bathroom. They passed each other in the hallway.

“My grandson gone?”

“Yeah, he just left,” Kwon said, heading to his room to relax.

Before he could even take his shoes off, his phone rang with a call from Tae.

“What up doe?” he answered.

“What’s up, nigga? You still got lil’ man?”

“Naw, he just left.”

“Sup then, I’m ‘bout to come scoop you.”

“There you go,” Kwon laughed.

“Come on, man! You been home two days, nigga. It’s time to hit the streets.”

“Where you at?”

“At the crib, I just got out the shower. Give me ‘bout 45 minutes, I’ll be pulling up.”

He’d forgotten all about promising Tae they’d hang out. After seven years in prison, he was definitely well rested. Maybe it was time to hit the streets.

“Alright, come through,” he decided.

Later on, as Kwon committed to an outfit to wear, he continued thinking about Des. He knew if she called while he was with Tae, he wouldn't get a chance to have the talk he knew they needed to have. He glanced at the time as he started to get dressed. He planned to wait for her to call like she promised, but suddenly time inched by at a snail's pace. Once he was certain she'd made it home, he called her instead.

"I was just about to call you," she answered.

"Is that right?" he replied skeptically.

"I was."

"Tae 'bout to come scoop me, so I figured I would call you so we could talk before he gets here."

"Whatchu got on your mind that's so urgent?" she asked, sounding like she was smiling.

"I think you know."

"I think I have an idea, but I could be wrong. So, tell me."

Blocka! Blocka! Blocka! Blocka! Blocka!

Shots rang out right outside the house, flying through Kwon's bedroom window.

“Fuck!” he shouted, dropping the phone and frantically diving to the floor.

Blocka! Blocka! Blocka! Continued sounds of an assault rifle boomed right outside his home, soon accompanied by popping of a handgun.

“Kwon!!!” He could barely hear Des screaming into the phone, although it was right by his ear.

He crawled out of the bedroom and down the hallway to his father's room as the shots continued and bullets tore into the walls of the house.

“Pop! Pop!” he shouted out with no answer.

When he made it to Ryan's bedroom, his father was lying on the floor face down. “Pop!” he yelled in a panic one last time, as the gunfire finally ceased.

“I'm alright!” Ryan replied.

“Where yo' gun at?” Kwon growled angrily, still afraid to lift his head off the floor.

Ryan crawled to the bed and stuck his hand under the mattress. He pulled out a silver snub-nose .357. “Give it here,” Kwon said as he stood to reach for it.

“Just stay down, son,” Ryan said as he rushed out of the room.

Kwon laid on the floor, feeling helpless and enraged. He could feel his heartbeat pounding on the hardwood floor as Ryan scrambled through the house.

“Be careful!” he called out, not knowing where his attackers were.

He laid there listening to his father’s footsteps shooting back and forth, realizing Joevonne had just left only an hour ago. The thought nearly drove him off the deep end. His spiral was broken by the sound of his father’s voice.

“I think they gone. Call the police!” he shouted from the living room.

Kwon’s phone rang repeatedly with calls from Des. He hesitated, still lying on the floor. He knew calling the police might be the smartest thing to do, but the time he’d done in prison had completely turned him away from seeking out police for assistance. He couldn’t... he wouldn’t.

Chapter 3

Tae arrived, clueless to the madness that had just unfolded as he was met with five police cars already outside. Kwon was standing out front, pacing the sidewalk anxiously, as Tae parked across the street and rushed to see what the hell had just happened. Two police officers were standing on the front porch talking. Two sat in their squad car eyeballing the house, and the rest were inside talking to Ryan.

“What the fuck happened?” Tae questioned as he approached, fearing the worst.

“Niggas shot up my muthafucking house, man!” Kwon informed, eyes bucked to the limits before he started pacing again.

He was so angry he couldn't even feel the night air piercing his thin sweater.

“What!? You bullshitting!” Tae said, angered.

“I wish.”

“Who, Mook?”

“It had to be.”

“Damn...like that?” Tae said in disbelief.

“My fucking son could’ve been here,” Kwon fumed through gritted teeth.

Tae could only imagine what was going through his head right now. Two days after coming home he was put right back in the same position he was seven years ago. Being tested and provoked by the same bloodline.

“You can’t stay here, dog,” Tae told him.

“I know, man.”

“Come to my crib for a little while. You know Endy don’t care.”

When Ryan called the police, they were already in route after neighbors heard the flurry of gunfire. When police arrived, they got conflicting stories from Ryan and Kwon about what happened. Kwon wouldn’t give up a name and Ryan didn’t have one, but Kwon had already told his dad there was a possible threat. Ryan didn’t hesitate to tell the police everything he knew.

“Let me go holla at my pops,” Kwon said as he headed toward the steps.

While he waited, Tae called Endy and told her what had just happened. He knew she would probably hang up and call Des, so he told her to let Kwon be the one to tell her what happened.

Des was on the phone with Endy trying to find out anything since Kwon wasn't answering the phone. When her line beeped, she ended the call with Endy and answered Kwon's call.

"What happened?" she said as soon as she answered.

"Somebody shot up the house."

"What? Oh my god, they were shooting at y'all? Are you alright?" she rambled off questions.

"I'm alright, my dad is alright."

"What the fuck? Why would somebody do that?"

"I don't even wanna speculate about it. I just know that I can't let it get me off track."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm headed to Tae and Endy's house. I'ma spend a few nights there while I figure this all out."

Kwon's calmness shocked Des, because she hadn't seen the panic in his eyes moments earlier. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Then it hit her that her son barely missed being inside the house when it happened.

“Oh my god. Jovonne could’ve been there.”

“If he had brought more clothes with him, he probably would’ve been there,” Kwon replied. “Shit got my head hurting just thinking about it.”

“Well, you sound calm, so I’m glad of that. We can’t tell him about this, but, of course, he can’t come back over there.”

“Yeah, of course. I’m not trying to put nobody in danger, that’s why I just left. Call you tomorrow, Des, alright?”

“What about the interview? You still doing it?”

Prolonged silence.

“Yeah, I’m still doing it.”

When Kwon left the house, he had to give police the address to where he would be in case they needed to ask him any more questions. The fact that his dad was cooperating canceled out any plans he or Tae may have thought of in retaliation, but Kwon wasn’t thinking that way at the time. He was thankful to be alive but more confused than anything. As soon as they walked in Endy was waiting, and she gave him a long, tight-gripped hug. He pretended to not know what really happened as she questioned him

about the incident. He wouldn't tell anybody the truth besides Tae. On his end, he had to figure out a way to handle this on his own without police involvement. If he was labeled a rat on the streets, the very youth that he was planning to reach would become guarded and untrusting of him before he even got started. The messenger had to be credible, and he would earn that trust over time like a branded business.

The two sat in the mancave basement with the scent of fine cognac lingering as Tae sipped while Kwon thought deeply on how to turn things around from here. Kwon had his hand resting on his chin, and Tae thought he'd lighten the mood.

“Nigga, sitting here looking like Malcolm X ain't gonna get us out of this shit,” he laughed.

Kwon chuckled a little.

“What, you want me to help you kill that bottle of Yack? I guarantee that ain't gonna fix it either,” he shot back.

“Sholl will make a nigga sleep good though.”

“True dat.”

“What we gon' do about this nigga, man?” Tae asked on a serious note.

“I don’t know, dog. Shit got my head in the clouds. I can’t even think straight.”

“We only got two options, really. We can let the police handle it, or we can go handle it ourselves. I mean, I know I ain’t no killer or nothing, but better him than me.”

Kwon shook his head, disagreeing.

“Those can’t be the only options. I didn’t fight this hard to come home just to go right back to prison.”

“So, what’s the move?”

There was prolonged silence as Kwon thought...

“I’ma try and talk to him.”

Tae’s whole face wrinkled like dirty laundry as he looked at Kwon like he’d lost his damn mind.

“Pssshhhhh. Nigga, you tripping,” Tae replied.

Kwon shook his head.

“I gotta try it, man. You ain’t been behind them bars, you don’t know what it’s like. I gotta try to reason with this nigga if I can.”

“And if you can’t?” Tae said, locking eyes with Kwon.

“We’ll have to cross that bridge when we get there.”

Chapter 4

Endy returned to work after the holiday weekend with Kwon still staying at her house. Without Tae telling her, she knew that the situation Kwon was in had a trickle-down effect that could spill into all of their lives. When she questioned him about it, he broke down and told her the truth that he, too, could be targeted because of his connection to Kwon and Boo. Before the past weekend, she never had to worry about Tae being involved in any sort of street drama. He wasn't a square, but he wasn't street either. He was a hard-working man that lived a low-key life.

He owned a gun legally but hadn't felt the need to carry it around with him until recently. The reality of it all sent shockwaves to her system magnified by Kwon's presence in her home. Because of her rising stress level and all the holiday food, Endy couldn't wait to get back to the gym. She had a routine established now and could work through it all alone if she was able to keep herself motivated. Today was leg day. After some squats, she worked on her inner thighs and did some lunges and calf raises. She finished with the twenty minutes on the treadmill as always. She had her headphones in with her Jazmine Sullivan playlist blasting. Jazmine was her

narcotic. Right next to her on a treadmill was Steffan, who was finishing up as well.

Steffan had his headphones on, gazing out of the window out into the downtown rush hour traffic. Every once in a while, he'd glance over at Endy. She'd catch it and they'd make eye contact briefly. She hadn't said it yet, but she knew Steffan would be her new workout partner. Hopefully, she wouldn't run into Tino on the days and times she came. She didn't know what she would do or say if she saw him anytime soon. When they were finished working out, Endy and Steffan left the gym together. He walked her to her car the same way as last time.

“That was a good workout, right?” he said.

“It was, and it was definitely needed it.”

“Too much holiday indulgence, huh?”

“You already know,” Endy giggled.

She made it to her car and was about to say goodbye, but he spoke first.

“So, listen, my birthday is coming up real soon and I'm having a party at Club Elite. I was thinking maybe you and a couple of friends could come hang out, if you didn't have plans.”

“I have been dying to get out. What day?”

“Well, my birthday is actually the 17th but we gonna party on the 16th because it’s a Saturday.”

“Oh my god, that’s my best friend’s birthday.”

“The 16th?”

“Yes, what a coincidence,” Endy said.

“Then it’s settled, y’all gotta come hang out.”

“I’ll have to check with my girl. I only have one real friend, but I have been meaning to drag her ass out of the house for a girl’s night, so this would be perfect now that she’s single.”

“There it is then.”

“Yes, so as soon as I talk with her I’ll get back to you.”

Steffan shot her a look, as if he wasn’t taking no for answer.

“Endy,” he said, stepping closer to her. “I wanna see you there,” Steffan said, looking in her eyes.

She blushed.

“If I’m not, I’m sure you’ll have Brittany there to keep you occupied.”

“You know how much I look forward to you. You’re the only reason I’m excited to go to work nowadays.”

“Is that right?” She smiled, opening her door.

She hoped he didn’t say anything else. She like the flirtatious vibe they had going on, but she didn’t want to have to shut him down if he actually stepped to her. She wanted to keep things just the way they were. She advanced, sliding one leg inside the car as he held the door open.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Steffan said.

“Byeeee.”

A light snowfall floated from the sky as Des pulled up to Endy’s house, realizing just how long it had been since she stepped inside her best friend’s home. She knew both she and Tae were at work, so she texted Kwon to come outside. By the time Kwon appeared on the porch, the snow tease had stopped. He locked up the door with the extra key Tae had given him and slow poked to the car, wearing a thick grey hoodie, matching sweatpants, and wheat Timbs. She zoomed in on his sweatpants as he approached and tried to conceal the devilish smile on her face as he opened the passenger door and fell inside.

“What up,” he greeted her.

“Hey,” she replied as Kwon closed the door, and she pulled off slowly.

“What time Jevonne get out of school again?”

“At 2:45. I told my mom to pick him up today so we can take care of business.”

Kwon reclined his seat until he was barely visible from the passenger side window.

“Oh, okay.”

“You wanna go to the mall to get something to wear for the interview?”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

On Sunday morning, Kwon and Des had went to church services and talked to Pastor Lewis about having his interview at the church. The news was out about Kwon’s house getting shot up, but if it had reached Pastor Lewis overnight, he certainly didn’t mention it. It was an odd feeling at first for Kwon to be in the house of the Lord after so much time had passed. On one hand, he felt out of place, and on the other hand, he felt a

strange connection. The pastor did a special prayer for Kwon, asking that God and all his angels watch over him and protect him from malice.

He left the church feeling shielded from danger and more focused on his mission than ever before. As Des pulled up to the stoplight, she reached into her leather jacket and pulled out an envelope. She handed it to Kwon. He knew what it was. Well, he had an idea anyway. He opened it and peeked inside.

“How much is this?”

“Twenty thousand. I know you have a lot to do to try and get situated, and hopefully that will help.”

Grateful wasn't a big enough word to describe how he felt as he gazed at her from the passenger seat.

“Twenty thousand though?”

She shrugged.

“I mean, I got it, so why wouldn't I? I need you out here at your best so you can help our son become his best. And you boujie, so I know you only wear certain stuff,” she added.

“Girls are boujie, I'm just fly,” he corrected her.

“Whatever. That’s the first cocky bullshit I heard you say since you’ve been home... which is good,” she laughed.

“Whatchu mean?” he wondered.

She looked over at him, taking her eyes off the road momentarily.

“I don’t know. You just different now.”

“Grown ass man now, I better be different.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but not just in the grown-up sense. You’ve changed a lot and... as much as I liked the old Kwon, I like this one better. You’ve evolved a lot over time. Look how calm you are after everything that just happened.”

“Long as my dad is safe, I’m good.”

“Is he back at the house yet?”

After Kwon left, Ryan went and got a hotel for a couple nights while he got the windows fixed and waited to see if police came up with any leads on the suspect. After two nights, he had his windows fixed and cameras installed around the house. Tonight would be Ryan’s first night back at the house.

“He said he’s going back home tonight.”

“Whatchu think about that?”

“I feel like I should be there with ‘em, but I know my presence might do more harm than good. So I’ma lay low for a little while longer until I figure some things out.”

Inside Somerset Mall, Kwon was spotted even more this time with most people back to work and school now, as he moved about the half-empty floors of the mall. He hit the Gucci store first, something he’d been dying to do.

“What up, Markwon?” he heard someone call out.

Kwon turned to see an unfamiliar face approach. The dude seemed to be at least five years his senior. He didn’t know what to expect, but judging by his demeanor, dude wasn’t a threat. Des watched on nervously.

“What up?”

“You a real one, fam, I just had to come shake your hand, bro. You could’ve snitched on Boo to get out of jail, but you didn’t. I knew Boo for years, man, we got money together in and out of town, you feel me? I just wanted to salute you, my G, for staying ten toes down.”

“Appreciated, bro,” Kwon returned.

Dude slapped fives with Kwon without ever mentioning his name. After he spoke his peace, he went on his way and continued shopping.

Kwon left the conversation feeling uncomfortable. Almost like a fraud. He hadn't stood ten toes down for Boo. If anything, it was the other way around. But he couldn't help the way God had worked things out in his favor, and he couldn't tell anybody the truth. Ever.

“That was weird,” Des giggled as they scanned the gym shoes and loafers that lined shoe racks on the wall.

Her phone buzzed with a call from Tino for the first time in days. She hadn't thought about him the entire time since he'd left with all of his things. That realization was a shock as she pressed the ignore button. She thought about blocking his number, but for some reason, she didn't. In the back of her mind, she knew that if she blocked Tino's number she would turn all of her attention to Kwon. Although she wasn't ready to talk to Tino, and maybe never would be, she was sure she didn't want Kwon to be her sole focus either.

Tae parked out front instead of pulling in the driveway when he got home from work. He wasn't sure if he was going to have to make a food run or if Endy would start back cooking, at least for Kwon's sake. He wasn't used to cooking his own food anymore and had been eating horribly since the day after Thanksgiving.

Endy was already home, but she looked like she'd only arrived moments before he did, still dressed in sweats and sneakers.

"Where Kwon at?" she asked as she passed him, headed to the bedroom to get ready for her shower.

"I think he's with Des. She was supposed to come pick him up."

"Oh, she ain't even tell me, sneaky heffa."

"I hope they don't rush into nothing," he replied.

Endy stopped at the threshold and turned around.

"Why you say that?"

"'Cause she just broke up with Tino two seconds ago."

"And? If that's who she wants then why wait? They waited seven years."

"Naw, they ain't wait seven years, he waited seven years. She was doing her," he reminded her.

"So you don't think they should be together?"

"I didn't say that. I said they shouldn't rush into anything."

"Sounds like you hating," Endy said as she went into the bedroom.

He followed her.

“How? ‘Cause I don’t wanna see my boy get fucked over?”

“By Des? Really?” Endy countered with her eyes squinted and full attitude and sarcasm.

“Des is my people too, but...”

“But what?” Endy asked as she started to undress.

“The only reason she and Tino broke up was because of you. It’s not like she was about to leave that nigga for Kwon,” he reminded her.

“I think she would’ve eventually.”

“Yeah, well that’s your opinion. I’m speaking facts.”

“Okay, well move, get out,” she said as she nudged him toward the door.

“What you doing?”

“I’m getting undressed and you don’t like me right now, so you not about to watch me get naked.”

He stopped her at the door, not allowing her to move him any further.

“I’ll like you if you cooking today.”

“If I’m cooking, huh? This is the longest conversation you’ve had with me in days. I knew something was up. Yo’ ass tired of eating hamburgers and shit, huh?”

She’d only been back in the gym for two days, but while they were on the subject of what led to their tension, he decided to inquire about her transition.

“So who you working out with now?” he asked.

She shrugged.

“Tino.”

His eyes almost popped out. “I’m joking, I’m joking,” she rushed to say after getting the reaction she wanted.

“That shit ain’t funny. Why the fuck would you even play like that?”

“Lighten up, man, damn. It happened and it’s over, okay?”

“So answer my question. Who you working out with?”

“Nobody,” she lied. “I know all the right exercises now so I don’t need anybody.”

She knew she couldn’t tell him the truth. He would just overreact and try to forbid her all over again. Sometimes it was just better to tell a peaceful lie. That way, everybody would be happy.

Des pulled up and parked in front of the neighbor's house when she saw Tae's black 2014 Charger parked out front. The two of them had been in such deep discussion about Kwon's nonprofit that she hadn't even gotten a chance to really chew on the idea that was floating in her head.

"Boyz in the Hood, I love that name," she said, referring to his big brother organization he planned to start.

The goal was to give at-risk youth from the age of 13 to 17 a place where they could come hang out, be themselves, and develop into men without the peer pressure from streets. His plan was to be fun but firm on serious issues. Informative but not preachy. He wanted these kids to believe that they had options. He spent a bankroll at the mall for a couple reasons. Not only did Kwon love to get fresh, he also wanted to look just as good as the neighborhood hustlers while he spread his message.

He didn't want his ideas to be outshined by the glitz and glamour of the streets. All he needed was a few good men on his side. Men that cared about the community as much as he did. Men that could bring value to the table and help kids grow mentally. But first, he would have to deal with the past.

“It’s gonna be dope as hell,” he told her as he gazed out of the front windshield, dreaming of the future.

“I believe that with all my heart,” Des told him. “So listen, I really want you and Jevonne to be able to spend some time together without having to worry about his safety. And the best way I know to do that right now is if you were there with him.”

“Where?” Kwon asked.

“My house,” she told him.

She still hadn’t really thought this thing through. She was winging it right now. Going with her gut.

“So, what you saying?”

“I’m saying maybe you should get your things and come to my house for a little while. For him... not for me,” she clarified.

“Come and live there?”

“Just for a few.” She nodded.

It took everything in Kwon for him to keep his cool and not show Des how overjoyed he was about her proposal.

“Is you sure about that? I mean, you did just break up with dude like days ago,” he said, just trying sound like he had some integrity about the situation.

In truth, he couldn't have given a fuck less how it turned out for Tino from here. This was one step closer to his goal of getting his girl back.

“Like I said, you're not coming for me. You'd be coming to spend time with your son and get to know him better. He's waited long enough to have his father in his life, and it would do everyone some good right now just to know that you're safe.”

“Oh, okay.” He nodded.

“How does that sound? That work for you?”

Kwon was staring out of the window at Tae's front porch. “Say something,” Des urged.

“I'm just wondering why we still sitting here when we could be on the freeway headed to your crib by now.”

She put the car in drive, laughing at his comment.

“You sure you don't need anything from here?”

“Naw, hurry up and pull off before you change your mind, girl.”

From the time he pulled up to the house, Kwon was in awe but he tried to play it cool. As soon as he stepped inside the beautiful French doors accented by the pottery beams in the foyer, he couldn't help but acknowledge it.

“Damn,” he sounded without thinking as he glanced at the fancy spiral staircase and the spacious floor plan.

“It's big,” Des admitted. “Come on, let me show you where to put your stuff then I'll give you the tour.”

Kwon followed her up the stairs where there were only hardwood floors, space-age lighting, and curved hallways. She showed him the guest room he'd be sleeping in, which had a full bathroom and was the first room on the second floor. She showed him Joevonne's room that was more like a palace for a prince. His son had everything he could possibly imagine wanting right inside his bedroom. Large electric jeeps and cars lined one side of the room, and a toy cabinet with all types of remote-controlled cars sat on the other side.

“No wonder he acts so damn spoiled,” Kwon said.

“He's not spoiled, he's blessed. Well, no, let me stop, his bad ass is spoiled.”

She tried to spin around and head back toward downstairs, but Kwon stood there instead of following her.

“So you not gon’ show me your room?”

She stopped, turned and looked at him. Thought about it.

“You can see it, I don’t care,” she decided as she headed back toward the end of the hallway.

Kwon followed her to the last room on the left. He was immediately taken aback by the size of it. Her king-sized canopy bed with black, padded leather headboard and footboard were swallowed up inside the massive space. A loveseat sat in the far corner with gold, modern-style lamps opposite an Australian Cyathea Cooperi plant. Kwon immediately felt a sense of belonging when he stepped inside the space. The whole aura in the room was just so welcoming. In that moment, he knew he was right where he needed to be. He glanced around the room and up at the tall ceiling, taking it in.

“All this for daddy?” he said aloud.

“Who is daddy?” Des laughed in shock.

“You know who daddy is,” he said, stepping toward the master bath.

The master bath was breathtaking as well. The décor, the white and grey swirl marble countertops, the walk-in shower, the jacuzzi! No way he was leaving. Here was here to stay. He turned to Des.

“So, tell me what happened with you and Tino.”

She picked up a bath towel she’d left on the floor and tossed it in the hamper.

“You happened,” she replied, walking out of the bathroom.

“How the hell you blaming me?” He followed behind her.

She wore jeans that clung to her every curve, and as he watched her walk out of the bedroom and into the hallway, her ass cheeks moved up and down like knees on a Stairmaster. His dick grew rock hard, almost bursting out of his sweats. It wasn’t the first time. He’d had a hard-on the entire time they rode in the car toward her home, just imagining the possibilities.

“When you kissed me on that last visit, your son told on you,” she explained. “That’s what really started everything, but that’s no excuse for what he did.”

“What did he do?” Kwon pretended not to know, following her back down the stairs.

“I know Tae told you, don’t even front.”

“Well, I don’t regret it.”

“I’m sure you don’t. The kitchen is this way and I just went grocery shopping, so it’s full of everything,” Des explained, leading the way.

“Do you regret it?”

“I didn’t do anything. You kissed me. Then I told you I’m with him and I didn’t want to complicate things between us.”

He followed her into the kitchen and grabbed her hand from behind to stop her from walking any farther.

“How did it make you feel? When I kissed you?”

She looked in his eyes. They were standing as far away as she possibly could with him holding one of her hands in his. He stepped closer, closing the gap.

“Tell me? How did it make you feel?”

“I shouldn’t answer that.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I say it felt good, then you’re gonna think I brought you here for me. And if I said I didn’t feel anything, then that’s just gonna make things awkward between us, and I don’t want that either.”

“So, what do you want?”

“I don’t know, Kwon. I just broke up with Tino.”

Before she could say another word, he leaned in and kissed her again. This time, she kissed him back without hesitation. He wrapped both hands around her waist and massaged her lips with his. She placed a hand on his chest and nudged him to pull back as her cellphone started to ring. She stepped away and answered.

“Hello? Okay.”

She ended the call quickly.

“Everything alright?” he asked, full of boiling hormones.

“Yeah. Your son’s here.”

Chapter 5

The next day, Tae was making his rounds at work when he got an unexpected call from his brother, Boo. Boo had been in the hole since he caught a new murder charge, only coming out to go talk to the Michigan State Police. Today he had court, so he was able to get some fresh air and grab the cellphone a shady guard had secured for him but Boo wasn't able to get his hands on until now. Tae was in between customers, so he quickly accepted and answered on the drive to his next house.

“Hello?”

“What up, lil' bro?” Boo greeted him back in the hole now with his cell phone.

“What up with you? You out the hole?”

“Nah, but I'm cool. it ain't shit,” Boo replied coolly.

“Oh, okay. What's the deal, my nigga?”

“Chillen. I got that bread you sent me yesterday.”

“Good. I hope that hold you for a minute.”

“It should. You know I'ma be in this bitch living like a rockstar anyway, but I appreciate the gesture still the same.”

Boo was back in the high-security prison he'd just left before he killed SB, and he knew he would probably be there for years to come. The good thing was he knew everyone and how they moved here. He was making sure he had everything he needed to do the time. In just the small amount of time he was let out of the hole since the murder, he received so much love by the other inmates and a couple COs, he knew his time wouldn't be hard here. He wasn't supposed to use the cellphone until nighttime, but he had another CO he was cool with working at the time. He also had all the food and goodies stashed he wasn't supposed to have, and because he'd been in the hole, his account was full of money he hadn't been able to spend.

"Whatchu mean living like a rockstar?" Tae questioned.

"I got everything I need in this bitch, nigga. I can't tell you nothing, but just know I'm good, lil' bro."

"Oh shit, good to know."

"I still got three months in the hole but I think I'ma ride out back to Detroit for the other trial before that."

"What other trial?" Tae asked.

"That Reo shit," he said solemnly.

“Oh...” Tae’s mind drifted.

“Anyway, what’s going on out there though, man?”

Tae hesitated. He didn’t want to tell Boo the truth about what was going on in his life right now. Boo would only worry himself and possibly even try to take action from behind bars. It was best to keep quiet about it.

“Same old shit, out here working trying to get this money.”

“What’s up with your boy? They gave him some money yet?”

“Naw, not yet. He supposed to talk to the reporters and shit today though.”

“Oh yeah?” Boo laughed. “About what?”

“Being wrongfully convicted, I guess.”

Boo burst into loud laughter.

“Ain’t that about a bitch.” He continued chuckling. “My boy Kwon about to become a mafucking activist for prison reform, huh?”

“Tell you the truth, I don’t know what he call hisself doing really. I know he serious about that shit though.”

“Yeah, he was serious when he was in here locked up with me. I know Kwon gon’ do some good things, man.”

Tae drifted back to the day he found out Boo was coming forward to say he was responsible for Phil's death. He still wished there could've been another way to bring Kwon home.

"You sure you alright in there, man?" Tae asked.

"Yeah, nigga, I'm good," Boo insisted. "You know I'm built for this shit. I made my bed and I'm about to go lie in the muthafucka right now and relax. I'll call you real soon though, bro."

"Aaight."

When Tae ended the call, he was pulling up to a stoplight in the middle lane. As he glanced over to his right, a car pulled up on his right side. The young dudes in the car peered hard inside the work truck, trying to get a glimpse of the driver. Tae studied their faces as he tried to see if he recognized any of them. The light changed and he pulled off slow, but the car to his right pulled off even slower. The young driver switched lanes and got right behind him.

Tae got over into the yellow lane because he was headed to service drive, and the car behind him signaled and got over again, still right behind him. Not sure if he was being followed, Tae removed the gun from his waist and sat it on his lap. His heart started to race as he turned onto the service drive with the young boys right behind him. He clicked the gun off safety,

but just as he did that, the car veered to the left and jumped on the freeway. Tae took a deep breath, realizing he was just paranoid. He wasn't used to having to watch his back like this.

The church pews were filled from the front row all the way to the back by the exit. Most of the people in the back were actually members of the church that just wouldn't miss any event that happened to be at the place they called their second home. In the middle, on up to the front, and on the left side were a lot of family, friends, and associates of both Kwon and Des. Everyone wanted to see what he would have to say. By now, Kwon had invited three different news crews, and media took up the front right side as low chatter filled the room. Cameramen filled the isles, waiting patiently with their cameras pointed at the podium on the stage.

Chanel, Kwon's mom, appeared from the back, quick-stepping to the podium, and people began to clap because it seemed like the appropriate thing to do. Her demeanor and smile were friendly, but when she started to speak, it was obvious she meant business.

"Hello everyone, thanks for coming. I wanna start by saying I appreciated you all for giving my son his privacy as he makes the transition from such a horrible place back into society. I want to say thank you to

everyone that had contacted us and has been praying for us. I truly appreciate you all. I don't wanna take up too much time. I'm gonna bring my son out in one second, but let me just reiterate that we want to keep this positive. I told everyone beforehand there are some things we just are not willing to talk about, so I would ask again that you guys respect the family's wishes and... be nice," she finished.

After that, she announced Kwon to the crowd and stepped away from the podium. Kwon came onto the stage with his son, his dad, and Tae in tow. The crowd gave him a good thirty seconds of applause, as if he'd just won an award for a grand accomplishment. Dressed in red Timbs, light-blue distressed jeans, a red varsity jacket, and a matching snapback hat, he stepped to the podium.

"Thank you all for the love. I appreciate everybody making me feel welcome. Thank you everybody for coming."

"Nice fit!" somebody yelled out, complimenting him on his outfit.

He smiled as light laughter came from the pews.

"Yeah, it felt good to go to the mall and get fresh. Y'all know that was always one of my favorite things to do." He smiled at all the familiar faces.

"Back like you never left," an old classmate said.

“I’m trying, man. It’s good to see you, boy.”

“You look good,” a female he went to Denby with blurted out.

Des’ head spun around from the front pew to see who was talking.

“Thank you, Leslie, you do too,” Kwon replied.

He realized the people he knew wouldn’t shut up unless he made them, so he turned to the other side of the room.

“Y’all can start now with the questions you have.”

The first reporter, a middle-aged white man, stood and announced himself and the station he worked for. He started with something light.

“What was the first thing you did when you got out?”

“Man, I went straight home and called my son’s mother and told her to bring him to me. That’s all I wanted at the moment was my son.”

Another reporter stood and announced himself.

“Your son wasn’t born yet when you went away. How were you able to develop a relationship with him? He seems to be quite attached.”

Joevonne was standing right next to his dad, swinging his arms and twisting his torso, releasing a little nervous energy.

“I wouldn’t have had it any other way. I always knew the importance of and the impact having a father with a lot of love and good intentions by his son could do, because that’s what I had growing up. So even when I couldn’t do nothing but show him I loved him, I tried to do that every chance I got.”

Applause came from the crowd as a young black female reporter stood.

“How has it been adjusting after over seven years incarcerated?”

“I’ma take it slow. Of course, everything has changed, so I’m finding some things more difficult than others. I’m just thankful to be here, so I won’t complain.”

He went back to the first reporter.

“Are you angry with law enforcement and the city of Detroit for not doing a better job at trying to catch the person responsible?”

Kwon shook his head no.

“Like I said, I’m just thankful to be here. If it wasn’t for the Michigan State Police, I’d still be in prison, so I definitely can’t say I’m angry with all law enforcement. I’m grateful and blessed.”

The second reporter waved and was called on.

“What was it like being in prison all that time, knowing you didn’t belong there?”

He knew these questions would come. He had prepared himself to answer them with a straight face and clean heart.

“You know, one thing my son’s mom taught me is that in life, you gonna go through some things, but God hears your prayers. If you just believe in him strong enough, he can turn any situation around. So even in the darkest moments, I knew I wasn’t going to spend the rest of my life in prison.”

Reporter three.

“So, what are your plans for the future?”

“I’m glad you asked me that. I’m about to start a nonprofit that focuses on the inner-city youth. It’s gonna be a lot of different programs centered around young guys, 13-17. I think that’s such a pivotal stage for youth in the city, and so I wanna try and curve as many as I can away from the streets.”

Reporter one.

“And how do you plan to do that? What do you think you can offer them as an incentive to turn away from maybe making thousands of dollars

as a drug dealer or joining a gang where they feel like they have a family they may have never had at home?”

Kwon looked him in his eyes.

“Well, that’s kinda the whole point. We’ll be their family. And if anybody is interested and wants to join me on this journey or just wants to know more about the project, tap in with me before you leave,” he told the crowd.

The next several questions were pertaining to his nonprofit and his plans moving forward. He answered them all with collectedness and articulation that took everyone by surprise. A plan that didn’t have full-scale vision two months ago sounded well thought out coming from his lips now. Then a question that rattled him came from the first reporter.

“Did you know that the person who confessed was the shooter all along? And if so, why didn’t you alert the police?”

“I didn’t know that,” he spoke in a low tone as his mind started to race.

His mom and dad assured him he wouldn’t have to answer these types of questions. That same reporter wasn’t done.

“But isn’t it true that the man responsible is your best friend’s older brother?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know anything about his life outside of my block. He was just—”

“What about the gun? Police say your fingerprints were on it.”

“I’m not gonna get into that. My conviction was overturned.”

The second reporter joined in.

“What about the incident at your house the first night you were home. Was it some sort of retaliation—”

Before he could finish the sentence, Ryan stepped up to the podium and snatched the microphone.

“This interview is over. Thank you all for coming out.”

Kwon leaned into the mic after his father released it.

“Thank you all for coming out,” he repeated before he turned and walked away.

That didn’t go too bad, he told himself as he headed to the back behind the stage. He told himself he was prepared to face some criticism. Only time would tell if he was fooling himself or not. They arrived at the

back exit where their cars were parked. Tae was shaking his head, walking behind Kwon.

“That was bullshit,” he mumbled.

“That’s how them reporters is though. I ain’t even mad at ‘em.”

They opened the door and spilled out into the parking lot. His father stopped.

“What about the people you told to get with you after the interview?” Ryan questioned.

“Let’s just go,” Chanel said.

“You can catch up with all of them on Facebook,” Tae suggested.

Just then, Kwon looked across the street and saw a group of guys standing in front of the same black Chevy Malibu, staring right across the street at him. He peered closer and realized it was Mook and his crew. Mook didn’t look like he was getting money in the streets. He looked more like a goon than a hustler. His braids were nappy and his clothes looked worn out. He looked like Meek Mill before the record deal. Mook was smoking a blunt while he watched their every move.

“You see that?” he said, tapping Tae’s arm, but he was already gazing back at them to see what they were up to.

“Yeah, I see ‘em.”

“Come on,” Kwon said and started toward them.

“Whatchu doing?” Tae wondered, confused as he took off behind Kwon.

“Where you going?” Ryan called out.

“Just chill, Pops, I gotta take care of something.”

Tae didn’t even have his gun on him as they moseyed across the street, as if this wasn’t the man that wanted them dead. Each step Tae took closer to Mook and his crew, he feared a little more the possibility of losing his life right there on the church grounds. Kwon was calm and poised as he stepped right to Mook, who was now gripping the butt of his gun hanging off his waistline.

“I was just about to come and find you,” Kwon said as Mook's crew circled him.

“Well, here I am, nigga, what’s up?” Mook replied, ready to get it popping.

Tae stood right by Kwon’s side with his fists balled up, not knowing what else to do.

“Look, man, nothing I can say or do will bring your brother back, so I won’t even waste time with that. But I do have a proposition for you that I think will keep any blood from being shed, which is all I care about. And it’s a proposition that only benefits you.”

“I didn’t come here to talk, nigga,” Mook growled.

“Come on, young dog. You not gonna shoot me in front of a church full of people and reporters. If you think you came to put fear in my heart, you must don’t know what I been through.”

Since the interview was over, more people were coming out of the church now, including Endy and Des. “Look at all those people. Don’t be stupid, dog,” Kwon continued.

Mook stepped up to Kwon, almost nose to nose.

“I don’t give a fuck, nigga, I’ll go to jail. Jail ain’t shit to me.”

Kwon didn’t back down. He matched Mook’s intense gaze, knowing this could very well be his last day on Earth.

“You wanna hear me out or you wanna handle your business? I guarantee you my way is better. Better for you, not me, you understand?”

“Kwon!” he heard Des’ voice yell out.

He ignored her. He had to. There stare off was still in session.

“You talking but you ain’t saying nothing,” Mook finally replied.

“Not here. Meet me on your block,” Kwon said before he turned and walked away.

He almost ran right into Ryan, who had followed him across the street to investigate.

“What’s going on, son?”

“Nothing, I got something to take care of. I’ll meet y’all back at the house.”

Mook and his crew were piling in the car now while Ryan stomped angrily behind Kwon.

“Naw, fuck that! You gon’ tell me what the fuck is going on! Is this the muthafucka that shot up my house?”

“Dad, I said I’m taking care of it!”

Ryan grabbed Kwon by the arm, but he snatched away.

“I gotta do this by myself! Tae, let me borrow your car for a minute.”

By now, the reporters were coming outside just as Mook was pulling off, and they could see the family dispute going on. There was no way Tae

was letting Kwon go to Mook's block alone. He had his gun in the car anyway. He would be ready for whatever from this point.

"You ain't in this shit by yourself, nigga!" Tae snapped. "Come on, if you going, let's go."

Des and Endy were walking up with fear and panic in their eyes.

"What happened?" Des questioned as the Malibu went flying up the block.

"Nothing. Meet us back at my dad's house in ten minutes."

"Where y'all going?" Endy asked.

"Stupid muthafuckas trying to get theyselves killed," Ryan snapped as Tae and Kwon walked off without saying another word.

"Oh my god! Stop, Tae, come back here and talk to me right now!" Endy demanded, but her pleas fell on deaf ears.

Des stood there in shock, not knowing what to do or say.

"Kwon! Kwon!" she shouted at his back as they made it to the car and quickly slipped inside.

As Tae drove away, neither of them would look at their loved ones, knowing it would hurt to see the pain in their eyes at that moment.

“I hope you know what the fuck you doing, nigga,” Tae said as he sped up the residential street.

His anger at Kwon and Mook had given him a lead foot as he reached the main road and boated out onto Moross Road.

“Slow down, nigga, you gon’ have muthafuckas shooting at us as soon as we bend the block,” Kwon told him.

Tae eased off the gas as they approached the block they knew Mook to be on all day every day. They spotted his Malibu parked in front of a brown brick house that stood out like a camel toe because of all the young thugs outside, not to mention the shabby condition the house was in. It looked like even the windows stunk. Tae pulled up and parked at the house right before Mook.

“You stay in the car, nigga,” Kwon said.

“Yeah, alright,” Tae said, reaching for the door handle.

Kwon placed a hand across his chest.

“I’m serious, dog. Let me handle this. Ain’t shit gon’ happen.”

Tae snorted as he gave Kwon a frustrated stare.

“Any sudden movement, I’m hopping out shooting,” he warned.

Kwon nodded.

“Okay. Do that.”

Kwon got out of the passenger seat and made his way up the sidewalk to where Mook and even more of his goons were waiting patiently. As he approached, Mook spit on the sidewalk, barely missing Kwon’s foot. He knew that it was intentional, but he didn’t respond as he dug in his pocket and pulled out a stack of cash.

“Since my conviction was overturned, I get a lump sum of money for being incarcerated all that time. Like I said, I can’t give you your brother back, but I can try to keep the peace by giving you something to make your life a lot better. This is just a down payment, and the rest you’ll get when I get my money.”

Mook grabbed the cash without hesitation.

“How much is this?”

“That’s ten thousand. I’ll give you another forty when I get my bread. That’s just something you gonna have to take my word on.”

Mook stared at him in confusion at first before he started thumbing through the cash.

“So, you didn’t kill my brother but you wanna give me 50 thousand to keep me off your ass?”

Kwon shook his head in disagreement.

“I’m not scared of you, young dog. I don’t even got a gun on me,” Kwon lifted his shirt as proof. “I’m trying to save your life.”

“Man, clap that nigga. You got the bread already,” Mook’s friend instigated.

Mook stroked on his chin hairs.

“What’s up, we got a deal?” Kwon asked, ignoring his friend.

“We got a deal,” Mook replied.

“I’ll be in touch,” Kwon said, walking away.

He was almost to the car door when Mook called out.

“Aye!”

He spun around.

“What up?”

“This don’t cover yo’ manz though.” He pointed at Tae in the driver’s seat.

As Kwon slid back into the car, he could only hope that the last part was just an empty threat. As he slammed the car door, he could feel Tae’s eyes on him, burning a hole in the side of his face.

“You paid that nigga?”

“Come on, man, pull off,” Kwon spoke just above a whisper.

Tae started the car and drove off slowly.

“I know you didn’t just pay that nigga,” he fumed, driving past the shabby crib.

“We got two choices, my nigga. Kill Mook and his boys or try and squash the shit. I’m sorry I got you into all this, man, but those is the only two options, ‘cause I’m not fucking with no police.”

Tae didn’t want to admit it, but deep down, he agreed with Kwon. He didn’t want to go on a killing spree, and he didn’t want to go to the police. He really just wanted the whole thing to just go away.

“But he still talking shit. What he say when he pointed at me?” he asked, not hearing the conversation from inside the car.

“He said the ten stacks I gave him don’t count for you. I guess he trying to say he still got beef with you, but he looking for another forty grand, so that nigga not about to bust a grape, trust me.”

“You probably right, but what about after you give him the forty grand? What’s stopping him then? ‘Cause I ain’t giving him shit!”

“Sometimes we just gotta believe, my nigga. Just believe... we gon’ be straight.”

Des almost lost it sitting at Ryan’s house, not knowing what was going on with Kwon and Tae until they showed up twenty minutes later. She was livid by now but had promised herself not to make a fuss in front of his dad. This wasn’t her way of doing things, and she had every intention of letting him know how she felt about it. He’d put his life in jeopardy again, and all she could think about was what she would’ve told Jevonne.

Kwon went back home with her that evening after spending a few hours at Ryan’s house. As soon as Jevonne was in bed and sound asleep, she went and found Kwon in the guest room doing some research on his new laptop. She stood in the doorway.

“Come here for a minute.”

He sat the computer down and sprang from the bed. As soon as he was in arm’s reach, she cocked back and slapped the shit out of him. What made it so bad was that he saw the slap coming and didn’t even try to avoid it. He just braced himself for it, feeling like he had it coming.

“Don’t you ever scare me like that by doing something so fucking stupid again!”

“I’m sorry, Des.”

“Sorry? Sorry? Is that what I was supposed to tell your son?” she shouted.

“Keep your voice down. Come on now, he just went to sleep.”

“You right... but come on, man. What were you thinking?” she barged in.

“I know it may have looked like a stupid thing to do to y’all on the outside looking in, but I knew what I was doing.”

“You really think so?”

He grabbed her by both hands and pulled her onto the bed.

“Listen, I can’t accomplish anything in the neighborhood if I can’t show my face without bullets flying at my head. Today I did what I had to do to try and make peace with someone that thinks he’s my enemy.”

“Which was?” she questioned.

Des still didn’t know what had transpired.

“I talked to him in the language that everybody understands. Money.”

She shook her head.

“What does that mean?”

“Let me ask you something. If you had to cough up fifty K to save my life, Tae’s life, and no telling how many others, would you do it?”

“Of course,” she said without hesitation.

“So that’s what I’m doing.”

Des was just as confused as Tae when she heard it. She had to let the thought linger in her head for a minute before responding.

“So, he shoots up your house and almost kills you and your father, and you gonna pay him to go away? Why not just let the police handle him like Ryan said?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” she shouted.

He looked her in the eyes.

“If you gotta ask, then you really don’t understand my vision.”

“I do, baby, but damn... fifty thousand dollars?”

He grabbed her hand.

“I gotta try and do this my way. Just trust me, okay?” he said, pulling her in for an embrace.

“What choice do I have?” she said as his arms wrapped tightly around her waist and hers draped his neck.

“I didn’t come this far to let you down.”

“You bet not.” She calmed.

“Did you hear yourself just call me baby?” he whispered softly in her ear.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” She smiled with her arms still clinging to him.

“You did though. You haven’t called me baby in years.”

He ran his hand up her velour sweat top, massaging her lower back.

“Look at you, tryna start something. Let me go get ready for bed,” she said and slightly pulled away.

He held her in place to see just how badly she wanted to leave. When she didn’t pull any further away from the grip of his arms around her waist, he kissed her softly. She kissed him back and he slid his tongue in her mouth without warning. An adrenaline rush shot through Kwon’s body and straight to his manhood as he tongued her down and eased her body onto the bed. When Des took the initiative to scoot her body further onto the bed, he knew it was finally about to happen. He climbed into the bed and on top

of her, kissing her lips then her neck and collarbone. He unzipped her sweater and ran his hand up inside of her T-shirt to find her soft C-cup breasts.

Standing on his knees with his shaft jammed between her thighs, he massaged her titties, staring down at her beautiful freckled face and pretty eyes.

“I been waiting forever for this day,” he told her.

Des didn't know what to say. She knew this could happen but hadn't planned on any of it, but it was here, and it was happening, so she just closed her eyes and let it.

Her velour bottoms slid right off as Kwon made his way down her body, kissing her stomach and her thighs. He palmed her ass in his hands as his heart pounded with anticipation. He ran his tongue up the fold in between her lower lips and her thigh before he slid her panties off. When he tasted her pussy for the first time in eight years, it was like a toasted cinnamon bun fresh out of the oven. He quickly began to tear off his sweats and boxers.

He positioned himself right back where he was with his head between her legs and continued to get reacquainted with her pussy. He was

rusty at first, and he tried to recall his technique. He listened for what her body craved.

“Ooohh, shit!” she sounded, and so he gave her more of that.

He could feel her left hand gripping his T-shirt, pulling on it tighter and tighter. Any tighter and she would rip the stitching apart.

“Shit!” she cried as he felt himself growing harder than he ever thought possible.

Before he broke a hole in the mattress with his dick, he backed up, climbed on top of her, and slowly inserted it inside of her where it belonged. As he tunneled his way inside of her, his lips found her breasts again and hungrily got lost in them. His tongue tickled her nipple until she squirmed, but then he filled her insides with his shaft, making her back arch, sending her torso into confusion.

He smacked her ass and found her lips, jamming his tongue inside her mouth. As his thrusts became fiercer, her arms clung to his body tightly. He buried his head into her neck as he stroked her body until every muscle in his stomach was burning. Dripping with sweat and gasping for air, he came up and flipped her over on her stomach. He grabbed the headboard, and he dove back inside of her with a vengeance.

“Damn, baby, this shit...” She couldn’t finish as he filled her up again and she began to come.

He rammed her backside, looking down in amazement as her cheeks bounced off his lower abdomen. He dicked her down with every ounce of energy he could muster until both their legs started to give out. He landed on her backside and stretched her legs out wide. He slow stroked her, staying buried deeply inside until he caught his second wind. He pounded her backside into submission as his body numbed and he left off an explosion inside of her. He collapsed onto her, sweaty and wet, kissing her sweaty shoulder and cradling her body. After catching her breath, Des rolled Kwon off of her and placed her head on his chest so she could listen to his heartbeat like she used to do when they were kids.

Chapter 6

If Endy's body lay any closer to the edge of the bed, she would've surely toppled off and onto the floor. Her disdain for her husband at the moment was reeking through her pores as she awakened the next morning just as upset as she was the night before. Just when things were starting to mesh again at home, Tae and Kwon had gone and pulled that stunt that could've gotten them both killed. All Endy could do was wait and worry while they drove away without an explanation of what was going on. Images flashed in her head of the police arriving at Ryan's door to break the news that things got out of hand and someone was dead.

Then to find out that this baby gangsta was still threatening to harm Tae and he was refusing to get the police involved just drove Endy over the edge.

"Are you stupid or are you dumb?" she lashed as they came in the night before.

"Shut the fuck up talking to me, Endy. I'm done talking about the shit, alright?"

"Don't tell me to shut the fuck up! I'm your wife! Did you think about you having a wife to come home to before you just rode off into the

sunset like a cowboy?”

“I’m done,” Tae said calmly, no longer having the energy.

“I’m done too. I’m calling the fucking police. I don’t give a fuck what y’all say! That muthafucka could come and try to shoot up our house next, and I ain’t having it!”

Endy pulled her cellphone out of her purse and walked away, but Tae was storming right behind her quietly. He yanked the cellphone out of her hand from behind.

“Stoooooop!” he shouted. “Just stop, Endy! You always tryna control some shit. I fucking said I’m gonna handle it, let me handle it!”

As she turned and faced Tae, the sharp gaze in her eyes was strong and menacing. His eyes were pleading as they went into a drawn-out stare down.

“Give me my phone,” she said, calmer now, with her palm extended.

“I got this, Endy. I’m not gon’ let shit happen to us.”

“Give me my phone,” she repeated, and he slowly handed it over.

As the alarm sounded, she stabbed the button on her phone quickly, already wide awake. She rolled out of bed and shot daggers at Tae on her way to the bathroom. He rolled over, instinctively feeling the heat lasering

in on his body. Thirty minutes later, his alarm went off and the two of them went about their morning getting ready for work, trying desperately to avoid each other. The tension was deep dish, Chicago-style thick inside the house. As she grabbed her keys and headed out, Endy had a few choice words for her husband. She hated mustering up extra energy after working all day and going to the gym just to give him a home-cooked meal. Now she was justified in not doing so.

“Find you something to eat while you out,” she called out before slamming the front door.

Despite being initially upset with Kwon, Des was just too glad to have him back in her and her son’s life to stay mad for long. After they made love she was just a ball of mixed emotions. Desperately clinging to her belief that Kwon was there for his son, she now had to try and process what last night meant. It was what they both wanted, and she had no regrets, but what would it mean for them going forward? Her cellphone rang with a call from Endy, breaking her train of thought as she finished up making a smoothie in the kitchen.

“Hello?”

“Hey girl,” Endy greeted.

She looked at the time and knew Endy was on her lunch break.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing, just calling to see did you slap the shit out Kwon’s ass like you promised me you would?” Endy giggled.

“I did... and then we had sex.”

“What!?” Endy shouted without realizing it. “Let me calm down.”

“Yes, girl, it just happened.”

“Oh my god. I can’t believe you went home and fucked him after what they did.”

“It just happened.” Des shook her head, still letting the image of his chiseled body pressed against hers float around in her head.

“You ain’t shit.” Endy laughed.

“Anyway, how did it go with you and Tae?”

“We beefed out all over again. I’m not speaking to his ass.”

“You need to be praying for him instead of beefing.”

“I’ma do both.”

Des shook her head.

“I’ma pray for you too.”

“Girl, I need it. Anyway, what I really called you about is your birthday. I know initially, you were expecting to do something with Tino. You said he was trying to surprise you with something. But now since those plans are out the window, I want you go to this club with me.”

“I’m not even thinking about my birthday right now with all this other shit going on.”

“I know, but it’s still your birthday month and you still gotta try and enjoy your life. When is the last time we been out? Think about it.”

Des paused as she tried to recall.

“When was it?” she finally asked.

“Exactly, so you need to get out the house to celebrate your twenty-sixth birthday. There’s a club downtown, Club Elite, it’s really nice I heard.”

Des always knew the club just wasn’t her scene, but she was overdue for a night out with her girl.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Think hard. Meanwhile, let me get something to eat before this break is over. I’ll call you later.”

“Okay.”

Over the next couple of weeks, Kwon would get on social media and start spreading his message to the people. His following immediately started to grow with people from in and out of state intrigued by his past and hoping to get a bird's eye view of how his future would unfold. He also opened a bank account after getting his identification and driver's license. The day he started filling out job applications online was also the day he got the call to come in and fill out the paperwork that was required for the state to give him the money he was owed for his wrongful conviction and incarceration. He didn't know if it was a sign for him to focus on his mission instead of finding a job, but that was the path he decided to take. Expecting the money to hit his account in the next ten business days, he took his last five grand and bought a shooter to get around in. It was silver 2010 Nissan Maxima. Although Des had a couple of cars in her three-car garage that she wasn't using, he felt she'd already done more than enough, and it was time for him to stand on his own.

He found a building in the hood that he was looking to lease for the boys club. The sun shined brightly as he drove up the slushy wet streets of Morang headed to the location to meet with the owner. He could feel the excitement flowing through him at the thought of turning his dream into a reality. He pulled up out front, admiring the building from the front

entrance to the roof. Shoveled snow piles from the early winter storm lined the small parking lot. As he parked out front, a sky-blue 2012 Range Rover pulled into the parking lot. He figured it must've been the owner arriving right on time just as he did.

As he got out the car and strolled to the front entrance, he heard the door to the truck slam closed. He waited on the sidewalk for the owner to bend the corner, but the person Kwon saw left him with a puzzled look smeared across his face.

“Tino?” he asked, still not sure.

Tino was just as confused as he looked at the face he was sure he knew but hadn't seen in years.

“Kwon?” Tino replied.

Both men squared their shoulders, not knowing what to expect from the other.

“Sup man?” Kwon started.

“What's up, whatchu doing up here?” Tino asked, relaxing now.

“You not... you not the one I talked to about the building?”

He was sure of it. That man was much older.

“Naw, that’s my uncle Brian. He couldn’t make it, but he told me he had a guy he needed to show the place to, so he had me swing by.”

For a moment, Kwon thought it was some kind of set up, but by the look in his eyes, he knew Tino was just as surprised to see him there. The building belonged to Tino’s uncle Brian, whom Tino was living with momentarily while he decided if he would keep fighting for Des or move on. The chance meeting was met with caution and suspicion on both ends. Each man being in phenomenal shape, they sized each other up quickly as Tino played it cool, moving to key open the door.

“Come on, let me show you around.”

“Bet,” Kwon agreed, looking around and watching his back carefully.

Inside, the space was completely empty except for few long cardboard boxes and a barstool. The front room was large and perfect for big gatherings. Kwon envisioned what he could do with the space. Tino stood by quietly as Kwon moseyed around, scanning the area.

“How long it’s been empty?” he asked, just to ease the tension.

“Shiiid, I’m not sure. You gotta talk to Unc about that,” Tino said as he stood by jingling keys, ready for this showing to be over as quickly as possible.

In the back was a smaller room and a bathroom that got straight to the point. He wondered if it was big enough to fit the needs of a large group of teenagers, but the location was perfect. He would have to try and make it work. As he came back out to the front, he decided to address the elephant in the room.

“So, check it out, Tino. I don’t know how you feel about me, but I don’t feel no way about you. We never been friends, so you didn’t owe me nothing and I definitely don’t owe you nothing now. Whatever your situation was with Des, it is what it is.”

Tino nodded then took a couple steps his way.

“Yeah, you’re right. It is what it is. Be that as it may, me and old girl got way more history. You might have a kid by her, but we got seven years, you feel me? So just know I ain’t going away that easy.”

“As a man in love, I wouldn’t expect you to. That’s between you and her, but me and you—”

Blocka! Blocka! Blocka! Blocka! Blocka!

Shots rang out from close by. Close enough to make both men freeze and give it all their attention, but not close enough to feel under attack or the need to duck for cover. It had been a long time since Kwon

heard the sound of gunfire before he'd come home, and now it was becoming a regular occurrence.

“I’m ‘bout to get the fuck on, man. You seen what you needed to see?” Tino asked, ready to skate now.

Kwon wasn't so sure he was ready walk right outside where the shooting was happening, but he agreed anyway.

“Yeah, I’m good. Tell your uncle to give me a call so we can talk more.”

As Kwon was leaving the area they both grew up in, Des was heading to it to meet with Tino. She and Tino had been communicating all day about meeting up to get some things of his. He'd left his birth certificate and social security card at her place tucked away where she'd never find it unless he gave her instructions. She didn't know if he'd done it purposely or not, but a few weeks had passed and she was no longer disgusted by the thought of him.

She drove to the neighborhood CVS to meet with him and grab a few things while she was out, then head to visit her baby sister. She really wanted to make this quick and painless. Just give Tino his property and keep it moving, but she was positive he wouldn't make it that easy. When

she arrived, she spotted his Range Rover already there and pulled next to it. Glancing to her left, she saw a Maxima just like the one Kwon had just purchased roll by, but she didn't think much of it. Tino got out of the car and walked up to her passenger side. She handed him all of his personal information in a small envelope, taking in how good he looked this day with his form-fitting, blue Pistons long-sleeve shirt and matching Pistons scully on.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” she said, giving him firm eye contact that said walk away now.

“While I got you here—”

“You don't have me here, Tino. You got your stuff, now just—”

“Can you just please give me two minutes to talk?” he cut her off.

“What, Tino? We been texting all day, whatever you had to say you couldn't say it then?”

“No, I couldn't.”

“Why?”

“Because that was business and this is personal.”

“Honestly and truthfully, do you really think we have anything personal left to discuss?”

“Honestly? Hell yeah, I’m a good nigga, Des, and you know in your heart that’s not who I am. That night I just got so confused. I never had to worry about you and another nigga, but—”

“I’m not going there again. We’ve been over all of this.”

“Okay, okay.” He threw a hand up, as if to say just be patient.

He pulled out a black leather rectangular box. He knew if he handed it to her she wouldn’t accept it, so he just showed it to her. “I know your birthday is right around the corner, and I had all these plans for us. I had so much planned for us, Des,” he went on with sincerity in his eyes. “But I know that’s not gonna happen, and I’m okay with that, but this...this right here is something I really want you to have. And you gotta take it because it’s nobody else in the world it could ever belong to.”

He opened the box and showed her the gift inside. It was a necklace attached to a picture pendant surrounded by diamonds. The picture inside was of Jevonne. Seeing the picture of her son’s face surrounded by glistening diamonds made her heart melt without permission or warning. She was speechless, and he extended his arm, motioning for her to take the gift. How could she not take it? It was...the one person she loved more than

anything in the world. She tried to compose her thoughts as well as her demeanor. She made sure not to crack even a hint of a smile as she took the box into her hand.

“This is a really, really nice gift, and I thank you for all the thoughtfulness that went into it. I can only hope that your intentions are pure in giving me this and it’s not some ploy to win me over.”

“Like I said, who else could it ever belong to? Just promise me you won’t move on past us without giving yourself some time to think rationally about all this. A lot has happened really fast.”

“I can’t promise that. I can’t see us getting back together, Tino.”

“Please, Des, baby. Just give it some time and you’ll feel different.”

“What’s time gonna do?”

“Nothing if you shut me out like you’re trying to do now. But if you give me a chance, baby...”

The sad part was that she felt herself wanting to believe him. He sounded so sincere, and she had so much history with him. She had moved on physically, but mentally he still had a lot of space in her head. She threw the gear in reverse, signaling the end of their conversation.

“Thank you for this. I gotta go.”

It was still early Friday afternoon as Kwon drove to Chanel's house to pick up Jevonne, who had spent the night with her. Before he left the area, he stopped by his dad's house just long enough to check on him, and ran right into Des meeting up with Tino as he headed out of the neighborhood. A part of him was jealous and disappointed, but another side was rationalizing and trying to be optimistic. The meetup could've been about anything. The two of them did have a long history. Longer than his and hers, technically. But after what Tino had said to him, he couldn't shake the thought of what their conversation could be like. Tino begging for another chance, and reminding Des of all of their history together.

He decided he wouldn't mention it unless she did. It wasn't like they were a couple or anything. He still wasn't sure if that's what Des even wanted. Whenever he brought it up, she just threw it right back at him that she was fresh out of a relationship. He planned to get his own place as soon as the money from the state hit his account. Whatever the future held for him and Des, the universe would have to work it out, but he knew exactly what he wanted.

Arriving at his mom's house, Jevonne came out bundled up from head to toe, the way grandmothers loved to do. He was tall enough now to

sit in the back without a car seat, but Kwon knew what his son was about to ask.

“Can I get in the front?” Jovonne said, standing at the passenger side door.

“Naw boy, get in the back.”

“Grrrrr,” he grunted angrily but complied.

“And put on your seatbelt.”

“Can I have some ice cream when we get home? I know it’s some in the freezer ‘cause I saw it.”

“You not getting none, though, because your grandma said all you did yesterday was eat junk. You didn’t even wanna eat your food. So no junk for you today.”

Kwon had noticed his son’s disdain for anything healthy. He was like a lot of kids his age, but he wanted to try and give his son a little discipline early in life about what he put inside his body on a regular. “We eating healthy today. Something that’s gonna be good for your teeth and your body, not all that sugar.”

Jovonne didn’t respond. In fact, he was quiet the rest of the way home, only answering in one-word responses. Kwon knew he had an

attitude, but he couldn't care less. When they arrived at the house, Kwon went upstairs to grab his laptop so he could finish up some paperwork in the kitchen while he made lunch for them. Des was probably at the nail shop with her sister by now and would be gone for a couple more hours. The three of them had plans later that he was looking forward to. When he came back downstairs, he found Jevonne in the kitchen.

He'd used a chair to climb up and inside of the freezer to get the ice cream, despite what Kwon had said. The sight angered him immediately.

"Put that shit back!" he yelled.

Jevonne smiled and grabbed the big bucket and his spoon and took off running through the house.

"Boy, I'm not playing with you." Kwon gave chase.

Jevonne was faster than he expected. He dashed from room to room, holding the ice cream for dear life. He was finally cornered in the entertainment room.

"You spill that shit, I'ma whoop your ass. Now stop playing!" Kwon warned as he stormed up and grabbed the ice cream.

A struggle ensued as Kwon wrapped both arms around the ice-cold bucket.

“No! No!” Joevonne fought, getting angry now, swinging his body from left to right.

“You don’t tell me no. Now give it here.”

Kwon finally got a grip and quickly took the ice cream away. The next thing he knew, he felt a swift kick in the shin and pain shooting up the front of his leg. His eyes bucked. He couldn’t believe it. He heard about it, but he had never seen it. Never thought he would. This was the temper he’d been warned about.

“Boy, I’m ‘bout to...” He couldn’t even finish the sentence as he rushed to put the ice cream back in the freezer.

Realizing what he’d done, Joevonne quickly made a run for it. When Kwon came back, he was nowhere to be found. He stomped up the stairs two at a time and found Joevonne in his bedroom sitting on his bed, still angry.

“Didn’t I tell you about that temper? I told you that temper gon’ get you fucked up, didn’t I?”

Kwon rushed over and grabbed his son by the waist. He took off Joevonne’s belt and laid him on his stomach.

“Noooo!” his son pleaded.

Wop! Wop! Wop! Wop! Wop!

“Annnnnnnnnnn! Annnnnnnnnnn!” Joevonne burst into tears, crying like he’d never cried before.

“Don’t you ever put your feet on me again, boy! You don’t put your feet on no fucking body! You keep your hands and feet to yourself.”

Kwon was so heated he had to try and calm himself down.

“Annnnnnnnnnn!” Joevonne continued.

“You understand me?”

“Annnnnn!”

He raised the belt again.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes!” he managed through snot-filled sobs.

Watching his son bawling his eyes out hurt Kwon probably more than it hurt Joevonne, but he realized in the moment that while he was so focused on the kids in his community, he definitely had some work to do with his own.

Chapter 7

When Des heard about Kwon giving her son his first spanking, she was pissed off initially. Then when she found out why he chose that form of discipline, she felt her anger subsiding. She couldn't believe that Jevonne had gone so far as to kick his dad, the one man she thought he was afraid of. While she still didn't agree with spankings, she was hard pressed to find an alternative at this point, and she knew Kwon wasn't backing down in his stance on how to discipline his son.

That evening, before they went out, they had a long talk with Jevonne about consequences and respect. He was still ticked at his dad, and mad at his mom now for taking his side. Only time would tell if the talk did any good but right now, Des was pushing parental guiding and adulting in general to the back burner. Today was her day. She was glad to see her son had woken up in a better mood when he came into her bedroom while she was still in bed, smiling, carrying a small plastic bag that was obviously a birthday present.

“Happy birthday, Mama,” he said, handing her the bag.

“Awwwww, for me?” she crooned.

“Yeah, it's from me and Daddy,” he announced proudly.

She opened the bag and found a small square box inside and an envelope. When she read the lettering, she just knew it was a Michael Kors watch. She pried open the box to reveal a beautiful watch with a rose-gold bezel and a pink leather band. She loved the watch as soon as she laid eyes on it.

“Thank youuuu.” She blushed.

“It’s something on the back,” Jevonne told her, pointing.

“Oh, it is?”

She flipped the watch over and read the back aloud. “Our favorite girl, love Kwon and Jevonne. Awwww, I love it! Can I have a hug?”

He wrapped his little arms around her neck and she squeezed him tightly. “Did you help Daddy pick this out?”

“Unhuh,” Jevonne said.

“Well, then I love it even more. Where’s your daddy? Is he up?”

“Yeah.”

Kwon had been sleeping in the guest room to keep from confusing their son about their relationship. They hadn’t figured out where things were going with them and didn’t want to get his hopes up if they ended up not working out. They both had grown and changed a lot over the years,

and though they seemed to be compatible, Des was still determined not to jump right into anything after being with Tino for so long. One thing she was sure of was that Kwon only had eyes for her. Just last night, Kwon was caught pussyfooting around her bedroom when his son woke up in the middle of the night.

They'd only had sex three times in the two weeks he'd been there, by her choice. It was her way of keeping him at bay, but every time they made love her feelings for him resurfaced stronger and stronger. She rolled out of bed and found her house slippers. She strolled down to the guest room and saw Kwon lying in the bed, staring at the ceiling. She leaned at the threshold, ogling his shirtless frame.

“I love my gift.” She smiled.

“I'm glad you like it.”

Her eyes roamed around in her head, as if she was searching for words.

“You know... I know you don't really wanna be out in the club scene or nothing like that right now, otherwise I would've invited you,” she told him.

“I'm sure you get enough of my face already. Anyway, it sounds like a fun girls night out, go have fun. I'm gonna try and get some work done

and hang out with this little monster.” He nodded toward Jevonne.

“I wanna talk to you about that too. Your work.”

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“Not today though. Today is not about you, it’s all about me,” she teased.

“I couldn’t agree more,” he replied, lifting himself up and out of the bed. “That’s why I’m about to make you breakfast.”

Her eyes widened.

“Oh my god. I’m scared.”

A beautiful array of Christmas lights illuminated the streets of downtown Detroit as the Uber driver zinged through traffic so he could drop off these beautiful young ladies and get to his next ride. Des peered out of the window, slightly buzzed, taking in the scenery as Endy rambled.

“I can’t get this goddamn shoulder to stay in place. My titty keep popping out,” she complained of her dress.

“Your titty isn’t out and you look fine, stop whining,” Des told her.

As they pulled up to the front of the club, the line was intimidatingly long. Luckily for them, it wouldn't be a part of their experience.

“Enjoy your evening, ladies,” the short man with a Middle Eastern accent said.

“Thank you, and you have a successful night,” Des replied with a smile.

They climbed out of the backseat of the Uber rocking their matching brown mink coats they hardly ever wore since purchasing them three years ago. Des wore Vestment jeans that hugged her frame tightly, with a brown sheer top and brown Christian Lacroix boots. Her hair was in wide curls and she sported her brand-new watch with her platinum and diamond butterfly earrings. Endy wore a tan, ribbed, off-the-shoulder bodycon maxi dress with some tan Gucci heels and a crossbody, printed Gucci bag.

“Girl, I hope he ain't lying. This line long as hell,” Endy said as they went straight to the front of the line to approach the bouncer as Steffan had instructed Endy to do.

The bouncer at the door was definitely Italian. He wasn't big and didn't look intimidating. He gave off more of a people person vibe.

“Ladies, how you doing? Can I help you with something? Y’all rolling up like you want some trouble,” he teased.

“No, we don’t want trouble. We wanna get in this club, that’s what we want. My friend Steffan told me to come see you. You’re Tommy, right?”

Tommy nodded knowingly.

“Steffan, yeah, that’s my boy, he told me to be on the lookout for you ladies. Right this way,” he said.

As they made their way inside of the packed club without paying a dime, Des could feel the music thumping in her chest. She texted her two cousins who were already inside, to see where they were. Endy texted Steffan, whose number she’d only recently gotten the day before. The mixed crowd was predominantly black and the music was straight hip hop. It was obviously more of an upscale spot from the fancy, dazzling lighting to the beautiful go-go dancers perched high on platforms spread across the first floor. Nipsey Hussle’s “Victory Lap” blasted through the building. Des was glad she decided to get out and enjoy her birthday.

There wasn’t a gym shoe or a hoodie in the entire building, and it seemed the whole club had pulled their best fits out of the closet for tonight. The whole vibe was just right. Surrounded by so many beautiful people, it

was hard for Des not to flirt back when she was approached. As a handsome dude around her age followed them toward the bar giving his best spiel, they ran right into her cousins, Shari and Shanice.

“Birthday girl, you finally made it,” Shanice sang as she wrapped her arms around Des.

“Happy birthday, cousin,” Shari said, kissing her cheek.

Shari and Shanice were sisters, with Shari being the oldest and both being older than Des. They didn’t hang out all the time because they said Des was lame, but they loved her, they got along well, and always had fun whenever they got together. Shari was smiling hard, eyes full of excitement, as if it was her birthday, but Des knew this was just her element. Endy greeted them both with hugs.

“Whatchu drinking, bitch?” Shari asked Des before she even finished her embrace with Endy.

Sparkling bottles zipped past them on the way to a section.

“Wait y’all, let me find this guy,” Endy told them as she read her message from Steffan. “We gon’ let these niggas get us drunk tonight,” she assured them.

Tae was at home plotting and planning on getting him some well-deserved cutty tonight. He'd been on his best behavior since all the back and forth between them and now he was just ready to get back to loving Endy the way he knew only he could. He knew when she came through the door tonight, she would be tipsy and probably horny as well. He planned to take full advantage of her intoxicated state. Around 11:00, he jumped in the shower, getting clean like he had a hot date. When he was out he threw on some cologne and poured a little cognac to sip while he waited.

He wanted this night to be one to remember, so after he was settled, he even popped one of the sex pills he kept stashed away for special occasions. When he was through with his wife tonight, her ass was gonna be calling him daddy again and waiting on him hand and foot.

When Endy first laid eyes on Steffan, she was taken aback at how scrumptious he looked on this night. She knew he was a nice-looking dude, but she wasn't expecting to be so mesmerized to see him cleaned up this way. To top it off, if you didn't know any better, the two of them looked like a couple standing up top near the balcony of their VIP section. Steffan wore a brown Louis Vuitton sweater under a tan turtle neck, with tan slacks and two-tone brown LV ankle boots. He wore his Cartier Buffs she'd never seen

him wear and a very nice watch to accentuate it all. By now, Steffan had shown the girls to the section and got everyone a glass of champagne while managing to pull Endy away from everyone for a brief moment.

“I can’t believe your ass showed up wearing the same colors as me.” Endy giggled, her smile extra wide tonight.

“I know right, it almost looks like we discussed this before.”

“Almost?” She laughed. “You look nice though.”

By now, Endy had taken off her coat and had plenty of the men in the VIP drooling over the dress that showed off her every curve as well as some skin.

“I wish I could say the same for you, but nice is way too much of a fucking understatement.”

“Don’t gas me.” She smiled.

“Naw, this dress is…” He shook his head as her off-the-shoulder strap went lower again, exposing more cleavage.

She straightened her body and pulled it back up, hoping she could keep it in place by not leaning on the balcony rail.

“If I can just keep my titty from falling out, I’ll be alright.”

“No comment,” Steffan replied, sipping his drink.

She put her hand on her hip.

“Whatchu mean no comment? You got something to say, say it,” she encouraged, flirting with her eyes.

Steffan looked her in the eyes.

“What do you want me to say? That I want you so bad I can taste it?”

Endy burst into laughter, in disbelief that he actually said it.

“See, there you go. Where is Brittany at?” she said, spinning around to look for her.

She was surprised to see he really didn't have a chick on his arm this night.

“Don't shy away from me now,” he told her.

“Let go find my crowd, 'cause yo' ass tryna start some trouble.”

Endy blushed as she turned to leave.

Steffan wasn't the only one that wanted something so bad he could taste it. Her pussy was starting to grow a mind of its own. The sexual tension between them was snowballing. Endy felt a longing she wasn't used

to and hadn't had since way before her wedding. When she came back to her seat and sat down next to Des, her best friend quickly spotted the guilty pleasure written all over her face.

"Bitch, what is you up to?" Des said, taking her by surprise.

They hardly ever used the B word on one another, so Endy's eyes were wide with surprise.

"Bitch, I'm chillen, what is you up to?" she shot back with a devilish grin.

Des gave her a knowing look. She'd seen the way she interacted with Steffan, and although she knew her best friend was a flirt, the look in her eyes right now was different.

"You really like him," she said, as if it was a fact that wasn't up for debate.

Endy lowered her head in shame.

"I do," she finally admitted.

"And?"

"And nothing. I just like him." She shrugged.

"Well, unlike him, because you're married."

Shari and Shanice were in the isle dancing to Cardi B's "Bodak Yellow," turning up, as Endy downed a glass of champagne to keep her mouth full then quickly poured another.

"I don't wanna talk about him, so let's change the subject. Let's toast before I give you your gift."

"Oh, whatever, we still gonna talk about it later." Des side-eyed.

"Shut up, mind your business. Aye y'all! Come here, y'all," Endy called out over the music, waving trying to get Des' cousins' attention.

Shanice noticed and grabbed her sister and came back to the section.

"I'm about to toast to the birthday girl before I give her my gift."

"Ayyyyyyyy!" Shari sang as the drinks loosened her up even more.

By now, Des had hundreds and fifties pinned to her top from her cousins, plus Steffan and all of his friends. Everyone was getting along well and having a great time, as Endy stood to toast, her voice becoming clearer as the song ended.

"Y'all know this is my heart right here. I don't know what I would do without my best friend. You've been through everything with me. I can always count on you no matter what. If I need some money, a place to lay

my head for a minute, some help whooping a bitch ass, I know I can always call you.”

They all laughed loudly as Endy went on. “And I know you don’t really like to be praised like this because you do everything you do from the bottom of your heart, but honestly and truly, you are one of the sweetest and kindest people I’ve met in my entire life, and I’m so glad that I have the pleasure of knowing you and calling you my best friend. Happy birthday, sweetheart, I love you.”

By now, Des was wiping away a tear and trying her best not to produce any more as she reached out for a hug from Endy, then clinked glasses with her cousin. Just then, Shari started to sing happy birthday, and they all joined in as Steffan and some of his friends came back to the section. As if on cue, the waitress came with more sparkling bottles of champagne, and Des was smiling so hard, lost in thought, but still taking in the moment. Endy was right, she was a good person and she really did like to help people. Not just the people she loved, but people in general.

She felt like that was just another thing that she and Kwon had in common. It’s why she wanted to discuss the nonprofit with him. She wanted to pitch in and help build something special that could help the community she grew up in. By the end of the night, Endy and Des were

wasted and glad they decided to take an Uber to and from the club. Des was with her cousins talking to some of Steffan's friends, giving Steffan and Endy some alone time that they both desperately wanted. He sat right next to her with his body angled in her direction so he could look directly at her as they spoke.

“I had a really good time tonight but to be honest with you, the best part of it all was having you here to celebrate with me. This is a different environment that we're not used to being in together, but it felt so natural.”

“It did. I must admit I really enjoyed myself, and despite you wanting me so bad you can taste it, you were a perfect gentleman, so thank you.”

The two had danced together off and on all night and had enough shots to remove any inhibitions they had left.

“You and your girl feeling pretty good. How you getting home tonight?” he wondered.

“We got an Uber here, but Des' cousin Shanice doesn't drink, so she might be the designated driver, I guess, if we don't get another Uber.”

Steffan glanced at his watch then looked in her eyes.

“I don't want you to go, I swear.”

“Well, shit, I can’t stay here. They gonna ask me to help clean up.”

She giggled.

“I know that, and you know what I mean. I’m not ready to part ways with you.”

“Steffan, you had me to yourself all night, now I have to go home to my husband.”

“I didn’t have you to myself. I had to share you with all your friends.”

“So what are you saying, Sir?” She batted her eyes.

“Come with me. Just for a little while. I promise I won’t keep you out all night. Just... some alone time with me. I know you want it just as much as I do. I can see it in your eyes.”

“You want me to just leave the club and go with you?”

“Yes.”

Endy paused.

“Where?”

She couldn’t believe she was considering it, but everything in her was dying of curiosity about this man. His hunger for her was like an aphrodisiac.

“My place. If we leave now we can be there a little after two.”

“Oh my god.” She shook her head, not just at him but at herself.

As Steffan kept talking, she didn't even consider Tae. All she could think about was what the hell she was going to tell Des.

“Where's the kitchen?”

“Right this way,” Steffan said.

“You have water? I need some water.”

“Of course.”

Steffan didn't hesitate to start peeling off his shirt right there as he followed her into the kitchen. Endy opened the fridge without permission and found a nice cold bottle of water. She twisted the top and took a long gulp, downing half the bottle, cooling her insides and rinsing the alcohol. She turned and gave him the “what now” look as he took her in from head to toe one last time. As Endy leaned against the kitchen counter, she had a brief moment where she thought about backing out, but there was Steffan closing in on her and wrapping his arms around her warm body like he'd been waiting for this moment his entire life. His body pressed tightly against hers made Endy's pussy purr.

He kissed her neck slowly, succulently, then licked her like a scoop of ice cream. He licked the top of her breasts as his hands found her ass cheeks and gripped them tightly. At that point, Endy just closed her eyes and took in the moment that her body seemed to desire. He pulled the top of her dress down gently until her nipple popped out. He quickly captured it between his lips and sucked on it softly.

“Mmmm,” she moaned, cupping his head against her chest.

“You’re so soft,” he mumbled as he caressed her whole backside and booty, still enjoying her bosom.

“You so hard,” she teased, rubbing his erection through his thin slacks, the only clothing he still had on.

Through the slit in her dress, he reached inside and pulled down her panties. Endy pulled the top of her dress all the way down around her waist. He fondled her breast that had been unattended until now, lapping at the nipple with a fast flicker of the tongue. Her neck fell back and she cradled his head against her chest again.

“Come on,” she pleaded as her pussy began throbbing.

He sucked on her nipple slowly, feeling it expand inside his mouth. She grabbed the buckle of his belt greedily. He helped her out, getting out

his pants and letting them fall to the floor. If this was how she wanted it right here and now, he was going to give it to her. Endy turned around and hiked up her dress above her ass cheeks. She looked back at him.

“Condom?”

“I got it,” he told her as he fumbled through the pocket of his clothing.

Seconds later, Steffan was ramming his beef inside of her from behind, right over the kitchen counter. Endy let out a shriek of pleasure that expanded his bone inside of her. He gripped one ass cheek while he pounded her backside like an animal in the safari. He pulled her away from the counter a little for better entry, then slid up inside her again. This time, she could feel his thick shaft fully inside of her.

“Shit!” she cried out.

He kissed the back of her shoulder then sucked on it hungrily, wrapping one arm around her stomach. The pussy got so good he began to slob on her shoulder as his mouth watered with ecstasy flowing through his body. He smacked her ass hard as soon as he released her.

“This pussy too good,” he mumbled.

“Oh shit.”

“This pussy too good.” He pounded away.

“OH SHIT!”

“It’s too fucking good!”

“Ummmmmmmm!” Endy bit her lip and they both came in unison, and her stomach rammed into the kitchen counter uncomfortably.

He stroked her backside until she was completely finished, as Endy’s high off her orgasm slowly declined. All she could think about in the moment was that this one night of passion was worth every second of her time.

When Endy snuck in at almost four in the morning, Tae was knocked out in a deep sleep. The cognac had him dead to the world, and it wasn’t until Endy started to turn in her sleep that he awakened with a rock-hard penis and warm body next to him. He snuggled next to her, still groggy, lazily rubbing her thigh.

“What time did you get in?” he whispered.

“It was later, I don’t remember,” she answered in a dehydrated tone.

“You were supposed to wake me up,” he said.

He'd texted her at two, feeling himself dozing off, and she agreed to wake him but by then, she had already headed to Steffan's. She knew she should've just told him to get some rest instead. He fondled her breasts from behind, still trying to wake up, but his dick was wide awake.

"Go to sleep," she mumbled.

"Come on, baby," he caressed.

"I'm tired, baby, please just go to sleep."

"I'm saying though...it's been a while," he reminded her.

"I know, baby, and I promise I'll make it up to you, just not tonight. And why are you so aroused?" she asked, feeling his beef poking her backside.

"I told you it's been a minute," he said as he tried one more time, easing his finger in her panty line.

Endy felt so bad denying him, but she knew that Steffan had just tried to knock the walls off her pussy only hours ago. There was no way she could have sex with her husband. She grabbed his hand and held it in a romantic and comforting way, but letting him know that it wasn't going to happen tonight. An hour later, after Endy was down for the count, Tae

would sneak off to the bathroom and masturbate just so he could get some sleep.

Chapter 8

Sunday morning, Kwon got up and went to church all alone. He knew Des would be too tired from partying to make it, but he wanted to show his face just to let the church know he appreciated the support they'd shown him since his release. He also understood that tapping in with the house of God sometimes could help him stay centered and guided in his purpose. He knew the path he was on would have some trials but, hopefully, if God had spoken to him the way he believed, then he'd fulfill his purpose in the end.

When Kwon came back home, Des was out in the backyard watching Jevonne play in the snow. It wasn't too cold out, more like thick jacket weather, but she was still red in the face from being exposed to the winter elements for so long. He came out onto the patio he'd shoveled only yesterday.

"You want some hot chocolate or something?"

"No, we going inside in a minute," she replied.

"Daddy, watch this!" Jevonne called out before he leaped into a pile of snow.

"Flying high, boy, I see you." Kwon laughed.

Des turned her attention to him.

“So, about Boyz in the Hood.”

“What about it?” Kwon asked, standing over her.

“I really wanna help you with this. Not like hands on with the guy stuff, but...I had this revelation, I guess, last night that I think you and I are aligned for a reason. Maybe reasons we didn't even realize. I mean, here I am twenty-six years old and I still haven't found anything I want to do with my life. I know I'm a good person and I know I want my life to mean something. And then you go through all this stuff and in it you find your purpose, and here I am still searching, but...I've been so blessed and I can't help but think like maybe this is it. Maybe you are driving me to my purpose, because I can't think of anything I would rather do more right now than to help you realize this dream that I know is going to help so many others.

“This could be bigger than just our neighborhood, you know? Our city needs men that can lead them down a different path. Our young men need someone with good intentions and real direction to guide them down a positive path. You're so passionate about this, and I believe you might be that person.”

Des' words hit Kwon like a brick in the chest. They hit him just as hard as the idea of being a voice and a leader for his community when he was locked in a cell with thirty-seven years to do. He didn't know what to say. He'd never thought that big. The city? He was just a dude with a troubled past and vision for his neighborhood. He was just a dude trying to right some of his wrongs and become a beacon of hope for his hood. But this vision Des had for Boyz in the Hood... felt magical when she spoke about it.

“So, what do you think you wanna do? Like, what part do you want to play? Because I don't wanna put any more responsibility on anybody than they want.”

“Well, that's the thing. I think if we get people that understand that it is our responsibility to change our community, then I think those are the people that will be willing to do whatever it takes. I wanna help you organize.”

He smiled at her with a gleam in his eyes and a fire in his heart.

“You serious, huh?”

“Never been more,” she said, staring back. “And you know I'm smart, so I could be the treasurer and handle the money, or I could organize the schedules and meetings. I could research the volunteers to make sure

we're not bringing in anybody that doesn't belong. I could help build on the goals and strategies list you talked about—”

“You can definitely do all that,” he cut her off.

“Yeah, see.” She smiled.

Kwon realized in that moment that Des would be a key component to the success of his entire operation. He wasn't a stupid man by far, but he was more passion than brains. Des was the smartest person he knew, and she had developed a passion for what he was doing that would make him unstoppable.

“You definitely got that position,” he reemphasized.

“Good... good, 'cause I wanna do it.”

They fell silent for a moment while his mind ran laps.

“So, if you really gonna be a part of this, like all in, don't it make sense that you go all in with me as well? I mean, I know you fresh out of your relationship and all that, but at this point, what else makes sense but us, baby?”

“Come on, let's go inside, son, that's enough,” Des called out to Jevonne.

“Awww, man,” Jevonne complained.

“You gotta get out them clothes, boy, you heard your mama,” Kwon seconded her order.

Joevonne wanted to defy the order. Kwon could see it in his eyes. He was thinking about it. They were still having problems with his attitude, but nothing that led to another ass whooping so far. He looked at his father, watching to see if he would listen, and decided to come toward the house. Kwon turned to Des.

“So, you not gonna respond to my question?”

She stood to go in the house, which put them face to face with each other.

“I couldn’t agree more,” she said, then kissed him softly on the lips.

“Cold ass lips,” he complained, smiling bigger than ever as the three of them headed inside.

The very next morning, Kwon was awarded \$403,000 from the state. Fifty thousand dollars for every year he was incarcerated. He didn’t hesitate going straight into action, putting his plans in motion. The first thing he did was purchase the building from Tino’s uncle. By now, his business name and organization was legalized. He went on Instagram and

Facebook and asked black men with like minds and objectives to join him for a meetup. He was pleasantly surprised at the overwhelming response. Friends from school as well as complete strangers wanted to help out.

He also had come to realize that walking in his purpose would be a dangerous task. He was trying to take the kids out of the streets and the prison system that niggas in the hood usually recruited as the help. Everyone wouldn't be on board with his agenda, not to mention things weren't squared between him and Mook. Since he wasn't a felon, he was able to purchase firearms legally and get a gun license, and that's exactly what he did. The buzz on the streets was that Mook was running out of patience with getting the rest of his money.

He was circulating threats around the hood again. But Kwon had every intention of keeping his word, so as soon as his affairs were in order, he went to see Mook. Tae insisted on coming and he was the first to get on board with the Boyz in the Hood moment. He told Tae that things might get ugly if Mook wasn't willing to stand down, but Tae couldn't go on living in fear. He was ready for whatever at this point. Kwon had a number to reach Mook with when he was ready to drop off the cash. He called and they agreed to meet on the same block as before. Kwon and Tae drove in separate cars as a safety precaution.

When Kwon pulled up on the block, he stopped in the middle of the street with Tae right behind him. Mook was on the porch with five of his goons. He wasn't the same old dusty nigga that Kwon had handed the ten thousand to. Mook looked like he'd taken the money and went to work with it. Either he'd spent every dime to look like he had it, or he'd put himself in position to really get it. It appeared he'd cleaned his crew up as well. A part of Kwon felt like it wasn't his business either way, but most of him knew it was.

He was about to give Mook another 40K to flood the community with as many drugs as he chose to. The same community he was going to bat for to make changes. He prayed he was doing the right thing as he slammed the car in park and got in the middle of the street. Mook was taken aback when Kwon hopped out with a bag of money in his hand and a 30 round poking out of his waistline. Mook eased his hand closer to his own pistol tucked in his jeans as Kwon marched right up to the porch without a hint of apprehension. Mook's goons stood on high alert.

“Check this out, man. I'm on some positive shit, right? But I can't let you do nothing to my manz, so if you take this bag, it's for the both of us. I can't give it to you otherwise.”

Mook's eyes widened at the audacity, as Kwon stood waiting for an answer.

“That wasn't the deal, man.”

“That's my deal. I never agreed to nothing except giving you this money. Now you done shot up my crib and I let it slide. I ain't letting shit else slide, so you can take this money or we can get to it right here and right now.”

Kwon tossed the money on the stairs as a gesture of faith and stepped back to see what response he got.

“Man, this nigga think we won't clap his ass,” one of the goons growled.

“Nah, chill Veto,” Mook said, staring at the cash in the see-thru plastic bag on the steps that separated him and Kwon.

Kwon had purposely brought the money in a bunch of small bills to make it look even more enticing, but if it didn't work, he was ready and willing to take another life today to save his friend's and his own. This was the position he was in now, and he was capable of dealing with it. To complete this mission, he had to be willing to kill or die. Mook took two steps down off the porch and picked up the money, just like Kwon thought.

Kwon began backing away, cautious not to turn his back on Mook and his goons too quickly.

“You be safe out there, fam,” Mook said with a sly grin.

Tae had been tearing the mall up lately. On this day, he took a trip to Twelve Oaks Mall to do some shopping just for himself. He wasn't feeling Endy at the moment, and he'd be damned if she was getting something. There was a disconnection between them happening that he just couldn't put his finger on, but right now he was too content to care. Kwon had been passing out money to his loved ones left and right. His mom, his dad, and Des all received a healthy deposit in their bank accounts when he first got the money.

He gave Tae 15,000 just to spend on clothes. He jokingly told Tae they were like Ace and Mitch from *Paid in Full*, and that Tae had to step his wardrobe up if they were gonna hang out when the summer hit. Tae cursed him out, of course, but he still took the money. He liked getting fly too, but the money he made didn't afford him the ability to do it often, and his pride would never let Endy do too much either. His pride didn't feel anything about the money he got from Kwon, and if he was honest with himself, he believed he deserved it.

He'd been a great friend the past eight years and even before that. Shit, he'd been a better friend to Kwon than Kwon had been to him. But that was the past and it felt good to have his main man back home where he could hit him up whenever and talk about anything. It was food for Tae's soul.

"Excuse me," Tae heard a voice snap him out of daydreaming as he waltzed through the mall.

He turned to see a girl coming out of Forever21 approaching him. She looked very familiar. "Don't I know you?" the girl asked.

The closer she got, he recognized her as one of his customers from the job. It was the girl he had drunk and smoked with that day.

"Shelli?" he said as her name came to him.

"Devonte, right?" she said as her eyes shifted quickly to his two hands full of shopping bags and then back up to his face.

"Yeah, how you doing?"

"I'm fine, how are you?" she said as she opened her arms to embrace him for a hug.

Tae's hands were full, but he was still able to lift one arm with light bags into a halfhearted hug.

“I’m good, I see you out here fucking the mall up.” She giggled.

“Little something, I need to stop too. I was just about to leave.”

“Oh yeah? Me too, where you park at?”

“Macy’s,” Tae said.

“Come on, we can walk out together and catch up.”

“Bet,” Tae said.

Every time he saw Shelli she looked good, but today she was exceptionally fine and she smelled even better. Her hair was bone straight, her eyes were smoked out, and her jeans fit like a glove. In one hand she carried bags from Forever21 and the Apple Store, and in the other a cellphone buzzed with back-to-back messages. He glanced at her just long enough to see her eyes roll looking down at the screen as they walked through the mall.

“So, what you been up to?” she said, ignoring her phone.

“Just chillen. My dog just came home from doing a stretch, so I been catching up with him and trying to help him get his movement started.

“What’s his movement? He rap or something?”

“Naw, he started a nonprofit group and a mentorship program called Boyz in the Hood.”

Her eyes lit up a little.

“That guy Markwon is your friend?”

“Yeah, you heard about him?”

“Everybody heard about him. He did all that time for something he didn’t even do. I follow him on Instagram,” she announced.

“Yeah? That’s what’s up. Yeah, that’s my road dog. We been like brothers since high school.”

As they made it to Macy's, her phone started buzzing again and she quickly and angrily responded, typing as fast as humanly possible.

“Anyway, yeah, that’s dope y’all doing something positive.”

“Hell yeah, trying to anyway. What’s been going on with you?”

“Nothing much, just trying to live life and stay out of trouble. I wish I could meet a dude that wasn’t playing all these games. Sick of niggas,” she mumbled the last part as an afterthought as she responded to another text.

“He out there, you just gotta stay patient,” Tae told her as they made it outside into the parking lot.

“I guess.”

“Where you parked?”

“Over there.” She pointed.

As he stood near the entrance, it was almost hard to say goodbye as he stared into her beautiful eyes and lust-inducing lips.

“It was good as hell to see you,” he said honestly.

“You not gon’ walk me to my car?” she insisted with an appalled stare down adjacent to a smile.

“Oh, my bad, yeah.” He started toward the direction she’d pointed.

“That’s more like it. You know it’s crazy around this time of the year.”

“True. How was your holidays, by the way?”

“I had a good time. I went to a New Year's Eve party with my sisters and brought the year in drunk as hell.”

“That’s the only to bring that muthafucka in,” Tae told her, thinking back his own New Year’s Day.

“Exactly.” Shelli giggled as they began to approach her White Volvo parked with the rear-end taking up two lanes.

“You sure you wasn’t drunk when you parked this muthafucka?”

“Shut up, I was in a rush.” She punched his arm. “I’m glad I didn’t get a ticket. I didn’t even know I parked like this.”

“I’m glad you didn’t either,” he said, standing there, wishing once again that he didn’t have to part ways with her so soon. He enjoyed her vibe.

As if she’d read his mind, Shelli glanced up into his eyes and said...

“We should keep in touch. I know you married and all, and I don’t wanna disturb your home or anything. I just really like talking to you and it would be so nice to have somebody around to talk to that wasn’t bringing any drama into my life and was just...you real chill, you know?”

Tae was blushing at this point. He couldn’t remember ever having a woman this fine pursuing him this way. Even with Endy, he had to do all the pursuing. He could feel his ego ballooning as they spoke. He couldn’t tell her no to her face even if he wanted to.

“Okay cool, we can do that.”

She smiled.

“Take my number,” she said in the most sensual tone he’d ever heard.

He pulled out his phone and took down her number with no real intentions on ever using it. He was supposed to delete the number from his phone the minute he got in the car, but that’s not what happened.

Chapter 9

Everything was almost in order for Kwon to have his first meeting with the first volunteers for Boyz in the Hood that he would hopefully turn into mentors and members of his organization. Today, Des was doing work on the business side, getting his business account set up while Kwon had contractors doing work on the building in the hood. Des would be the treasurer of B.I.T.H., and Tae would be the sergeant at arms, which meant Kwon would be delegating any responsibilities he couldn't handle to Tae first. Tae would be his second in command so to speak, and he quickly fell in love with the idea.

For Tae, although this wasn't his dream, it gave him a sense of pride to be a part of something bigger than his ordinary day-to-day life. He didn't mind the life he had and he was grateful, but he knew twenty or thirty years from now, it wouldn't have made much difference that he was here. This was going to make a difference in some young people's lives, so he dug right into it, ready to learn and help out in any way he could.

As Des sat in the parking lot of the bank, she listened to her cellphone ding with messages from Tino. He'd been texting her off and on all day, and she'd planned to call him but hadn't had the time. It was

time for her to cut ties with him altogether and move on. For some reason, it was feeling harder than it should have, but she knew that she was just a soft-hearted person and never saw herself as tough enough when she needed to be.

“Huuuuuu,” she sighed deeply as she grabbed her phone and pushed send.

The phone barely got off a full ring.

“Hello,” Tino answered immediately.

“Shouldn’t you be working instead of texting me?” she teased, starting the conversation off light.

“It’s my break. I got a client coming in about thirty minutes, so you got me right now. I’m all yours,” he told her.

“No, you not,” she sassied.

“Don’t be like that.”

“Nah, I’m serious. That’s kinda what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Uh oh. What’s on your mind?”

“Well, I wanna give things with Kwon a real chance. I know you don’t wanna hear this. I know it’s the last thing you wanna hear, but you put yourself in this position, and I can’t continue to sugarcoat it. You fucked up,

you know? I didn't do anything wrong, you did. So now that I'm in this position, I have to make a decision, and I made the best one for me."

"But you still moving too fast, baby. It's only been a couple of months—"

"I think it's been long enough. Besides that, we're going into business together and we have all of these plans outside of our relationship that I know it would only make sense from here that we try to finish what we started. Our relationship never got a chance to bloom, and I do still care for him."

"Damn, that's how you feel, huh? Guess it ain't no changing your mind."

"Nah," she admitted somberly.

Saying goodbye to Tino still hurt after being away from him for months. She knew this would be the last conversation they had about them. It felt like they were lowering their relationship into the ground to dwell in its final resting place.

"I understand, I'll respect your wishes," Tino said.

"Thank you. I wish you the best."

"I wish you the same."

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

She felt her tear ducts swelling as she ended the call. She quickly blinked the tears away as she thought about how breakups were such a cruel and ugly part of life. She didn't wish it on anyone. It made her think about her best friend and the bullshit she was on. She'd risked her marriage for a night of pleasure without even safely planning any of it through. They'd had words about it on more than one occasion since the party, but as usual, Endy was able to back her off, playing on Des' non-confrontational personality. Endy told her it was a one-time thing but since then, she'd gone mute about it, which made Des think she wasn't being honest. She told herself that she would try and have at least one last talk with Endy before she messed around and ruined her marriage.

Blended aromas from the food court put Endy's nostrils and stomach on high alert as she drifted through the sitting area, taking the shortcut to her favorite spot, The Salad Bowl. She made to the short line just before more patrons swooped in right behind her. The tall white man in front of her looked irritated and anxious as he stepped up to give his order. Glancing to her left, just people watching, she spotted Steffan in the line for

Mexican food. He'd spotted her already and gave her a wave as soon as they made eye contact.

She smiled and waved back. Since the night they'd had sex, Steffan had been on her mind on a daily. They talked at work but not as much as they did before. It was like he was trying to give Endy her space, but not so much that she would have to question if he was still into her. The fact that he was handling the situation so well made her even more drawn to him. When she got her salad he was still in line. They made eye contact again and she nodded to the table she had her eyes on, giving him the cue to join her. Moments later, he had his food, heading her way. As Steffan approached, Tae called, but she quickly silenced it and let the call go to voicemail.

"Hey," she greeted.

"How you doing today, with your fine self?" Steffan greeted as he sat down.

"Not bad, not bad at all. How are you?"

Dressed in a sky-blue polo and white slacks, she eyeballed Steffan like he was a side dish on her table. It was like this now every time she laid eyes on him. Now that he was more than just an idea in her head, his charm and sexiness were magnified. She could feel her body craving him.

“You know me, just counting down the hours to when it’s time for us to connect again.”

“Whatever, you didn’t even come to the gym yesterday. I had to work out alone.”

“Yeah, my bad, something came up with my dad and I had to go and check on him.”

Endy’s eyes widened with alarm.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, he’s fine, just had a little health scare.”

“Oh... well, I’m glad he’s okay.”

As the two of them began to eat, they talked in between bites, mostly about the workout schedule and routine. It was easy for them to not have to communicate with each other over the phone because they still spent time together either at work or at the gym four days a week. But the sexual tension between them that had been released was slowly building up again.

“I wanna ask you something,” Steffan said as he finished up his food.

“Ask away.”

He wiped his mouth with a napkin and looked her in the eyes.

“Would I sound selfish if I said that once wasn’t enough? That it only made me hungrier?”

Endy’s head tossed backed in laughter. She glanced around before her voice went low.

“What are you saying, I’m a snack?”

“Not at all. I’m saying you’re a meal, but I was only fed a small portion. I needed more time to... explore you.”

Her pussy throbbed.

“Oh god.” She blushed, covering her mouth as sinful thoughts bombarded her mind. “Can we talk about this outside of this building?” she pleaded, feeling like a schoolgirl, hoping no one could see the lust in her eyes.

“We sure can.” Steffan smiled. “We most definitely can.”

Today was the day to meet with the first volunteers for Boyz in the Hood, and Kwon was super excited. Des hadn’t seen him smile this much since the day he came home. They arrived at the newly renovated clubhouse, as Kwon called it, about an hour before the meeting was to start.

Inside the main room now was a classroom-sized chalkboard on one wall, a laptop wall that ran the length of the room, game tables in the back, and a hundred-inch mounted television with chairs in the front. The Boyz in the Hood sign and logo hung right over the television on the wall. Kwon sat in one of the television chairs, brushing his hair obsessively. He was dressed in a blue and yellow UofM sweater, dark blue jeans, and blue and yellow Air Dunks.

“You nervous?” Des questioned as Tae came back into the building after taking a private call with Endy.

“Lil’ bit,” he admitted.

Seven years ago, Des would’ve never believed he could pull off this kind of leadership role, but staring at the grown man he’d become, she just knew he was equipped. He was a different person. Behind the full beard and hardened features was a man that had fully evolved and found his purpose. Still handsome, his face now reflected his checkered past. There was pain there, but his eyes shined bright with ambitions of the future.

“You got this,” she told him before the doorbell rang with the first volunteers.

“I got it,” Tae said, as he was already near the door.

Kwon stood to greet whoever came through the door. In came a peanut-brown man of average height, followed by a taller, much darker gentleman.

“What’s up fellas, glad you could make it.” Kwon stepped to them and extended his hand. “Markwon, but everybody just calls me Kwon.”

“Mandrell, but everybody calls me Man Man,” the brown-skin man said.

As soon as he spoke, Kwon could smell the liquor on his breath. It was only 1 p.m. He hoped this wasn’t a representation of how the day was going to go. Next, he met Clyde, the darker of the two. Clyde seemed to be sober and serious about volunteering his time. Moments later, more people showed up and Kwon greeted everyone with a smile and handshake. Most of the men that showed up were at least ten years Kwon’s senior, which he wasn’t that surprised by. This was exactly what he needed, some men with real life experiences that he had yet to conquer. But there was one guy that showed up that had to be at least a couple years younger than Kwon, or at least he looked it.

His name was Tywon but his nickname was Treach because he bared a striking resemblance to the old school rapper from Naughty by Nature. He told Kwon he’d recently come back home from the military, and

he was looking for something positive to keep him busy when he wasn't working. Kwon didn't know how to take Tywon, or Treach as he liked to be called, at first glance, but if he had something to offer the group and the kids, he was welcome. After a good fifteen people showed up, Kwon got the meeting started as people continued to file in. He stood at the front of the room looking out at all the faces, some familiar but most of them not.

“I wanna thank you all for coming to build with us today. I think this could be a new beginning for everybody involved and for this hood. I know I explained a lot of what Boyz in the Hood is all about online, but just in case you missed it, I'ma run it back. Boyz in the Hood is just about that. It's about these young black men around here that keep getting led down a path of destruction. They didn't ask to be here, you know? This world or this environment. None of us did. So, I think it's time to start taking care of our own and raising more young kings and fewer criminals and convicts, what y'all think?”

“Say it louder!” someone shouted as a mixture of agreeable responses came from the crowd.

The first set of females came through the door, followed by a third female that didn't seem to be with them. Kwon continued.

“First and foremost, before you’re accepted as a volunteer, we will be doing a background check on everyone. We’re asking people to trust us with their kids, so that’s gonna be mandatory. We’re also looking for people who have a background on any teachable skills that we can implement into our programs. Things like computer skills, knowledge on smart money habits or credit building, job skills teaching, self-defense like martial arts, and boxing. Boyz in the Hood will be a wealth of information. We’ll start small and hopefully continue to grow.”

A videographer stood in the corner filming his speech. As Kwon continued to talk, he had the entire audience hanging onto every word. He sounded so confident in his plans for the neighborhood as he paced the floor, making eye contact with everyone. A few more females came in while he was talking. They all looked old enough to have teenagers. Then Tae let in some guys that immediately didn’t look like they belonged there. A wave of caution swept the room as everyone looked on. They all looked to be in their mid-twenties, dressed in hoodies and Timbs. Their bloodshot eyes scanned the room as they moseyed in and found seats in the back.

A strong marijuana scent consumed the air as Kwon made eye contact with all three of them.

“We gotta try and get these kids before the streets get ‘em. To each his own, but we wanna let these young boys out here know they got options. So that’s what we’re here for, to present some options,” he said, looking straight at the back row filled with obvious street niggas.

The cappuccino-brown dude with the long dreads and glistening jewelry gave Kwon an ice grill. He had the look of a demon in his eyes. Kwon didn’t flinch as they stared each other down. “If you scared of the neighborhood hustlers, then this ain’t the place for you. Everybody should want a better, safer neighborhood, including them. Everybody got kids that they wanna see grow up and be better than they were. So if they stay out of our way we stay out of theirs,” he went on.

By now, Des was craning her neck to see if the men who’d come in were still ice grilling Kwon the way they were when they came in. She couldn’t speak for anyone else, but she was definitely afraid they were going to be a problem.

Chapter 10

Tae woke up with a hard-on, like he was coming out of a wet dream. He laid there trying to decide if it was his full bladder or his hormones trying to get his attention. Thankfully, things had gone off without a hitch during the first volunteer's meeting, because Tae was just as concerned as Des about the dudes that came in seemingly only to gather information on the group. After getting to know Kwon as an adult, Tae was more trusting of him than he initially was.

He trusted this was a dude that would have his back no matter what happened and to move forward with his commitment, that was something he had to be sure of. Although he forgave him, he never forgot about how Kwon had left him to fend for himself when they were teens. Their friendship had truly been through the fire and back. Today was the second meetup, and he was glad Endy didn't complain about him spending his day off with the group's obligations.

Endy was awakened by the soft caress of Tae's hand rubbing her ass. He figured since they were parting ways early, he'd get some early morning loving to start the day off right. She felt the kiss of his lips on her

bare shoulder. She immediately began to feel a little guilty as she conjured up her lie.

“Baby,” she spoke softly.

“Huh,” he replied, still feeling her up.

“Before you get yourself too worked up, I came on early last night,” she lied.

Tae stopped and collapsed onto the bed in frustration. Lately, their sex life had been slowing down. He had no idea that the real reason Endy wasn't attending the meetings with him was that she was using the time to sneak off and be with Steffan. She had plans to see him again today.

“I'm sorry, baby. I'll make it up to you. You know I always do.”

She told herself she would give her husband some head tonight to make it up to him. She wasn't in the mood to do it right now, but she knew she couldn't keep turning him down for sex to please Steffan. She had to find a better balance.

“You better,” Tae said.

Kwon was out making runs with his son, getting things for the clubhouse and their house as well. Today he drove Des's BMW and let

Joevonne ride in the front passenger seat for the first time. Joevonne stared aimlessly out of the window as his dad was lost in thought about the thing that consumed him most days, Boyz in the Hood. Since the first meeting, they'd done background checks on almost everyone that attended. After getting to know the volunteers a little, so far they only had five guys who were picked to be big brothers.

There was Harold, Austell, Jason, Treach, and Clyde. They all seemed to be solid, with the right intentions, and brought something to the table. Jason was a substitute teacher and tutor, and Treach was trained in all kinds of self-defense. He knew he needed a few more guys before he opened enrollment, but he was still getting inboxes and DMs every day, so he was confident he'd find the right men. Earlier that morning, he'd sent Boo some money through J-Pay, and it brought him back to his incarceration and how quickly his life had changed in a matter of months.

He knew that there were plenty of guys with criminal records that weren't career criminals and could've probably been a valuable asset to the group, but he couldn't take the chance. This had to be about putting the best interest of the youth as the number one priority.

“Daddy,” Joevonne called out.

“What's up?”

“If you didn’t shoot nobody, why did the police put you in jail for all that time?” Jevonne asked as they passed a patrol car.

“It was a misunderstanding, that’s all,” Kwon said as his guilt from lying to his son instantly kicked in.

“My cousin, Tariq, said you shot them because they were messing with you.”

Kwon glanced at his son, who was staring in his face searching for answers.

“Don’t listen to your cousin, he’s a kid just like you. He doesn’t know anything but what other people tell him.”

“Okay, that’s true, I guess. If somebody was messing with me, I’d shoot ‘em, like boom, boom, boom!” He gestured with his fingers like a gun.

Kwon pulled up to the red light, slamming on brakes harder than intended.

“Boy, don’t you ever let me hear you say that again!” he yelled. “Shooting somebody don’t make you tough, and it don’t make you no man. A coward a kill quicker than anybody, trust me, I know.”

“Sorry,” Jevonne apologized, lowering his head in shame.

Kwon tried to calm himself down as the light turned green.

“You know what makes you a man?”

“No.”

“Your morals, your decisions, standing on your own two feet, the way you treat other people. Now I know you kinda young for me to be talking to you about morals and all that stuff, but you understand the difference between right and wrong a little bit, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, your morals is just the thing inside you that helps you do the right thing even when it’s the hardest thing to do. Does that make sense?”

“I guess.” He shrugged.

Kwon reached over and rubbed his son’s head as he cruised.

“You’ll learn. I’m sorry I yelled at you, but don’t ever say that again, okay?”

“Okay... but can I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“What about when the police shoot the bad guys? Is that wrong?”

Kwon shook his head. He knew his son was too young to be having these types of conversations with him. He definitely wasn't ready to talk to him about police brutality and dirty cops.

“Right and wrong can be tricky at your age, son. You have to get some more life under your belt to understand a lot of it. It's like in the jungle, the lion has to kill and eat other animals to feed their cubs and survive. All the animals do it. It's not right or wrong, it's just what they have to do to survive. I know that's not an answer but...in life, sometimes something has to die so that something else can live.”

Joevonne went back to staring out of the window, in deep thought about what Kwon had just laid on him. Kwon was thanking God that he was here with his son to plant his ideas into his head instead of Joevonne succumbing to the ethics and false ideologies of the cold world that surrounding them.

When Endy met up with Steffan at his home, they once again wasted no time with the small talk. She tore at his belt buckle as they practically ballroom danced their way to the bedroom, kissing and rubbing each other. He pulled her blouse down on one side, just enough to expose her neck and shoulder as he tasted her skin and gripped her ass cheek. Endy

pushed him down onto the bed and ripped off his pants, flinging them onto the floor.

Staring with lust in her eyes, she undressed and crawled into the bed while Steffan stroked his rock-hard penis slowly. Endy rolled the condom down onto his shaft before she mounted him with one hand resting on his chest and the other guiding his dick inside of her. With two hands full of juicy, butter soft booty, Steffan began to bounce her up and down on his rod as she moaned and made fuck faces that drove him crazy. He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted from the bed, digging deep inside of her. Endy's hips wiggled as her neck fell back, and she relaxed her body into his arms.

He sucked on her breasts longingly as she continued gyrating her hips with just enough room in his arms for quick, contrasting motions. He cradled her tighter the faster she rode.

“Shit! Steffan! Shit!” she cried out, bouncing like she was riding a buck wild horse.

Sweat dripped down the small of her back and side onto his fingers, as Steffan held on for dear life. Just when she felt her knees growing weak, he flipped her onto her back and plummeted into her from a side angle that made Endy cum instantly. This was supposed to be the last time. Every time

was supposed to be the last time, but each fuck was better than the last. It was still all about the sex with Endy, but it was too good to give it up.

Coming up at 11:00, gun violence erupts in Detroit over the weekend. Three separate shootings on the Eastside leaving five people dead and one man in critical condition. More on news at 11:00.

“Psssss,” Kwon sighed as he lay in bed next to Des.

Des turned the channel and sat the remote on the nightstand.

“That don’t make no damn sense,” she fussed.

“You know what’s fucked up? It’s not even warm yet and they clowning like this. What’s gon’ happen when it gets hot?”

“That’s why we gotta be careful when we go to the hood from now on. I don’t trust them dudes that showed up that day.”

“We getting the security cameras installed in the building tomorrow,” Kwon informed.

Kwon could see the look of apprehension in her eyes. She had every right to feel that way, but he truly believed in his heart that this was God’s plan for him and he was protected. He lifted from the bed, resting on his side and elbow so he could look her in the eyes.

“Look, I’m not fooling myself. I know what I’m up against, but I believe this is what I’m supposed to be doing with my life. I’m out here for a reason.”

“I know...we just gotta believe that we’re walking in purpose,” Des replied, trying to convince herself more than anybody that Kwon’s plan could work.

“That’s right...we gotta believe.”

Chapter 11

Today was the first day that kids were allowed to sign up and join the Boyz in the Hood club. The way Kwon set it up, instead of the boys having one big brother that they'd hang out with all the time and give them valuable life skills, they'd have a bunch of big brothers. There were 30 spots open on a first-come, first-serve basis. Kwon had fourteen enrollments on the first day. Most of the kids were near the minimum age of thirteen or fourteen. A lot of them were kids that were not drawn to sports and had no real outlet to explore themselves socially.

As he met with the kids and their parents, Kwon could feel an overwhelming sense of accomplishment, just knowing that there was a need for what he'd brought to the neighborhood. Once the parents had signed all the consent forms and left their kids with the crew, Kwon turned on the music, cranked up the volume, and threw his hands in the air celebrating. The speakers blasted a local rapper named Peezy's new song, "Magic Johnson."

/You ain't really living what you rapping/

/Y'all niggas need to quit with all that capping/

"If y'all know the words, let me hear it," Kwon told them.

/Hear ya man died, damn what happen/

/When I found out the news I couldn't even stop laughing/

/Shitting on these niggas need a napkin/

All the kids joined in because they knew the song word for word. They'd all played the video on YouTube dozens of times. He had the moms sign consent about the music they would listen to at the club as well. As they all rapped along with the music, throwing hands up, Kwon could see that the kids were excited that they would be able to listen to their favorite rap songs. The look in their eyes told him that a lot of them were forced to be here and already had come to realize it wasn't what they were expecting.

When the song was over, Kwon signaled to Treach to turn the music down.

“Yeah, that's right. We gon' bang that gangsta rap music up in here. We love that gangsta rap music, it's a part of our culture, but let me tell you something. We not gon' live out the music. We gon' learn the difference between entertainment and real life. We as young black men in the hood tend to let the music take control of our decision-making skills sometimes. That's not what music is for. Rap music is a billion-dollar industry because people all over the world love it. We got half of young corporate America

riding around listening to trap music, but they don't go out and try to shoot nobody when the song is over, you feel me?"

All the boys nodded in agreement.

"We got a understanding, that's what I'm talking about. Turn that shit back up, fam," he instructed and jumped right back to grooving to the music.

After a couple more songs, they turned the music off and got down to the purpose of the day. First, all the mentors, 10 in all now, stood in front of the room and introduced themselves and told the kids all about themselves. Then it was the kids' turn, but Kwon didn't make them stand in front of the room like they were in school. Everyone introduced themselves from wherever they were seated at the time. Kwon asked them all what they planned to do after graduating from high school, and only half of them had an idea of what they wanted to do with their lives.

"How many of y'all already know each other?" Kwon asked.

"I know everybody," one boy quickly said.

All the kids agreed they knew him. Then some of the kids pointed to and called out the names of the other kids they knew.

“That’s good, I’m glad a lot of y’all already know each other. We all about building bonds up in this joint. So the people you see in this room, they can all become like family. You don’t gotta go and join a gang to feel like you a part of something. Half them niggas ain’t gon’ give a fuck about you anyway. Boyz in the Hood cares about you, and we gon’ fight for your future.”

The first official meetup ended around five o’clock. Starting Monday, the clubhouse would be open from three to seven on weekdays and twelve to seven on the weekends. Kids could come and do their homework after school and then hang out or just come and hang out. Kwon left the clubhouse and drove to Ryan’s house. He wanted to try and convince his father to come in and speak with the kids. Ryan wasn’t involved from the conception of Boyz in the Hood. He knew his work schedule just wouldn’t permit him the time. After explaining what he thought his dad could offer to the group, explaining some of the core values he’d instilled in his son, Ryan agreed to speak with the kids once in the coming weeks.

Kwon stepped outside, feeling accomplished because he was able to convince his father to come and talk with the boys. Coming off the porch, he glanced to his right and spotted a young dude walking down the middle of the street with no shirt on, gripping an assault rifle. He had a fire in his

eyes that he'd seen before in his own. The closer her got, Kwon realized it was Bobby from right down the street. He'd known Bobby practically all his young life, but this seventeen-year-old version, he wasn't familiar with.

Kwon rushed off the porch and toward the kid with the AK-47 that held a banana clip as he marched angrily up the block.

“Bobby, Bobby, Bobby! Slow down, my boy. Bobby, please, slow down and talk to me,” he begged as he approached with his hands up in a non-threatening manner.

Bobby continued without even glancing at Kwon. Kwon was almost close enough to cut off his path, but knew that wasn't a smart idea. He looked to have been in a scuffle. A scuffle that he might have caught the worst end off.

“Bobby, listen to me. I know what you going through right now, lil' homie, but it's not worth it. Whatever it is, you can find another way, I promise.”

Bobby made eye contact with him for the first time. He was definitely in killer instinct mode as his jaw and lip tightened while he gripped the assault rifle defiantly.

“Move, Kwon, this ain’t got shit to do with you,” he growled as he went to pass the man he knew and respected.

In a split-second judgement call, he made a decision. Kwon stepped in front of Bobby and blocked his path. The kid came to a halt.

“Don’t throw your life away, Bobby. I guarantee somebody done saw you walking down the street with that gun and called the police. The police will be pulled up by the time you let off a shot. You’ll be in jail in an hour. Don’t throw your life away, Bobby.”

When Bobby didn’t attempt to move around him, Kwon knew he was getting through to him. “Listen, Bobby, you don’t gotta tell me what happened, dog, I don’t care. Just come on, man, get off the street with this gun before the police come. You can find a better way, dog. One day of anger ain’t worth your life, homie, I promise you. Come on, man, let me take you home or wherever you need to go.”

Bobby was thinking as he saw neighbors outside looking on now. Reality started to set in.

“I’m not giving you my gun.”

“I don’t want your gun, Bobby, I just wanna get you off the streets with it. Come on, man,” he instructed as he headed toward his car.

Bobby followed behind him, walking around to the passenger seat. He got in the car and sat the AK between his legs. Ryan was outside looking on as well when Kwon started the car and sped off. As soon as he made it to the corner, he spotted two police patrol cars about five blocks away.

“See! What the fuck I tell you?” Kwon barked.

He bent the right, drove two blocks and bent a left, then mashed the gas to get himself and Bobby away from the scene as fast as possible.

Boo arrived at the Wayne County Jail Monday afternoon to stand in front of a judge for his role in the death of SB’s son and Reo. Although he planned to plead guilty, they still had to go through all the formalities. Boo was just glad to be out of the hole and back into regular population. Soon, he ran into other inmates that he knew from the streets. He quickly learned about the secret his brother and his girl had been keeping from him about Kwon’s house being shot up the first week he came home. He called Tae as soon as he was granted access to a phone.

“What the fuck, bro? You wasn’t gon’ tell me about that shit that happened to Kwon?” Boo growled as soon as he answered.

“Ummmm... What shit?” Tae said, confused.

He knew more than likely what his brother was calling about, but he didn’t want to spill it unless he was absolutely sure.

“Niggas tried to get at Kwon?”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, that, nigga, what you mean, oh that? Niggas got problems out there already?”

“Man, we handled it. I didn’t wanna put that worry on you while you was going through all that shit, bro.”

“Fuck that! Nigga, you gotta tell me what the fuck is going on at all times. Is you sure it’s handled?”

“Yeah, it’s handled. Who told you about it?”

“Got my sources, man. I’m the county now so I can deal with this other charge.”

“Damn, foreal? Can you have visits?”

“I don’t know if I’ma be here long enough for a visit.”

Boo spotted an unfamiliar face giving him an ice grill. He watched the dude like a hawk as he crept by, maintaining eye contact. “The fuck you

looking at, nigga?” Boo lashed.

“What’s going on, bro?” Tae asked.

“I don’t know. I think I’ma have to mop this nigga.”

“Dog, don’t go right back to the hole, nigga, you just got out,” Tae reminded him.

Boo thought about it. He wasn’t ready to go back in the hole, especially in county jail. The man he’d threatened went on to his cell, and Boo tried to calm himself down before he did something stupid.

“I’ma check on that visit situation and let you know, bro. I gotta go.”

Although he didn’t tell her about it, Des found out about the incident with Bobby anyway. She was angry with Kwon at first, but then realized that he’d probably saved the boy’s life. They had a long talk about it, and she just reiterated that he also had a son to raise of his own. Today, Kwon agreed to do his second on-camera interview with the media. He allowed a local news station to come inside and see what the Boyz in the Hood Clubhouse was all about. The place was packed today because the boys knew they would be on television, and they suspected that Kwon also had

another trick up his sleeve. When the media arrived, Tae, Clyde, and Harold went outside to their cars. As they were setting up to start recording, the men came back in one by one carrying boxes of gym shoes. The week before, Kwon had taken down all the boys' shoe sizes and what shoes they would like to have but maybe couldn't afford. Today he was hoping to put a smile on some faces. He knew the boys were at an age where their clothes became more important and could have a direct impact on their self-confidence. The young black female reporter smiled as they started to record and he explained what was happening.

“So today, we're here at the Boyz in the Hood Clubhouse and we're gonna get these young men's feet together. You know it's nothing like fresh pair of kicks to make you walk with your head up high, so we just wanna bless the kids today as a thank you for joining the program.”

With that being said, he grabbed the first box of Air Jordan's off the table.

“Jaquan, come here.”

Jaquan jumped up and came rushing to the front.

“Don't gotta call me twice,” he teased, and they all laughed before he thanked Kwon and the rest of the men. “Thanks y'all.”

“Jason, come here.”

“Reece, come here.”

“Camdyn.”

“Cornell.”

“Raylin.”

As he called out their names, each one of them were shocked to realize they had the exact shoes they’d asked for. Some of the silly kids did a little dance as they received their shoes. When they were done passing out the shoes, all the volunteers and kids got together and took pictures. Then the reporter asked for a picture of just Kwon and all the kids. The kids made crazy poses and faces as the photographer snapped away. Kwon smiled big for the camera, taking in the moment, thinking of how proud everyone would be when they saw the segment aired on television. He never felt more like he was walking in his purpose than he did on that day.

Fresh out of a long hot shower, Endy wiped the steamy mirror clean and took a step back, admiring herself in the nude. Her consistency to her workout routine was starting to manifest real results, and she smiled proudly as she saw her body transforming back to what it used to look like

in high school. At the same time, it seemed her newly sculpted body was only drawing both of the men in her life closer, with her husband and her side dude each vying for more time.

She'd agreed to see Steffan today, but she'd been up all night with Tae after a romantic date night. It was becoming too much, and today she was trying to use Des as a scapegoat to get away, even after Des begged her to cut things with Steffan off. After appreciating herself in the mirror a little longer, Des dried off and went to get dressed. She ran into Tae in the hallway, and he gawked at her frame with the skimpy towel wrapped around it.

“Got damn, look at that body. All mine,” he praised, grabbing her by the hand. “Come here, girl.”

He pressed her against the wall and kissed her lips. She kissed him back.

“Can I go get dressed now?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“’Cause...whatever plans you got, I want you to cancel them and stay here with me.”

“You had me to yourself all last night. I can’t go hang out with my best friend?”

He kissed her lips, palmed her ass, and ran kisses down her neck and breasts.

“You don’t wanna stay with me?” he pleaded.

She smiled as the feel of his soft lips on her body made her reconsider.

“I just got out the shower, boy, back up off me.” She pushed him away.

He held her with both her hands in his.

“Seriously though. With you working out after work and me helping Kwon, we hardly see each other on the weekdays. I just wanna spend some time with my wife. Is that so bad?”

“No, of course not. What would we do, stay home?”

“We don’t have to. We can do something.”

He raised her left hand and kissed it. Then her right. The more Endy thought about it, she didn’t want to see Steffan today. If anybody was gonna lay a hand on her today, it would be her husband.

“Alright, let me think of a lie to tell Des,” she said, but really thinking of Steffan.

Chapter 12

After the segment about Kwon's organization aired on the news, several successful entrepreneurs in the community reached out and donated a substantial amount of money to the worthy cause. Kwon would need donations from the community to keep from spending up all of his own money, while Des applied for grants and came up with ways to fund the movement including selling food and merchandise. As word spread and kids found out about the benefits of joining the clubhouse, ten more teens quickly signed up after seeing dudes rocking two-hundred-dollar kicks they got just for being a member.

Kwon hoped he wouldn't have to always buy their time, but he knew what caught a young kid from the hood's attention. Today, eight of the now eleven volunteers went out in the streets, walking through the neighborhood passing out flyers to women who had teenagers, trying to get the last four remaining slots filled. He wanted those slots filled before the warm weather hit and things got crazy. All the men wore black Boyz in the Hood sweaters with red embroidery as they marched through the neighborhood like a unit, some legal with firearms concealed in their waistline.

Kwon and Tae were out front as Tae scanned the area, watching out for any and everything that looked suspicious while Kwon did most of the talking to the neighbors. Treach was there wearing camouflage pants and combat boots, as if he thought something was about to pop off any second. He trailed the group a few steps behind everyone, watching their backs from the rear. Kwon had learned over the past weeks that Treach still had a military mindset but he seemed to be a good dude. As they moved up and down the street, people stared from their front porches, shocked to see a large group of black men out in the community doing something positive.

“We got four spots left. Only four slots, so make sure you fill out the consent form ASAP if wanna get him in,” Kwon told a tall, mocha-brown woman as he left her front porch.

“I definitely will. I love what y’all doing,” the woman replied.

Down by the end of the block, a house was jumping with traffic that could only be drug related. The people that were swarming to it were addicts, but Kwon didn’t think much of it. It was just another block infested with all the destruction it could handle.

“You getting all the new kids shoes too?” Tae asked.

“I don’t know. You think I should?”

“I don’t know, man. Some of them lil’ niggas probably just came for the shoes.”

“You know they did.” Kwon laughed. “Still better than them going to the trap to get it.”

A red Audi A8 came pulling up the block, and Kwon and all his crew veered toward the curb to get out of the street. The car pulled up alongside him and the passenger side window came down. Kwon was already on high alert and so was Tae. Looking inside, he spotted the dude with the long dreads that came to the clubhouse behind the wheel with another familiar face in the passenger seat. By now, he knew the driver’s name was Daveon.

“What’s up?” Kwon asked plainly.

“Fuck y’all think y’all doing?” Daveon questioned, leaned close to the passenger side making eye contact.

Treach immediately stepped to the front of the group and off to the side to have a clear view of the car and the passengers.

“What it look like we doing? We out here getting these kids off the streets. Fuck you doing?” Kwon shot back with his chest poked out.

He knew he couldn't show any weakness with guys like Daveon. He'd already assessed the situation way beforehand.

"Nah, nigga, not on this block you ain't. You better take that shit somewhere else," Daveon ordered.

Kwon stepped back so he could see all the angles and everyone inside the car.

"This block got kids on it, don't it? Wherever it's young black men at you gon' see me," he told Daveon.

Just then, he looked in the back seat and realized it was Bobby sitting in the back behind the passenger.

"Oh, you think shit a game, huh?" Daveon said, getting angrier.

Kwon turned his attention to Bobby, ignoring Daveon.

"Bobby, wassup man? I thought you was coming to the clubhouse?"

"I was, I am," Bobby fumbled his words nervously.

"You think I'm playing with you niggas?" Daveon went on. "This my muthafucking hood, nigga, and this my block."

"Come today, Bobby. We there until six," Kwon said.

"Yeah, come today," Tae repeated, watching Daveon's every move.

“Yeah, okay, I can show you better than I can tell you,” he warned before he skirted off, furious that Kwon wasn’t thrown off by his threats.

Kwon could see that some of the men were a little shaken up as the confrontation continued on. The look in Jason’s eyes told Kwon he definitely wasn’t cut out for this part of the task. He was a just school teacher trying to help do some good. Kwon made a note of it as Treach tapped him on the arm.

“That nigga gon’ be a problem. We gon’ have to do something about him,” he warned.

Des and Endy rode to the clubhouse with Des behind the wheel, about to drop off pizzas to the boys. On the surface, things seemed to be normal, but they both knew there was still tension between them because of Endy’s recent behavior. Tae was like a brother to Des and Endy was like a sister. It broke her heart to see her acting so selfishly but at this point, she knew there was nothing she could do to stop her.

“Who did your eyebrows, Kenya?” Endy asked as they turned onto Morang.

“Unun, that girl Sha I was telling you about.”

“Oh okay, I still haven’t seen her up there. I’ll ask about her next time I go.”

They spotted Kwon and the others walking back toward the clubhouse as they reached the parking lot.

“Look at them.” Des giggled, thinking they looked like a miniature Black Panther Party or something.

By the time they pulled into the lot, Clyde had spotted them on the camera and came outside to help with all the pizza boxes.

“Hey Clyde,” they said simultaneously.

“Ladies,” he returned and went to open Des’ back door.

“Thank you. Where’s the rest of the help?” she teased.

“There they go, they all with Kwon. It’s just me, Ray, and the boys inside.”

Everyone grabbed all the pizza boxes they could hold and went inside. Ray was holding the door open for everyone. As soon as Des stepped inside, she heard commotion in the back.

“Bitch ass nigga!” Wop!

A fight broke out with Jaquan and Rondell, one of the new boys. They locked each other up in a tussle, throwing punches with one free hand each. The other boys cleared out as they began to sling each other around the room. Clyde had his hands full, but Ray rushed to the back and the two teens broke free of each other and squared up again.

“What’s up?” Jaquan challenged with his guards up.

“What’s up?” Rondell challenged.

Bam! Jaquan threw a connecting blow, and the two went at it again as Ray reached the boys and tried to break it up.

“Stop! Come on, man, stop,” he demanded, jumping in between them while the kids recorded the whole thing.

Rondell threw a punch over Ray’s shoulder that nicked Jaquan just as he was about to stop swinging. That drove him crazy, and he tried with everything he had to break free of Ray, as Ray used his body weight to force Jaquan in the opposite direction. By now, Clyde had rushed in to contain Rondell, but both boys were still struggling to break free. When Kwon walked in and saw the commotion, he was shocked.

“What’s up? What’s going on?”

“They scrapping over a girl,” Cornell snitched.

“Everybody with they phone out recording, delete that shit. Fellas, go make sure they delete it,” he ordered the volunteers.

All the men went around to the guys that were caught recording and watched them delete the fight. “That’s what’s wrong with y’all niggas now, y’all can’t wait to embarrass somebody. Whatever problems they had, that’s between them and us in this house. We not bringing outsiders into our world, you understand? Anybody got a problem with that, they can leave.”

Des watched on as Kwon called the two boys and took them outside. She wasn’t finished unloading the food, so she had to go out and interrupt what was supposed to be a private conversation. She eavesdropped the entire time.

“If it’s about a girl, just tell the truth. It’s about a girl?” Kwon pressured.

“He can have her, I’on care,” Jaquan said.

“He wasn’t saying that in school. He gon’ try to walk up and put his arm around her like they kicking it, but we already go together,” Rondell countered.

The tension between the boys had been brewing for weeks. The fact that they were in the same room together only brought it to a boil.

“Listen, man, let me tell y’all something. It ain’t neither one of y’all decision to make on who she kick it with. That’s her decision. And when she make it, or if she already made it, as a man you just gotta respect it. Somebody gon’ win, somebody gon’ lose. But how you handle the loss is more important than the L. Shake hands, fist bump, do something, ‘cause I can’t have y’all up in here beefing.”

Both were still highly upset. Jaquan’s nappy fro was all over the place. Rondell had his steaming mad grill still on. “Y’all wanna beef, y’all can’t stay. And then y’all gonna have to tell your family why y’all left the clubhouse. Come on, bump it out,” Kwon pressured.

Against their will, the two boys fist bumped and Kwon told them to head back inside as he went to help Des, who was eavesdropping.

“It’s taking you forever and a day to get four pizzas, huh?” Kwon teased as he went to grab the boxes out of her hand.

Des spotted a young dude walking up the street headed to the clubhouse.

“Who is that?” she asked Kwon.

Kwon turned to look, then a smile eased across his face.

“Oh, that’s Bobby.”

Endy stayed around for the rest of the day, just to see for herself what they did all day at the clubhouse. She and Tae rode home together, and he told her to drive while he posted pictures of the fun they had on his Instagram. He saw that Des had also recently posted some pictures from the clubhouse, which was a little surprising because she didn't post on IG much. He scrolled to her page to see more pics of the day, and he noticed that she hadn't posted pictures but one other time since her birthday. He scanned through the birthday pictures, seeing them for the first time.

He really wanted to see how good his girl looked that night, thinking back to how he'd stayed up waiting on her all night. He spotted men in the pictures that he didn't know. His jealous streak immediately caused him to zoom in, and although Endy was in none of the pictures with men, one face was unmistakable. He showed his phone to Endy.

“Ain't this the guy that was in Jamaica when we was there?”

Endy didn't react, but her eyes did. Her face did.

“Steffan, yeah, why?” she said calmly.

“He know Des?” he questioned.

“Yeah.”

“From where?”

“Whatchu mean from where? He know her, shit, I don’t know.” She panicked.

“So that’s who y’all was hanging out with on Des’ birthday?”

Endy felt like she was being backed into a corner, so she used the only defense mechanism she had. Her anger.

“No! He just happened to be there, and what the fuck difference does it make?”

“Oh, it make a muthafucking difference!” Tae yelled back. “You didn’t come home till four in the fucking morning that night.”

“It’s wasn’t four in the morning,” she quickly denied.

“Whatever it was, it was too late for you to be hanging with some nigga from your job.”

“I wasn’t hanging with him. He just happened to be there. Tae, stop, okay?”

He took a deep breath. Endy always accused him of being overly jealous, and this was one of the few times he questioned whether he was overreacting. “You have me, okay? I’m all yours. I don’t want no other nigga. Another nigga can’t do shit for me.”

He looked at his wife and she sounded so convincing, he hated he'd even brought it up. He wouldn't apologize, but he would leave it alone. He shot her another suspicious gaze.

"You better be all mine," he told her.

Later that evening, Des, Kwon, and Jevonne sat at the dinner table having a late dinner from the local Caribbean carryout spot close by. Des watched her son and his father as they interacted, something she liked to do.

"Slow down, playa, you ain't in county, ain't nobody gon' try and take your food," Kwon teased.

"What's county?" Jevonne asked, mouth stuffed full of jerk chicken and plantains.

"Nothing, don't worry about it, just slow down and chew your food. You have fun with your grandma?"

"Always."

"She ain't more fun than me."

He waited until he swallowed.

"She kinda is."

Joevonne's behavior was really starting to improve slowly and steadily since his father had been home. Des had a strong suspicion that it may not have been so much the physical discipline that sparked the change, but the bridging of the gap in the relationship between father and son. She realized now that Tino was only tolerating her son and not really raising him, as to where Joevonne and Kwon were like Batman and Robin. They loved being together and they loved one another wholeheartedly. Kwon's cellphone rang with a call from Treach, but he didn't answer. He and Treach talked a lot, but most of the time he called it wasn't something that couldn't wait.

Right after Treach called, Harold called, and that made him answer because Harold never called.

"Hello?"

"Hey man, sorry to bother you so late, but I got some bad news."

"What's wrong?"

"That boy Darius in jail."

"Darius?" Kwon had to think. He knew Darius was one of the new boys that joined recently. "Darius the skinny, dark-skin dude?"

"Yeah. He in jail for a shooting."

“Don’t say that,” Kwon said as his whole mood soured.

“I hate to have to say it. It’s something that happened after he left the clubhouse, that’s all I know right now.”

“You talked to his family?”

“Not yet. What you wanna do?”

“We need to find out what happened.”

Kwon didn’t know if he wanted to get involved. He’d barely known this kid a week and he was in jail for a shooting. He needed to learn more.

“You want me to try and reach out to his family?”

“Nah, let’s see if they reach out and tell us something first, and then I guess we’ll go from there.”

“Alright. If I hear something else, I’ll keep you posted.”

“Alright.”

Kwon ended the call with Des watching and waiting.

“What’s wrong?”

He took a deep breath and told himself again that this was what he’d signed up for. He looked at his son.

“I’ll talk to you about it later,” he told her.

Chapter 13

When Endy stepped inside the food court, she had one thing on her mind, and it wasn't food. She quick-stepped through the open spaces, scanning Steffan's favorite restaurants to see if he was in line. She found him already seated at a table near her salad store. She made a beeline straight toward him.

"Hey beautiful," he greeted.

"Hey, how you doing?" She sat.

He noticed the concern in her eyes.

"I'm good. What's wrong?"

"Listen, we gotta stop," she said, getting straight to the point. "At least for the time being."

"Um, okay. I can't say I'm happy about that, but...I understand." He nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, things at home are not that peaceful right now, and I know it's mostly my fault, so I just need to work on that."

“Sure you know. I know your husband comes first. I won’t stand in the way of that, but I hope this doesn’t mean we have to start avoiding each other.”

“No, no, I’m not saying that. I think we can still work out together and stuff. I mean, we do go to the same gym.” She laughed.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“Yeah, of course. I just think that maybe we should chill on all the lunch breaks together and stuff like that. Just to curve the temptation, you know?”

Steffan looked around to see if anyone they knew was nearby.

“So, what you saying is the more time you spend with me, the more you want me?” he flirted.

“Hey, stop. See, that’s why I’m no longer spending my lunch break with you, because you the devil.”

Steffan used his fingers to make two little horns on the back of his head. Endy shook her head, thinking to herself how hard it was going to be to slowly peel herself away from this man she’d become so attached to. This was her way of letting him down easily. She had to cut him loose and

get back to being a better wife to her husband. She was just glad she was able to get control of herself before things got out of hand.

There was a sad and eerie feeling that came over you walking through the corridors on the visitor's side of county jail. Inside the visiting booth, Tae barely glanced at an inmate and what seemed to be his girlfriend, and could still see the pain of uncertainty in his eyes. When he sat down across from Boo staring at him through the Plexiglass, one thing was for sure, there was no uncertainty in his eyes. Boo had accepted his fate and seemed to be at peace with it.

“Bro!” he sounded with a grin as soon as he sat down.

“What’s good, bro?” Tae returned, smiling and happy to see his brother upbeat.

“Same shit. I been trying to get every bitch I know to come visit me while I’m here, nigga.” Boo laughed.

“Jazz came down to see you yet?”

Boo looked at him like he was crazy.

“Nigga, you know my bitch was the first one here.”

“Jazz a rider, foreal.”

“I don’t know for how long, but right now she still rocking her members only jacket,” Boo joked.

“How much longer you gon’ be here?”

“Shit, I go back for sentencing in three weeks. Didn’t think they was gon’ let me stay.”

“Man, it’s good as hell to see you, bro.” Tae smiled.

“You too, man. What’s that nigga Kwon up to?”

“You know we been on that Boyz in the Hood thing heavy. It’s starting to come together too, man. He got speakers coming in to talk to the kids and all that. It’s a dope program, man. I’m glad to be a part of it.”

Boo smiled and nodded.

“That’s what’s up, man. What the fuck you be doing though? ‘Cause you don’t know nothing about nothing but sniffing around your wife’s ass to keep up with her,” Boo teased.

“Fuck you, nigga,” Tae shot back. “But foreal, I talk to the kids too and try to give ‘em some game on the high school years and the pressures that comes with shit like that. But honestly, I just follow Kwon’s lead and be there for whatever he need me for. Like I said, he got a lot of guest

speakers lined up, so they gon' learn a lot of shit while they there. He got some doctors coming in this week to talk to them about the medical field."

"Damn, foreal?"

Kwon had been using his social media platform to expand the awareness of Boyz in the Hood for funding and guest speakers. So far, everything was going according to plan.

"Yeah, that nigga on point with his shit," Tae said proudly.

"I'm proud of y'all boys, man. Y'all niggas making me do this time in peace foreal," Boo said, smiling big now.

Tae realized in the moment that the roles had been reversed and the look of admiration was now in his brother's eyes. He also knew what he meant by doing his time in peace. Boo had given up any chances of freedom in hopes to give someone else a shot that would make something of themselves, and it worked. "Yo, I heard about the young boy that shot them niggas in the hood last week too. I used to fuck with his sister," Boo informed.

"Darius?"

"Yeah, that little nigga. I heard he here in county now."

"Yeah, his bond was high as hell because one of the niggas died."

Boo shook his head.

“That’s fucked up.”

“He had just joined the clubhouse too.”

“Straight up? Kwon ain’t try to bail ‘em out?”

“Naw, we didn’t really know ‘em like that, so we didn’t wanna send the wrong message. We had just met ‘em, but we going to court for his next court date just to see what’s going on.”

“Don’t get too close to that nigga, though, ‘cause you neva know what kind of enemies he done made with that situation.”

“That’s exactly why we couldn’t bond him out. But aye...” Tae started then stopped.

He wasn’t sure he should.

“What’s up?”

He decided he would just see what his brother knew.

“You know a nigga named Daveon?”

“Yeah, I know that little nigga. Nigga been in and out of jail since forever.”

“I guess that’s why I don’t know ‘em.”

“What about him?”

“Nigga think he run the hood now and shit.”

“Oh yeah? Y’all had any problems with ‘em?”

“Naw, naw, nothing like that,” Tae quickly replied.

Boo shot him a skeptical look. Tae could feel the tension they were creating with the hustlers in the neighborhood. There were still some unresolved issues with Mook to deal with, at least on his end, but he wouldn’t worry his brother with any of it.

“You sure?” Boo said.

“Yeah man, ain’t nothing. Just regular hood shit, you know.”

Boo sat up and leaned in, staring Tae in the eye now without remnants of the smile he wore on arrival.

“Listen to me, bro, whatever you do, man, don’t put yourself in a position to end up in here with me for nobody, you understand? Nobody.”

Tae gazed at his brother, almost looking past him, as he nodded in agreement and drifted off into thoughts of the near future. His future, Boo’s future, his best friend’s future...all of them.

As the word quickly spread about all the good that was happening with the Boyz in the Hood group in the Morang and Cadieux area, more people began to reach out to Kwon about possibly expanding his reach with different chapters of the clubhouse in other neighborhoods. He didn't quite know what that would look like, but the fact that Darius had caught a murder charge the same week he signed up for the program let Kwon know just how badly his movement was needed in the community.

They had enough mentors now where there were always at least five or six guys there every day to cater to the kids' needs. But everyone wasn't up to the task. Jason quit the same day after the run-in with Daveon. While Tae visited his brother in county, Kwon was at the clubhouse having a deep conversation with Booby in the back room while everyone else was up front. Bobby was honest about how he had started hustling over the past year to keep some money in his pocket and save up for a car. Kwon believed Cornell was doing some part-time hustling as well because of the company he kept, but he wasn't going to admit to it, knowing it would cost him his spot in the clubhouse. Kwon focused on one problem at time.

"I gave the work back to them niggas, big bro. I don't even mess around no more," Bobby explained.

"So, is it over now?"

“I’m done, man, I swear.”

“I’m only asking because I can’t have you in here with these other kids, and I can’t have you leaving out of here and going to do all kinda crazy shit like Darius. I got other dudes in here to worry about too. Now if you find you a lil’ part-time gig, I’ll help you get the whip if you show up like you really serious about this shit. You know that ain’t nothing to do, but don’t let nobody else know I said that. That’s between me and you, alright?”

“That’s a bet.” Bobby nodded and slapped fives with Kwon.

The doorbell buzzed just as they were finishing up, so Bobby and Kwon went back out to the front.

“And next time, it’s gon’ be worse!” Kwon yelled out playfully, pointing a finger at Bobby as if he’d just beat him up in the back.

Everyone that got the joke laughed as he moved toward the front. To his surprise, when the door opened, Treach moved to the side, and in came Tino.

“What’s up fellas? How’s everybody doing?” Tino came in greeting everyone with a smile.

“Tinooooo,” Kwon sounded, not knowing what to expect at the moment.

He walked up to Tino and the two slapped fives. “Whatchu doing up here?”

He knew he didn’t owe Tino’s uncle any more money, so he was clueless as to why he was there.

“Real talk, I love what you doing, Kwon. I’m seeing the hood all over the news, and I’m seeing how you getting these kids together and off the streets dog, and I’m sitting up thinking that this is my hood too. I need to be trying to help out. You got room for one more?”

Tino was a year older than Kwon. That fact that he’d come home and in less than a year was making positive change in the community tugged at Tino’s ego. It made him feel like he wasn’t doing enough. With no kids of his own, he decided that he wanted to help change the mindset of the youth in the hood he grew up in and still loved. He knew it would be hard working around Kwon, much less Des, but his pride was driving him to do it anyway. He also wanted to show Des and himself that Kwon wasn’t a better man than him.

“You sure you wanna do this, fam? I got room if you serious.”

“Yeah man, I was thinking I could teach the kids about fitness and healthy eating habits, you know? The stuff they won’t learn in school though.”

“That’s a good idea, man, we would love to have you.”

The kids weren’t doing anything specific at the moment. Some were playing games on the computer, some were playing table games, and some were just grouped up having conversations about teenage shit. When the doorbell buzzed again, everyone turned to see who else was coming in. From the cameras, Kwon could see that it was Daveon and three of his boys outside. Kwon turned and looked at Bobby before he went to the door.

“They looking for you?” he asked.

Bobby was sitting down watching a table game.

“I’m straight, I’m not going out there,” he replied.

Treach, Clyde, and Kwon went to the door. Kwon opened the door but blocked the entrance path. Daveon stood in front of his team with a smirk on his face.

“What’s up, man?” Kwon asked.

“Where lil’ Bobby at? He in there?”

“Bobby said he good, homie,” Kwon replied as the two stared each other down.

“Man, tell that lil’ nigga to bring his ass out here before I come up there and get ‘em.”

“Ain’t shit up!” Treach shouted from behind Kwon.

By now, all the kids inside had stopped what they were doing, feeling the tension at the door. They watched on nervously, venturing closer to the door.

“What?” Daveon chuckled. “You think we won’t run in there?”

“Oh, I know you won’t,” Kwon said, planting his feet firmly and pulling his jeans up a notch.

No weapons were allowed inside the clubhouse, but they were close by. All he had was his manhood and his volunteers, but that was enough for him.

“Who the fuck you think you talking to, buddy?” Daveon barked as he pulled out a chrome pistol and edged closer to the door.

“You know you on camera, right?” Kwon told him.

“I’on give a fuck!”

“So you gon’ shoot up in a building full of kids? That’s sucker shit. See me in the streets like a man, nigga,” Kwon dared him.

“Fuck this.” Another one of Daveon’s boys tried to move Kwon out of the way.

Kwon shoved him backward. His other boys moved in closer as Treach and Clyde made a barricade with their bodies, blocking the door.

“You ‘bout to get stretched, hoe ass nigga,” Daveon vowed as the pushing and shoving continued at the door while he contemplated his next move.

“Po Po!” a voice called out.

The next thing Kwon knew, Daveon was tucking his pistol and walking away, slowly followed by his crew. Seconds later, the police car came cruising by, recklessly eyeballing the building and the gentlemen walking away from it. As Kwon closed the door and walked away, he knew now that Daveon would for sure be a problem. He was just thankful that the incident didn’t happen while parents were arriving to pick up their kids. He took Bobby to the backroom again.

“Bobby, be straight up with me. You owe them niggas some money?”

He shook his head emphatically.

“Big bro, I don’t owe them niggas shit, on God!”

Kwon studied his demeanor. He looked in his eyes and saw the truth.

“Alright, well, pressure bust pipes not me. Don’t worry about it, I’ll take care of it. I’ma drop you off at home to make sure you straight too,” he told Bobby as he realized the fear in his eyes.

It was a familiar fear. One he’d seen in his own eyes before. Bobby reminded Kwon of a younger version of himself in a lot of ways. The way he dressed, the way he talked, even the girls he picked to date. He refused to let the streets have him.

“Thanks man,” Bobby told him, looking relieved now.

The adrenaline rush from the altercation had the guys still full of excitement and high energy hours after it was over and all the boys had gone home. Kwon was honest with the kids by giving them the choice to tell their parents about what transpired. He also warned them that it might lead to their parents removing them from the clubhouse, but he was praying that didn’t happen. He prayed he was making the right decision by giving

them a choice. He was just trying his best to keep things going in the right direction. That evening, a few of the fellas went to the neighborhood bar to unwind.

Tae joined them shortly after they arrived, and learned of the incident when he got there. Tae was wide-eyed while Kwon gave him a rundown of everything that happened.

“And guess who was right there the entire time?” Kwon said.

“Who?”

“Tino!” he revealed.

“Tino? What the fuck was Tino doing there?”

“I don’t know, man, the nigga said he wanna come volunteer.”

Tae’s neck flew back.

“Get the fuck outta here.” He waved it off.

“On God! I’m as shocked as anybody, but if he wanna come through, he more than welcome. He can be like the fitness coach for the kids, you know?” Kwon said seriously.

“I guess, man,” Tae said, not feeling it.

The Boyz in the Hood crew took up two tables at the rear of the bar. Some ordered food while some just sipped on a beer. Kwon ordered

everybody shots and got them all to agree to take at least one, even if they didn't drink. It was a night of camaraderie, and he figured what better way to solidify the bonds they were creating? He held the shot glass in the air.

“To all the fellas here tonight that decided they neighborhood was worth fighting for, I hope the bond that we building with these kids and among ourselves continues to grow. I know we got a lot of work to do, but I think today showed me that we are all in it for the long hall. Save our hood!”

“Save our hood!” they all shouted in unison.

People looked on, some with admiration, some with distain, as they tossed back shots and laughed at Austell, who didn't drink, making ugly faces as the liquor burned his esophagus. Later on, and a couple shots later, Kwon found himself at the bar with Treach, who was nursing a Corona. He slapped Treach on the back and sat down next to him.

“You really stepped up today, bro, and I wanna thank you for it. It seems like you already be on tip every time it's an issue. I guess that's that military training.”

“You already know. I stay on go mode, that's just the way I am, man.”

“Well, I’m glad you on our side. Let me ask you, though. I know we talked about this a little bit before, but...a young nigga like you...it’s gotta be something that drove you into the clubhouse that day. I mean, you could be doing anything else, chasing pussy, chasing a bag, deep diving into anything else but these kids, and yet here you are with me at twenty-four, dedicating all your free time to this movement.”

Treach took a sip of his drink.

“You know, if I’m honest with myself, I think that this group is saving me. I told you I joined the military because I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life. After five years of it, I still didn’t really know, but I know I didn’t want that for another five years. When I came home and started working, everything was different. I forgot what it was like to be in the D with all the pressures of trying to find your way as a man...a black man. I felt myself becoming lost again, and when I saw what you were doing, it just felt right. I mean, I know I don’t have as much to offer as some of them other niggas do, but I love being a part of the solution instead of the problem.”

Kwon looked in his eyes and he saw the sincerity. He never thought that his movement could be making a positive difference in the volunteer’s lives as well.

“That’s some real shit. And you got a lot to offer, bro, you the closest thing to security we got. We need you, and I fuck with you, Treach, you a solid nigga,” Kwon told him, and they slapped fives.

“Likewise, fam.”

Things were getting back to normal with Endy and Tae, and she was remembering why she married her husband in the first place. It had been a wild ride with Steffan, but it was time to get off and never visit that amusement park again. All the sneaking around and being torn between men was exciting as hell, but as she stood in the kitchen finishing up dinner, she knew she loved her husband too much to break his heart that way. Tae was at the dining room table trying to connect with his phone service because his cellphone had been out of service just about all day.

“They still got you on hold?” Endy asked from the kitchen.

“This the third person I talked to that put me on hold,” he said, shaking his head.

Because his service was so bad, and he didn’t want the call to go out in the middle of the conversation, he was using Endy’s phone. When her phone buzzed with a text message, he glanced at the phone and saw that it was AT&T sending a message. He thought it was strange that they were

sending a text message while he was on the phone with them, but he clicked on it anyway. It was a picture, which was even more strange. When the image came through, Tae was frozen with shock. All he could see was a long brown dick staring him right in the face. Then another message came through.

AT&T: I know you miss this.

At first, for a split second, Tae thought it had to be a wrong number. But as he scrolled the text thread, he quickly realized he was now living in his worst nightmare. There were pictures that Endy had also sent to this person wearing lingerie. His hand started to shake with anger as his whole body turned hot with rage. Endy was in the kitchen where she couldn't hear the buzz from her phone being drowned out by the cracking of chicken frying on the stove.

The customer service rep came through.

“Hello, this is Christine, I apologize for the wait.”

Tae had a blackout. He couldn't hear her words, just mumbo jumbo. He stared dead at Endy with mania in his eyes. She glanced up and their eyes locked, and she realized something was seriously wrong.

“What's wrong with—”

She didn't get to finish the sentence as she had to duck just in time keep her cellphone from busting her in the face as it went crashing into the upper kitchen cabinet.

“YOU CHEATING ON ME, BITCH?” He charged at her like a football linebacker as he came around the stove.

The force of his momentum knocked Endy into the sink and hot grease into the fire as he cocked a balled up fist back.

“YOU CHEATING ON ME, BITCH?”

Endy covered her face with both hands as the grease fire from the pan of chicken spilling on the kitchen stove went poof!

“Tae, don't hit me!” she shouted.

Tae's fist was still cocked back, and it took every ounce of restraint he could muster not to bash her in her face with his fist. He found her neck with his other hand and wrapped his fingers around it as the blaze continued.

“Tae, the fucking kitchen is on fire!” she shouted as she fought him off.

Reality set in as the smoke detector sounded, bringing Tae back into the present moment. Endy rushed to grab the fire extinguisher while Tae

slowly moved away from the fire, still in shock. She rushed in and extinguished the fire quickly. “Open the fucking windows!” Endy shouted as her fear of dying in a house fire was quickly replaced by method of strangulation.

Tae rushed to open the front door and the windows as the house continued to fill with smoke. When he was done, he went back and found Endy’s phone in the kitchen, then went outside, coughing from the fumes. He found the fake number and was about to call as Endy rushed outside trying to take to phone away.

“Endy, I swear to God,” he shot her a look that was so deranged she quickly backed away.

Tears fell from her eyes nonstop as neighbors outside watched from across the street.

“You don’t gotta do that. I’ll tell you everything you want to know,” she pleaded.

“Hello?” a man answered.

“Who is this?” Tae growled, and the man on the other end quickly hung up.

Click. He called right back, and his call was sent to voicemail.

“You’ve reached Steffan...”

“I’m beating the fuck out of you when I see you, boy, that’s on my mama!” Tae vowed.

“Tae, stop, don’t you see our neighbors is out here? Don’t do this.”

“I don’t give a fuck! Fuck them!” he barked. “Steffan, huh?”

Tae bit his lip as he stared at Endy, and his own eyes started to well with tears. He felt like his heart had been broken in half, stomped on, and set on fire. His soul was hurting at that moment. Endy was squeezing her fist together as fear struck her to the core. She didn’t know what was about to happen next. She knew how much he loved her and didn’t know if he was about to snap again. She’d never been afraid of him until now.

“Tae, I broke it off, I swear on my mama, okay?” she said as calmly as possible, as if this was a hostage negotiation.

Tae stared through her momentarily.

“You killed us,” he said as a tear rolled down his cheek. “You fucking killed us.”

He stormed past Endy and into the house, slamming the door so hard he could’ve knocked it off the hinges. Moments later, he appeared with

his car keys. His mind was spinning out of control, and he looked disoriented as he flew past Endy again, tossing her phone in the grass.

“I’m sorry!” was all she could think of.

She was afraid. Afraid of him, afraid of embarrassing herself any further, and afraid that her marriage was over.

Chapter 14

When Des got the call from Endy about what had transpired, she was honestly too upset with her to feel sorry for her best friend. She'd literally begged her to stop the madness, and now that she'd decided to take her advice, it was too late. Then to find out that she hadn't deleted the evidence just took Des right over the edge. She was about ready to pull up and finish what Tae started by going upside her head with the wine bottle she had on the front seat of her car. But by the time she arrived at the house, Des had calmed down and was prepared to just be the friend Endy needed in that moment.

They hugged for almost two minutes at the front door as Endy fell into her arms crying as soon as she walked in. The smell of smoke from the fire still lingered in the air, but it was much milder now. Endy hadn't told anyone but Des, too embarrassed to let her family know. She'd tried to call Tae but didn't know if he was ignoring her or his service was still out. After Des and Endy had been talking for over an hour, Endy found her phone and tried him again to no avail.

“You might wanna leave him alone right now anyway. If y'all talk now, y'all not gonna do shit but argue,” Des warned.

“I just wanna know that he’s okay, because when he left here I know he wasn’t in the right state of mind. You should’ve seen how he was looking. I never seen him like that before.”

“He’s heartbroken,” Des said as she texted Kwon to see if he’d talked to Tae yet.

“I still can’t believe I was stupid enough to still have that text thread.” Endy shook her head.

“I can’t either.”

“It was just buried at the bottom of my messages because we’d stopped texting or calling each other completely weeks ago. We only talked at the gym, so I honestly just forgot about it.”

Des felt her anger rising all over again. It’s not like she thought she was perfect, but it just felt like Endy was about to lose her marriage over lust and on top of it...recklessness. The recklessness was really grinding her gears. She sighed.

“Well, all you can do now is pray and beg for forgiveness,” she said.

Endy had been watching the glass of wine just settle since she poured it. She’d only taken one sip, but she stood up and took the glass into the kitchen and poured it out.

“Oh my god,” Des heard her say, and she didn’t have to guess why.

She’d seen the damage to the kitchen firsthand already. The fire had reached the cabinets over the stove before she’d gotten a chance to put it out. Endy came back with the bottle of Remy that Tae had bought days ago. “I was trying not to get drunk in case he called me back, but I need something strong to calm my nerves.”

“I texted Kwon to see if he talked to him.”

“Maybe his phone is still acting up. I’m surprised mine is working the way he hurled into the fucking kitchen cabinet.”

She poured a drink over some ice and took a big sip. “I can’t believe I still had those messages in there. If I didn’t have all that shit in there, I could’ve just told him that was the wrong number or some shit. And I can’t believe Steffan’s stupid ass is still sending me dick pics after I told him we needed to chill!”

“Because he’s selfish. You think he cares about you or your marriage? No. He just wants what he wants.”

“He’s really gonna leave me.” Endy shook her head as reality continued to stab at her conscience. “He never would’ve gone through my phone if he didn’t just happen to be using it at the time. Tae never would’ve gone through my phone.”

Tae woke up the next morning in a hotel bed, lying in his own vomit. He passed out before midnight, drunk off tequila, and didn't even remember throwing up. The entire night was a blur as he escaped from the world by drinking dangerous levels of alcohol until he was no longer able to walk to the bathroom. The pain in his heart had spread through his entire body like a cancer, eating at his sanity as he drank straight from the bottle. Once he was out of the bed, only then did he realize that some of what he was lying in wasn't vomit, it was blood. Two of his knuckles were busted from him punching walls in the hotel room. There were dents in the wall that he would surely have to pay for, and the bathroom mirror was cracked as well.

Surveying the damage, he was surprised he didn't wake up in jail cell instead. His cellphone was working perfectly fine today when he finally turned it on. While the hotel housekeeping changed his sheets, trying not to look disgusted by them, he called Kwon and told him where he was. Kwon came through to the hotel two hours later with a toothbrush, a change of clothes, and underwear he had to go buy himself to keep from telling Des or Endy where Tae was, per his request.

By the time Kwon arrived, Tae had pulled himself together some. Most of the evidence of his unraveling was gone, except the dent in the wall.

“Bought you some coffee too, man. I know your head probably hurting,” Kwon said as he sat the coffee down on the nightstand.

“Thanks, dog,” Tae spoke in a gruff tone.

Tae took the coffee and began to sip it immediately. He was wearing blue jeans, no shirt, and no draws because everything else was filthy with vomit, even his socks.

“How long you plan on staying here?” Kwon asked.

“I haven’t planned shit honestly. I don’t even remember how many days I paid for. They didn’t kick me out, so I guess it was more than one day.”

“Damn, you was fucked up.”

“I was, man. I’m still fucked up, physically and mentally.”

When Kwon found out what had happened, he was floored. Never in a million years would he suspect Endy of doing such a thing. She was always just a big flirt in his eyes. Obviously, she’d changed over the years since he’d been gone. He didn’t know what advice to offer his friend. He’d

never been married and only had the one relationship he was in now as an adult. He just wanted to help in any way he could, as he could feel the pain in Tae's eyes every time he glanced up and spoke.

“You talked to anybody besides me yet?”

“Naw, I don't wanna talk, man. I just need a minute to wrap my head around this shit. I just keep thinking like...how long this shit been going on? Was he the only nigga, or the only nigga she got caught with? I never trusted that bitch, dog,” Tae vented, looking down at the floor, now ashamed to look his friend in the face. “I never trusted that bitch!”

He felt like less of a man than he ever did before he'd found out his wife had been unfaithful. All the years he'd had doubts lingering in his mind about whether he was good enough for her, today felt like the confirmation that he wasn't. He tried to tell himself that she was a whore who simply wasn't good enough for him, but it didn't soothe his shattered heart or his battered pride.

“You gotta talk to her and find out what really happened and why, I guess. If you don't, it's gonna stay on your mind and fuck with you.”

“I ain't talking to that bitch. Be done knocked her fucking teeth out,” he growled.

“Yeah...you don't wanna do that,” Kwon said calmly.

“I almost knocked her ass out yesterday. I was this close!” Tae gestured, closing his index and thumb in together. “That’s how I know...I can’t talk to her right now.”

“I’m sure Des won’t mind if you come to the crib. You don’t gotta be in this hotel, my nigga.”

“I just need some space, man. I called my job and told them I can’t come in for a couple days. I gotta get my head together.”

Kwon noticed the wall for the first time.

“You did that?”

Tae nodded that he did.

“That’s how batshit I was last night.”

“Nigga, they gon’ put yo’ ass out when they see that anyway, so you might as well get your money back for the other days, ‘cause you gon’ need it to pay for that wall.”

“I know, man, I fucked up the mirror too,” Tae said, showing Kwon his damaged fist.

“Damn!”

Kwon took off to the bathroom to see the mirror damage.

“Gotdamn, Tae!” he called out from the bathroom.

Tae fell back onto the bed, feeling like life as he knew it was over. He wanted to just lay in bed all day.

Endy wasted no time storming down the catwalk to the opposite entrance where she knew Steffan would be coming out for his lunch break. She'd left her area early to make sure she didn't miss him. When she spotted him, he was walking behind a group of coworkers. She split through the crowd and grabbed his arm, pointing in the opposite direction. He turned and followed her through the maze of passageways until they arrived in the back where no one would interrupt them.

“Why the fuck would you do that stupid shit, Steffan?” she fumed through gritted teeth.

Steffan looked genuinely sorry as he tried to find the words, but Endy didn't give a damn what he had to say. “You knew I was trying to work on my marriage! I told you to back the fuck off and you send me dick pics?”

“Endy, I'm so sorry. I didn't think it was that big of deal.”

“But I told you to back off! Do you know what the fuck that means?”

“You never said back off. You said we were gonna slow down and —”

She got in his face. She was fighting mad.

“I specifically told you that we needed to chill! The fact that you would do that shows that you have no respect for me or my feelings.”

“That’s not true, I—”

“Don’t ever speak to me again! Don’t ever look my fucking way again! I’m about to lose my husband because you were thinking with your dick instead of your brain. Have a great fucking life!”

Kwon stuck around the hotel for a few hours then left to go handle some business at the clubhouse. Having the talk with Kwon really helped Tae pull himself together. It was the first time in a long time that he’d been in a rut and had someone to talk to about his problems that he could trust.

Someone he was comfortable being honest with and talking to about shit that men didn’t just openly discuss. After Kwon was gone, he realized just how much a blessing him coming home was. If he wasn’t there, who would he have been able to turn to? The only other people he could ever talk to was Endy or Boo. Just then, he realized it was his brother’s visiting

day in the county. He would be leaving next week after sentencing. He got dressed and drove downtown to the county, but he couldn't get in because the jail was on lockdown. Something had happened, but the staff wasn't talking to the public about it. He prayed that Boo wasn't involved as he drove through downtown, not sure where he was going now. The outside air felt good for him.

He wasn't ready to go back to the hotel and sink into another depression. Endy had tried to call him countless times until he put her on the block list. Des had called and he didn't answer her call either. She texted, telling him to just let Endy know that he was okay, but he knew she knew damn well he was okay because Kwon had just left his hotel room. Sitting at the red light, all he could think of was how much he just wanted to feel better. How badly he wanted to shake this world-crumbling feeling, if only for a moment.

More than anything, he wished he had a side chick of his own that he could use right now to take his mind off Endy. Revenge sex! That would make him feel a hell of a lot better. Just then, he remembered Shelli. He couldn't remember deleting her number either. It was possible that he never did. He grabbed his phone and began scrolling through it, barely paying attention to the road in front of him. Traffic came to a sudden halt, and he had to slam on brakes to keep from rear-ending a Honda Civic.

“Fuck!” he vented.

Tae realized how much his nerves were already on edge, and he needed to do something. Anything. He found Shelli’s number and texted her.

Tae: Hey, this Devonte. I hope you haven’t forgot about me.

It was twelve minutes later when he was coming up off the freeway, and she texted back.

Shelli: Hey! Of course not. Where you at?

Tae: Driving around on the eastside. I wanna see you.

Shelli: I’m at home, come through.

“Hell yeah,” Tae mumbled as he tried to recall where she lived.

The moment Tae arrived on Shelli’s block, all his thoughts of Endy and her transgressions disappeared. His mind was now on the woman he wanted but thought he could never have. Her Volvo was in the driveway, so he parked right out front without a care in the world of being spotted. He texted her and she came to the door wearing a red T-shirt and black skintight jeans. Her hair was bone straight just like the last time he’d seen her. Even from the distance, he could see that beautiful glowing skin and

shapely figure. His mood had gone from down in the dumps to floating in the clouds as he exited the car.

It was jacket weather but the sun was shining brightly, so he left it in the car, only wearing the long-sleeve, thin pullover Kwon bought him. The smell of Shelli's perfume engaged him as he moved past her inside the house. She closed and locked the door behind him, and he took that as a sign he would be there for a while.

"How you been?" he asked Shelli.

"I've been good, you know. Some days better than others, but I'm not the one to complain."

"I like that about you. You never in a bad mood."

She shrugged.

"I just try not to take my shit out on other people," she told him, and they settled onto the sofa.

Shelli had a pile of weed already broken down on the coffee table.

"I'm just in time, huh?" Tae said, seeing the weed.

"I was just about to smoke when I saw your text, but then I decided to wait for you."

"I didn't think you would be home."

“I’m a homebody, honestly. So what brings you here to my doorstep today, sir?” She smiled and looked him straight in the eyes.

The room fell silent as he thought about how to respond. He thought of what would get him closer to the pussy more than anything else.

“You know I like you, right?”

“Ummm, I know you think I’m cool.”

“And you know I like hanging out with you, but I never called you just because of my situation or whatever.”

“Your marriage,” she clarified.

“Yeah, that. Well, honestly, I haven’t stopped thinking about you since I saw you in the mall. I’m just to the point that I don’t care no more. You’re a cool person, you’re a beautiful woman, and I’d be crazy to let the opportunity to get to know you slip away.”

“Wow, just empty the clip why dontcha.” She laughed.

“Ha! You asked,” he told her, chuckling.

“I did. I mean, I think you cool too. I have friends, but they been on bullshit and I’m literally about to cut everybody off, foreal.”

“Everybody? How many friends you got?” he asked, using quotation gestures for the word friends.

Not that he cared, but he wanted Shelli to feel like he did. She sassed him with her eyes.

“First of all, friends don’t mean fuck buddies, okay?”

“I’m just asking.” He surrendered, throwing up his hands.

“It’s a couple guys around. They not gon’ pop up or nothing like that, if that’s what you worried about.”

That did cross his mind.

“Good to know.”

While Shelli rolled the weed, Tae turned his phone off and she handed him the remote to find something he wanted to watch on the mounted wide-screen television. When she gave him the remote, he held onto her hand, admiring her nails. They were a dark peach.

“You just got those done, I can tell.”

“I did,” she admitted. “You like?”

“I do. How them toes doing though?”

He knew how a lot of women liked to slack on their feet during the winter months, but the weather break was just around the corner.

“You got me bent,” she replied, as she used the heel of one shoe to kick off the other, then pulled off her sock.

Her hands were nice, so he assumed her feet would be pretty as well, and he was right. Not as nice as Endy's, but they were nice.

“I see you on point.”

“Always. Those are like my self-care days, you know? I like to treat myself to a mani and pedi, then sometimes I go straight and get a message.”

“I give the best massages,” he told her.

Her lip curled in skepticism as she eyed him up and down.

“On God,” he doubled down.

“Mmmm. Maybe we will get to test that theory.”

The two began to talk and get to know each other better as they floated the blunt back and forth. Tae wasn't a daily smoker, so he was high fairly quickly. This conversation was completely different than any they'd ever had before because there were no restrictions. She was available, and apparently he was too. She offered him a drink but he declined, still recovering from the night before. He learned more about her than he ever cared to know before today. He learned she worked for Ford Motor Company but was drawing unemployment because her plant was down temporarily. She also did hair as a side hustle.

About an hour after she offered him a drink, she offered again, stating she didn't want to drink alone. Because if Tae wasn't drinking, she wouldn't either. He decided he needed to get her as loose as possible, so he agreed to a drink and nursed it while she smashed one and made another. Once the weed and alcohol were in her system, Shelli became more playful, more touchy feely. Tae had her right where he wanted her. He wasn't used to making moves on other women, so he was rusty as hell. He needed her to give him all the warning signs to go for it. When she mounted him and took his snapback off and put it on his head backwards, he knew that it was on. She draped her arms around his neck.

“Is your lips off limits? I don't have cooties,” Shelli said.

“Ain't nothing off limits,” he told her as he ran his hands inside her T-shirt and up the small of her back.

She leaned in and kissed him, sliding him her tongue immediately. He kissed her back as he cupped her booty, feeling his manhood rise. She kissed him harder, as if she felt it too. When she broke their kiss, his lips found her neck. She moaned in heat, and he knew he had a real freak on his hands. He was about to enjoy the hell out of this revenge pussy.

Kwon had locked up the clubhouse for the day as sunset came upon the horizon. Days ago, he'd realized that Bobby hadn't been to the clubhouse in almost a week, so after locking up, he called his phone. When he didn't answer, he swung by his house. By the time he was pulling up, Bobby was returning his call.

"What up, B? I just pulled up to your spot, you at home?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Bobby replied.

"Come outside."

Bobby lived with his mom and her sister. Kwon got out of the car and went up to the porch so his family could see it was him and not one of the neighborhood knuckleheads that had pulled up. Bobby's mom peeked outside from the window and saw him, then came and leaned out of the door.

"Hey, Kwon, how you doing?" she spoke.

"Hey, I'm good, Cat," he replied, shortening her name, Cathlyn.

"How you?"

Cat was only ten years older than Kwon. She'd had her son at seventeen, the same as he did.

"I'm good. Here he come," she said and ducked back into the house.

Cat seemed to be still growing herself as she raised her son. She wasn't too involved in his day-to-day activities, which gave him a lot of room to roam and find trouble. Kwon was hoping he hadn't gone back to hustling. When Bobby stepped out onto the porch, he was smiling as if he was glad to see Kwon. He pulled his black hoodie over his head and looked up and down the block.

“What's up, my G?” he greeted as he stepped down off the porch.

“Where you been at, man?” Kwon said as the two slapped fives and embraced quickly.

“I had to lay low for a minute, man. I wanted to call you, but then again I didn't,” Bobby admitted.

“Why, what happened?”

“I got into it with Daveon's punk ass again.”

Kwon immediately grew aggravated.

“They ran up on you?”

“Naw, we just happened to see each other at the liquor store. He was with his boys, so you know he had to play hard, talking about he should fuck me up and all this.”

“What’s the problem, Bobby? Do you owe that nigga some money or something? Be honest.”

Bobby shook his head emphatically again.

“I’ on owe that nigga shit, bro. He mad ‘cause I stopped working for him. Talking about I’m disloyal and I’m running with the wrong crowd and all this other stuff. He think I’m scared of ‘em, but I’m not. I just know he got a crew, so I can’t win.”

“Nigga too old for that shit anyway, man. Picking on a seventeen-year-old.”

“I saw that nigga cousin Reek at that gas station yesterday. I told that nigga we can scrap if he want to. I ain’t scared of that nigga.”

Kwon looked in his eyes and smiled, as he could honestly see that Bobby wasn’t afraid of Daveon anymore. He had much more heart than Kwon at his age.

“You gon’ give a three piece, Bobby?” Kwon said as he threw slap-boxing punches playfully at Bobby.

Bobby squared up and threw a couple back.

“I’ma give that nigga the family pack!” he vowed.

“You mean like this,” Kwon said, running up on Bobby but missing.

The two bobbed and weaved around each other until they ended up near the corner.

“Come get some,” Bobby dared.

A red Dodge Avenger came racing down the block and bent the corner. Kwon saw the window come down and a firearm come out. He turned to run for his life but couldn't outrun a bullet. Blocka! Block! Blocka! Blocka! Blocka! Skuurrrrrrr.

“Fuck!” Kwon shouted as the car sped off.

He'd dove in the neighbor's grass and crawled as far away from the shots as he could. When he rolled over on his back, he saw Bobby laid out on the sidewalk, not moving. “Bobby!” he called out in a panic.

He scrambled to his feet and rushed to his side. The front of Bobby's shirt was wet with blood. Kwon dropped down, banging his knees against the cold, hard concrete as he lifted Bobby into his arms. His soul began to cry.

“Help! Help! Somebody call an ambulance!” he shouted as tears came streaming down his face. “Please, somebody.”

Cat came busting out of her front door.

“Noooooooo!” She rushed off the porch and down to the corner where her son was lying in Kwon’s lap.

She kneeled down and grabbed his limp body from Kwon’s lap and into her own.

“Bobby, wake up, baby. Bobby...Bobby...Bobby.”

Kwon had completely blacked out at this point. He stopped hearing Cat’s voice and any other commotion going on around him. He stood to his feet with blood all over his bright tan jacket as he took off running down the street, leaving his car behind. The only thoughts he had in his head were getting to his father’s house where he had multiple guns stashed.

Chapter 15

The bliss of Tae's sweet revenge lasted about as long as a drop of food on the floor once spotted by the family dog. Moments after he and Shelli had sex, he was bombarded with all sorts of heartbreaking news that sent him flying out of the door with his head spinning all over again. First, he learned that the reason the county jail was on lockdown was because seventeen-year-old Darius had hung himself in the cell before he could even make it to his second court date. Then he got calls from Treach and Clyde, who had heard about Bobby but couldn't reach Kwon.

When Tae couldn't reach Kwon either, he drove straight to the hood to see if he could find him. He hadn't heard all the specifics, and no one knew that Kwon was right there when the shooting happened. But when he arrived on the block where the shooting happened, Ryan informed him of everything. It was just Kwon's luck that his father was home that day and was able to talk to him long enough for the police to arrive and take him down to the precinct for questioning. Once again, Kwon was uncooperative with the police, telling them he had no idea who was responsible. It wasn't about his refusal to be labeled a snitch, but his decision to handle things

himself from that point on. After a few hours of no cooperation, they released him.

Tae drove to the precinct to pick him up, and Kwon came out and got in the car with a look of determination in his eyes.

“Take me back to my pops’ crib,” he said as he slammed the passenger door.

“What the fuck happened, man?” Tae said, pulling off, even though he knew all the specifics now.

He was more interested in why it happened.

“Bitch ass nigga Daveon happened.”

“You saw him in the car?”

“Naw, I don’t think it was him, it was his bitch ass flunkies. Some of them same niggas that came into the clubhouse that day,” he replied.

“Who they was trying to shoot? You or Bobby?”

“I think both of us, but I think they were looking Bobby. He told me he just got into it with them at the store.”

Kwon reclined his seat some, stroking his beard as he contemplated.

“Damn, man, they couldn’t just whoop his ass or something? Do he owe them niggas money?” Tae asked, confused.

“He said he didn’t, and I believe him. Them niggas gotta get it, cuz,” Kwon said, staring blankly ahead out of the front windshield.

Tae shot him a glance.

“You talking about what I think you talking about, nigga?”

Kwon just shot him a knowing look that said it all. The two rode in silence all the way back to Ryan’s house. Ryan’s car was gone now and Kwon knew he probably headed to work.

“Come in for a minute,” Kwon said as he got out of the car and looked up and down the block.

All was quiet on the streets, and it was now shortly after midnight. Des called his phone, but he ignored the call. Kwon keyed the door and Tae followed him inside, thinking of what he should say about Kwon’s intentions. Before he could process his own position on the matter, Kwon went into his old bedroom and came back out with an AR-15 assault rifle.

“I got two of these bitches, but this one ain’t registered.”

“Dog, think about what you doing for a second,” Tae finally said.

Kwon stared at him, wide-eyed.

“Oh, I’m thinking...and I know exactly what I’m doing. I ain’t no kid no more, my nigga, but Bobby was seventeen, and most of them lil’

dudes at the clubhouse is younger than him. Somebody gotta protect them little niggas, man. And that somebody gotta be ready to kill or die to protect ‘em. Otherwise, we wasting our time,” Kwon explained bluntly.

Tae sat on the sofa.

“So we vigilantes now?”

“Hell yeah, we is! I’m putting a hole in a nigga tonight, fam. I’m not letting shit slide when it comes to these kids. I thought this through, my nigga. It is what it is.”

Kwon had already made up his mind that to make change in the neighborhood, he would have to get his hands dirty. He was hoping it wouldn’t be this soon, but he was ready and willing to kill in the name of a better tomorrow.

“Come on, man, you just did eight—”

Kwon racked a bullet in the chamber.

“I don’t wanna hear that shit, Tae. You in or you out?” he questioned, locking eyes with him.

All Tae could think about was the visit with his brother when Boo told him not to jeopardize his life for anybody. As much as he cared about

the kids, he had his whole life ahead of him. Tae tried to reason with Kwon once more.

“You got a kid to raise, my nigga.”

“I got some kids to protect too. Juevonne ain’t the only reason I came home, my nigga. I believe that in my heart. Like I said, you either with me or you ain’t.”

Tae was getting angry now. He felt like Kwon was treating him as if he was punking out, when in fact he was trying to be levelheaded. He started thinking back to when they were kids as Kwon loaded more rounds in the clip of his rifle.

“I’m witchu you or I ain’t? Nigga, I was with you when you wasn’t with me. Nigga, you ain’t never had my back like this the way you ready to fucking ride for Bobby!”

Kwon propped the gun up in the corner and got in Tae’s face.

“Muthafucka, I made niggas bleed for you! I took a life for me and for you! You think that shit was all about me? I shot them muthafuckas for us! For us!”

Tae was standing down and shoved Kwon back to get him out of his face.

“I didn’t ask you to do shit for me, bro. I can fight my own battles! Mine and yours, nigga, so don’t play me like a pussy.”

The old wounds still had a thick scab that Tae had just peeled off the both of them. Kwon got back in his face, but this time Tae stood up.

“You still in your feelings, nigga?” Kwon shouted. “What, you want some payback or something? You wanna whoop my ass? Here’s your chance!”

He was nose to nose with Tae. He was fed up with reliving his shortcomings. Tae had his fist balled up in anger, seconds away from swinging.

“Dog, I’m on gon’ tell you one time to get the fuck out my face!” Tae barked.

“Or what? Gone head and get you some, nigga.” Kwon tapped his jaw twice. “You know you want to,” he instigated, and when Tae didn’t bite, he shoved him hard.

Tae cocked back and rocked Kwon’s jaw like he was a regular dude on the street. Kwon was momentarily shocked that his friend had punched

him in the face, but he quickly gathered himself and swung back, grazing Tae on the chin as Tae weaved his head backward. Tae followed up with a two-piece combination that made Kwon start fighting to defend himself instead of getting his lick back. The two traded blows in the living room until they stumbled backward over the corner of the sofa and onto the floor. Pounding on the front door could be heard throughout the house. Tae and Kwon both thought it was the police, so they stopped fighting and sprang up off the floor. Before Kwon could make it to the front door, Des pushed the unlocked door open and came inside.

“Why the fuck you banging like the cops?” Tae said, breathing heavily.

“I know goddamn well y’all ain’t in here fucking fighting!” Des fumed.

Tae couldn’t believe it either. He was so mad when Kwon egged him on, he just lost control, letting all of his built-up anger loose. Now he felt childish seeing Des standing there. He headed for the door.

“Get yo’ man, ‘cause he talking crazy,” he told her on his way out of the door.

“You ain’t gotta leave, nigga, we good. What’s done is done,” Kwon told him, checking his mouth for blood as Tae reached for the door.

Kwon followed him out onto the porch. “You know I don’t trust nobody but you, Tae. Who else I’m supposed to turn to? Huh, nigga?”

Tae kept walking to her car.

“Go home to your family, dog,” was all Tae would say before he climbed behind the wheel of his Charger.

Kwon sat down on the front porch, feeling lost. As he watched Tae’s car drive up the block, he saw the only help he had to revenge Bobby tonight leaving the hood to a destination unknown. Des came outside and stood over him.

“I heard what you said.”

He looked up at her.

“Huh?”

“You were yelling loud enough for the neighbors to probably hear you. All this time I wanted to believe you were innocent, but you really did it.”

Kwon dropped his head in another defeated moment of the day. He was just tired and didn’t have the energy to lie or defend his actions.

“Deep down, you knew. You always knew, and I was just too ashamed to ever admit it,” he said without looking at her.

Endy drove to the hood after hearing that Tae was with Kwon, but by the time she made it there, he was long gone. She sat outside of Ryan's house for an hour while Kwon and Des were inside talking privately. She was hoping Tae went to his mother's house down the street, but Tae never showed. He still had her on the blocked list. She couldn't think of anywhere he could be if he wasn't at his mom's house or with Kwon. It was driving her crazy that he wouldn't talk to her, even though she had no idea what she would say. She just wanted to get the line of communication open again and from there, hopefully, they could explore the possibility of not getting a divorce.

She drove to her parents' house to get some sleep and would try to catch Tae at his mother's house in the morning. When she walked in using her spare key, Carlos was asleep on the couch with the TV on. She walked over and tapped him lightly.

“Daddy...Daddy, go get in the bed.”

Carlos opened his eyes but didn't look to see who had awakened him. He was still half asleep. “Go get in the bed, Daddy.”

When he heard her call him Daddy, it caught the second time, and his head swung around to see her face.

“Whatchu doing here this late?” he questioned.

“I’ll tell you about it in the morning.”

“Everything alright?” Carlos asked as he grunted getting off the couch.

“No, but I’m too tired to talk about it tonight. I’m okay though,” she assured him.

“I’m not gon’ have to whoop Tae’s ass, am I?”

“Daddy, you can’t beat nobody up no more.”

She knew her father’s health would never improve. She was just glad he hadn’t got any worse over the past year.

“I can still shoot though,” Carlos replied as he limped down the hall, feeling older than he was.

Endy curled up on the sofa, knowing fully well she wasn’t about to go to sleep, just like the night before. She laid there thinking about the future of her marriage and her future in general. She thought about what starting over would feel like, and it felt like her heart was being ripped from her chest just thinking about it. She felt foolish, selfish, and immature, but she still tried to find a way to take some of the blame away from herself.

Maybe if Tae wasn't in such a rush to marry this would've never happened. Maybe if he didn't act so insecure and untrusting of her then she would've never let it go this far. She thought of all the variables she could, but it all still came back to her. Only when her eyes became too heavy to keep open did she finally doze off for a few hours of sleep.

Tae tried to go back to the hotel he was staying in but by then, the housecleaning had reported the damage to the room and he was put out of the hotel and told his credit card would be charged with the damages. He ended up spending that night at Shelli's with his gun under the pillow in case he got any surprises. Even with the comfort of his pistol close by, he still couldn't sleep. He had way too much on his mind, so he got up and went home in the wee hours of the morning, hoping to sneak in and grab some clothes while Endy was asleep or too tired to get out of bed and try to talk to him. To Tae's surprise, Endy wasn't even home. He became infuriated all over again as he looked at his empty bedroom, assuming the worst. *This bitch is still out here creeping around, and now she spending nights out?*

He grabbed his luggage from the closet and began to angrily sling clothes into the suitcase, packing everything he could fit inside. The longer

he stayed in the house, the more upset he got. He couldn't let this shit slide. He grabbed his phone and unblocked Endy so he could call and curse her ass out. He heard a key jiggling at the door as her phone rang for the first time. He ended the call as Endy came through the door, her eyes searching for him. He stood at the threshold of the bedroom at the end of the hallway.

“Dick must be good than a muthafucka you can't stay away,” he blurted out.

Endy sighed heavily.

“Tae...I been out looking for you all night. Ask anybody.”

“What the fuck ever,” he replied as he went back into the bedroom to finish packing.

He closed the door to the bedroom, wanting to be left alone, but moments later, Endy was pushing it open and coming in.

“You have every right to feel exactly how you feel, and I don't wanna discount any of it. I just want you to know that what I did had nothing to do with how I feel about you or how happy I am in our marriage. It was stupid and it was selfish, and I'm sorry.”

Tae shrugged.

“Why do you think I give a fuck about anything you saying right now? I just came to get my shit. Watch out, man,” he said as he nudged the small of her back to edge her out of the bedroom.

“Don’t push me, Tae. This my bedroom just like it is yours.”

“Okay, but I can’t stand the sight of you, so just get out my face!” he shouted.

The boom in his voice made her comply, leaving the room.

“I fucked up, Tae,” she shouted from the other room. “You’ve known me since I was fourteen, and I’ve never done anything like this. I’m not a hoe!”

Her words only fueled the fire burning inside of him, mostly because he knew it was true. He stormed out into the hallway.

“So what the fuck was it? What the fuck made you go out and decide to have a whole affair with a nigga to the point you sending him half-naked pictures and he sending dick pics to your phone? Why, Endy?”

“Because I was stupid, okay?”

“Stupid as fuck.” He looked at her in disgust.

She’d never seen him look at her that way. It hurt her and made her lash out.

“Well, just maybe if you act like you believed you were man enough for me, then I would believe it too! You never trusted me. You always acted as if you thought I wanted someone else besides you, and I never did! I never did—”

“Oh, so it’s my fault?!”

He raced toward her and then stopped in his tracks. He pivoted. “I gotta get the fuck up out of here.”

“How is that gonna solve anything?”

Tae was in the dining room now, grabbing his vitamins and supplements from the table. The next thing he knew, he was flipping the dining room table over. The glass shattered everywhere.

“Tae, stop!” Endy pleaded. “Somebody gonna call the police thinking you in here killing me!”

Tae picked up a dining room chair and slammed into the floor with all his might. Then again. Then again. Endy just stood back and watched, afraid now to say anything else. He looked at her, still hunched over, holding the bent chair with the crazed look in his eyes again. It truly pained her to see how much she had hurt him.

“I want a divorce,” he growled.

Chapter 16

The days were gloomy for everyone. There was no one to call to lift anybody up, because everyone was low. Batteries on ten percent, tanks running on fumes. Kwon and Tae were both in their feelings the next day after the fight, and Des was just distant after learning the truth about what really happened to Phil and Stacy. Kwon always believed in his heart that she knew the truth. It was so obvious the night things happened. The way he disappeared, the way he reacted to her lines of questioning when they did talk. He still remembered it all like it was yesterday. But seeing the shock and disappointment in her eyes last night, he realized she always truly believed he was innocent.

A part of him was relieved to finally not have such a massive secret he was keeping from the person he was closest to in the world. Another part was afraid that things would never be the same between them. Last night, Bobby was still clinging to life in the hospital, but it wasn't looking good for him. Kwon called Cat that morning to see if anything had changed, but her phone went straight to voicemail. Knowing what she was going through, he wasn't surprised. He sat on the edge of the bed in the upstairs guest room, fixating on the bedroom wall, contemplating his next move.

Kwon had now realized that he couldn't strike back at Daveon and leave his father like a sitting duck in the hood. And he couldn't ask him to move after being there all this time without confrontation before he'd come home. Besides that, Kwon's whole goal was to make the hood safer so people wouldn't be afraid to live there. If he believed in his plan, he had to believe his father was right where he needed to be. His phone rang on the bed, and he eyed the phone, letting it ring a few times before he answered.

"Treach, what up?" he greeted solemnly.

"You heard anything else about Bobby?"

"Not yet. You?"

"Naw, I been calling around though. We need to talk, man. We can't let this shit slide."

"I know, man...trust me, I know."

"So what's up? Meet me in the hood so we can talk about it."

Kwon was silent for a minute. He didn't want to say what he was about to say, but his back was against the wall and he was surrounded by reality.

"I'm calling a meeting with all the volunteers at the clubhouse today. Gotta shut it down for a minute, shit getting too crazy."

“If you shut it down, they win, fam.”

“It’s just temporary. Can’t put the kids at risk.”

“Yeah, you right,” Treach agreed.

“See if you can reach Clyde and Harold, and see if they can meet us at 3 o’clock. I’m about to call everybody else now.”

“Bet, I’ll see you at three,” Treach said before they ended the call.

Kwon held the phone in his hand, pondering how Treach was one of the only volunteers that saw things the way he saw them. The urgency as well as the possibility of extreme measures. He seemed to be the only one willing to do whatever it took. Well, maybe he wasn’t the only one. Kwon had never asked the others, but judging by their actions, most had their limits, and he didn’t judge them for it. Today he would find out exactly who was who. He got a call from his mom and he didn’t answer. He couldn’t talk to her right now. He would have to pretend he was okay when he wasn’t. After the phone stopped ringing, he got a text message, which he assumed was his mom but it wasn’t. It was Bobby’s mom.

Cat: Bobby didn’t make it.

Kwon’s heart fell to his stomach, and his already depleted mind drained its last few drops of upside thinking before he collapsed onto the

bed and closed his eyes.

Des was calling all the parents to let them know the clubhouse would be shut down until further notice. She stopped what she was doing to listen as she heard the front door close. She went to the window to see if Kwon was leaving. He'd told her he was leaving, but she was hoping he'd wait until he was in a better state of mind before he left the house. After learning the truth about Kwon's crimes, a lot of things made more sense now. She saw him as a man trying to right his wrongs and save his soul in the process. She now knew where his passion came from. Although it was scary to know he could do the things he'd now admitted to, she loved him way too much to second guess her decision to be with him now.

He had a good heart and good intentions, but she was worried about where his passion to change lives in the hood was going to take him. Where it would take her. Kwon quickly offered to pay for Bobby's funeral, and Cat accepted his offer. After she finished calling the parents, she would call and make the arrangements. Her phone buzzed with a message.

Tino: Can I talk to you for a minute?

The message took her by surprise. The two hadn't talked since the day he gave her the necklace. It was horrible timing, but Kwon had told her

about the day he popped up at the clubhouse, so she was anxious to see what was on his mind.

Des: Sure, you can call.

The phone rang almost immediately, and she picked up.

“Hey.”

“Des, how you doing?” Tino said gravelly.

“I’m good, and you?”

“I’m good, I guess. I heard about what happened yesterday.”

“Bobby didn’t make it,” she informed.

“Damnnnnn.”

By now, everyone knew that Kwon was right there when it happened. Some of the rumors floating around were that the bullets were meant for him and not Bobby. It was all just ghetto gossip. The truth was, nobody knew who the bullets were meant for except the shooter. The fact that Kwon wasn’t hit one time led Des to believe they’d hit their target. She also understood that Kwon being a witness put him in even more danger than he already was.

“It’s just stupid as hell, that boy didn’t deserve that,” she fumed.

“Hell no, he didn’t. But listen, Kwon was pissing a lot of the wrong people off with the way he’s moving. Nobody’s ever done anything like this before. I support what he’s doing, and I’m gonna go to the next meeting and talk with him myself, but I want you to be safe, Des. It ain’t safe in the hood right now. ”

“Yeah, I know. He’s actually on his way to tell the volunteers that the clubhouse will be shut down momentarily, which is even sadder.”

“Today?”

“Yeah, at three o’clock,” she informed.

“I’ll try to catch him today then. I really have some ideas I think could help with the end goal of Boyz in the Hood.”

“I’m glad you wanna help, Tino, that’s really dope,” she said with admiration in her tone.

She thought it was big of Tino to want to step in and help out with a cause he’d never considered before, but even more so because of the man that was behind it all. In truth, it was all for Des. Tino didn’t see Kwon lasting long on the streets. He expected him to be dead or back in jail soon and was moving to plant a foot in the door early. He didn’t plan to be around for any of the action that was taking place in the hood. He was laying the groundwork to get his girl back.

“I wanna talk to Tae too. We got some things to talk about if we gonna be working together with these kids, you know?”

“Maybe now isn’t a good time, but definitely in the future, you two should talk.”

“Yeah, you right, everybody got a lot going on right now,” Tino said.

You have no idea, Des thought.

By the time the clock struck a quarter after three, all the volunteers were at the clubhouse, including Tae. Kwon had sent him a text message but wasn’t sure if he would show. It was Sunday, which made it easier for everyone to get there for an emergency meeting on a day the clubhouse was usually closed. Kwon stood at the front of the room with his bright-skinned face slightly bruised from a punch Tae gave him the night before. Everyone just assumed it was due to the incident where he was almost killed. He was able to clear his head on the drive over, and he stood before the volunteers now with much-needed lucidity and strength of his conviction.

“We knew we would have some hurdles. We knew we would have some resistance, but not this soon, and not this much. I can’t lie, I’m hurting right now y’all. One guy done hung himself in the county and another guy

done got killed standing right in front of his own house. I don't ever want it to be said that we doing more harm than good up in here. We know that ain't the case, but right now we gotta think about these kids. So, the clubhouse will be shut down for a minute. We gotta regroup, reassess..."

Kwon went on for about fifteen minutes explaining to the volunteers what he knew for sure at the time. A lot was still up in the air, and he admitted that to them, but he was sure they wouldn't be shut down for long. He was willing to bet his life on it. "And now what I'm about to say is not for everybody's ears that's in here. I know everybody didn't sign up to be vigilantes. So if you not willing to go to extremes to save your neighborhood, which I know a lot of y'all are not, then this part of the meeting is over."

Kwon looked around the room and waited. He knew no one would want to be the first to get up and leave. The pride of men would keep them in their seats ready to pledge a false allegiance. Instead of waiting for them to admit their limits, he began to dismiss people.

"Kari, you can leave, bro," he said, walking up and slapping fives with the brother.

"D, I'll see you later, man. Soon as we have a solid plan, I'll call you. Austell, you can dip, man. Nothing personal, I know this ain't for you,

fam.”

He went around dismissing everyone until there were only five people left in the room. He wouldn't dare ask Tae to leave, although he'd already made his stance clear the night before. Along with Kwon and Tae were Clyde, Harold, and Treach.

“I left the people in the room here for two reasons. One, I know y'all ain't scared of these niggas. Two, I know none of you got kids of your own. The moves I make in the future are gonna be risky. It might involve some things that I can't guarantee we would make it back home from, but this where we at with it right now. You might have to put your life and or freedom on the line.”

He pulled up a chair and sat down with them. “I started this shit just trying to make a difference in my hood, man. Now I feel like if we quit now, it's gonna just make this hood worse than it was when we started. Kids won't see no hope for their future. So, to put it plainly, some of these niggas got to go, man. If they ain't willing to stand back and let us raise some young kings without interference, then they our enemies. And just so it ain't no confusion, I am saying we may have to take some muthafuckas out. However many we have to.”

“Let’s do it,” Clyde said immediately. “I ran these streets for years, man. I know a lot of these lil’ niggas’ mamas. I know where they live and I know where they mamas live. If we start dropping these niggas, they won’t hold up under the pressure. I don’t care if it’s twenty of ‘em. Drop the head, the body gonna collapse.”

Kwon was somewhat surprised by Clyde’s aggression.

“I think it’s worth it,” Treach said. “If that’s what it takes to save lives, then fuck it. Let’s get busy.”

Kwon looked at Harold.

“How you feel about all this, OG?”

“Well...” He stroked his beard. “I ain’t no killer, but I ain’t no snitch either. If you need me, just let me know what you need me for and I’m there, but like I said, I ain’t no killer, so I’m going on record to put that in the air.”

“Respect, OG,” Kwon said, and they slapped fives.

The doorbell rang and Treach was the closest to the door so he went to answer it. He peeked at the camera and relaxed the hand on his gun, seeing it was the guy that Kwon let in days before. They all had concealed

weapons today except Harold, knowing the clubhouse wasn't open for the kids and things were just that crazy.

"It's old boy," Treach said.

Kwon came closer to the camera. It was Tino. It wasn't the right time to let Tino inside, whatever he wanted. He went to the door and opened it, but just wide enough to show his face and block Tino's entrance.

"Sup, Tino?" Kwon said, giving him a straight to the point gaze.

"I heard about what happened, man, you alright?" Tino started.

"I'm good, bro, thanks for coming by to check. We having a private meeting at the moment. You know the clubhouse gonna be shut down for a minute."

"That's understandable. If it's anything I can do, man, let me know."

"I appreciate that, Tino, foreal."

He was about to walk away when Tino stopped.

"While I'm here, is Tae in there?"

"Yeah, he here."

"I wanna talk to him. Can you let him know I'm outside?"

"Yeah, hold on a minute."

Kwon went and whispered in Tae's ear about Tino wanting to talk to him, then stepped back to see his facial reaction.

"Pssssshhhh. This should be interesting," Tae said as he stood to leave out.

"You got your gun, right?" Kwon asked as he walked Kwon to the door.

"Yeah."

He wasn't worried about Tino. It was all the other enemies they had lurking in the hood.

"Alright, watch your back standing outside. You know I'ma leave the door unlocked."

"Yep."

As Tae stepped out, Kwon came back to the front of the room.

"That's actually good that Tae had to step away for a minute, because I need to have a one-on-one with him about some other stuff, and we gonna talk about the plans for the near future as well. Right now, we not doing nothing but just laying low and kinda getting whatever affairs in order we need to. Clyde, I wanna get with you later about whatever information you might have on these guys. We gonna meet up again in

about a week. I should have more information for everybody at that time. I gotta go see Bobby's mom in a minute, so we can wrap this meeting up. Anybody got any questions or concerns they wanna address?"

"So what's up, man?" Tae said, standing outside the clubhouse giving Tino a guarded look.

"You got every right to feel the way you feel about me, bro, but I'm coming to you as a man, hoping we can put the past behind us."

"How we supposed to do that?"

Tino looked around nervously.

"You know, I don't wanna stand around out here for too long. I know it's a lot going on with the clubhouse right now. How about we go for a ride right quick? We can take your car if you want."

Tae gave him a once over. He could see Tino was uncomfortable being at the spot. How the hell was he gonna be a volunteer if he couldn't even stand in front of the building when things got hard?

"Yeah, alright, let's take my car," Tae decided.

The two of them jumped in his Charger as the rest of the volunteers came outside, leaving the meeting. Kwon looked on in surprise as he saw

Tino and Tae about to pull off.

“What’s up, everything good?” Kwon called out.

“Yeah, I’m just ‘bout to spin a couple blocks with this fool,” Tae called back.

Tino shot him a look as Tae pulled away from the clubhouse.

“I’ll be that.” Tino smiled.

“So what’s on your mind bro?”

“Like I said, man, you got every right to feel the way you feel about me. That was some hoe shit I did trying to kiss your wife. It didn’t have anything to do with you, though, or the way I feel ‘bout you, I should say. It didn’t really have anything to do with Endy honestly. It was just me going through my own shit at the time and I didn’t handle it like an adult.”

“Word,” Tae agreed as he turned down a random block driving slowly.

“I just wanted to first apologize to you for violating. I wanna apologize to Endy because I never got a chance to, and I wanna hopefully put that shit behind us, man. Like I told Kwon, I love what y’all doing and I would like to be a part of it if y’all can get things back up and running without all the trouble surrounding the mission.”

“Well, first of all, I don’t know if Endy will ever forgive you, but that’s between you and her. I don’t got no beef with you though. As far as the clubhouse, I don’t think a lot of y’all understand that this mission comes with problems. Something like this ain’t never been done before. Not in the way we doing it.”

“That’s a fact,” Tino agreed. “I just...this my hood too, man, you know I grew up all my life over here. I don’t wanna sit back and watch, I wanna help in any way I can.”

Tae made a right turn, headed back toward the clubhouse where Tino’s truck was parked.

“You welcome to join us, man, if that’s what you really wanna do. I’m still tryna find a way to play a more active role myself honestly.”

As the tension in the car eased, a brown caravan had turned behind them. Tae was cruising unusually slow, which made him pay attention to the van. He thought the van would go around but instead, it just crept behind him. The windows were tinted, so he couldn’t see inside.

“I wanna try and—”

“Hold on, Tino,” Tae said as he pulled his gun from his lap.

All of a sudden, the van sped up, swerved around, and pulled alongside him right before the passenger window came down and a gun popped out.

“This for Phil, nigga!” a voice hollered before bullets rained down all over Tae’s Charger.

A deafening blast of return fire sounded as Tae shot through his windshield and got off three shots off before he was struck and lost control of the wheel. Tae was struck again when he ran into a fire hydrant on the corner and the caravan sped off as the shooter emptied his clip. Water burst from the hydrant as Tae tried to correct his blurred vision. He was still conscious and able to move as he looked over at Tino and realized he’d been shot in the head.

Chapter 17

Des cried the entire time she was driving to the hospital after receiving the call. She couldn't even explain to her son what was going on and why she was crying as she drove him to his grandmother's house to drop him off. She hated that he even had to see her this way. It was Endy who had phoned her after getting the call from Kwon. Endy was completely hysterical at first and needed someone to calm her down as she tried to drive to the hospital herself.

They still didn't know much about Tae's condition, being that once Endy heard he was shot she rushed Kwon off the phone so that she could get to the hospital. All in all, she did hear that it didn't look like Tino was going to make it and when Des heard that, she broke down.

Des and Endy both had so many unanswered questions. *What were Tae and Tino even doing together? Why was someone shooting at Tae? Was this incident related to Bobby's murder somehow?* All of these thoughts and more were swarming through her head as Des pulled into the emergency entrance. She spotted some of Tino's family standing right outside smoking cigarettes, and she knew she would have a hard time facing them. By the

time she parked and made it back up to the entrance, Tino's family had disappeared.

She hurried inside and quickly found Tae's family along with Tino's in the waiting room. Endy was sitting by herself close to Tae's mom and uncle, but she stood up as soon as she spotted Des. The two embraced the second they were in arm's reach, both passing internal strength to and through one another.

"You heard anything?" Des wanted to know as she looked at Tino's family seemingly already in mourning.

"Tae is gonna be okay, thank God. They said the bullet hit his shoulder and another one only grazed him in the back."

"Oh my god." Des breathed a sigh of relief.

"Tino didn't make it though. He was DOA they said."

Des didn't break down again, but she did lay her head on Endy's shoulder as another burst of tears started to flow. She had a place in her heart for Tino that couldn't be denied. She couldn't imagine him dying this way in her wildest dreams. Endy held her tightly, consoling her. When she finally lifted her head, she scanned the room for Tino's mom.

"Where's Kwon?" she asked, looking at Tino's mother from afar.

“He left as soon as he heard that Tae was gonna be okay. He didn’t say anything to me, so I don’t know where he was going.”

“You seen Tae yet?”

“No, I’m going in with his mom as soon as they say we can. Call Kwon and make sure he’s okay though.”

“I’ll call him in a minute.”

Des took a deep breath as she gathered the courage to go and talk to Tino’s mom, knowing there was nothing she could say to make this day any easier to stomach.

Kwon drove on the freeway doing ninety miles an hour with his head throbbing and his stomach in knots. He wasn’t even sure of where he was going, he just had to get away from that hospital...away from the darkness and away from everybody before he had a mental breakdown. Tae’s mom was accusing him of being responsible for all of it, and he couldn’t see where she could be wrong. Three people in two days had been shot, two people killed, and all three of them were directly connected to him. He ate the blame. Things couldn’t get any worse. If this was God’s plan for his life, it sure was a fucked up one.

“What the fuck?!” he screamed louder than a kidnapped American soldier being tortured as he punched the steering wheel. “What the fuck?!”

He almost lost control he'd struck the steering wheel so hard the second time. He tried to calm down before he killed himself on the freeway. He began to zoom Des's Explorer in and out of lanes, passing all the cars that were easily keeping up with the flow of traffic but not doing ninety. The speed of the truck was keeping up with his racing thoughts, allowing him to form small increments of clarity to the surface. When he pieced together enough thoughts that made sense, he scrolled the contacts on the touch screen and called Ryan.

“Hello?” his father's voice came in loudly through the car speaker.

“Dad.”

“Yeah? You alright, son? I been calling you. Me and your mother.”

“Yeah, I know. It's just a lot going on.”

“What now? Something happened since yesterday?” his father wanted to know.

“I'll tell you some other time, Pop.”

He knew by his father's tone he didn't know about Tae and Tino, and Kwon wasn't about to mention it now.

“Okay.”

“Listen, how many vacation days you got left?”

“I still got all of ‘em. I’m saving ‘em for my birthday month, why?”

“I need you to take ‘em, Pop. All of ‘em, and I’ll pay for your trip wherever you wanna go. I’ll pay for you and Cassie, ‘cause I know you wanna get away with her. Just don’t ask me why ‘cause I can’t explain it to you.”

“Kwon, come on man, what the fuck? Enough is enough, man.”

“Pop, listen to me, you gotta trust me on this. I’m still the same person that walked out the gates in November. I haven’t changed. The only thing that has changed is my circumstances. I’m doing everything I said I was gonna do, and you know that.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Pop, I need you to trust me, please! Please, I’m begging you, just take your vacation as soon as you can. Put in for it tomorrow, please.”

“Am I in some kind of danger and you’re not telling me? Be straight up, son, and tell me what the fuck is going on,” Ryan demanded.

“I don’t think you are...but I know I am, and I just don’t want you to be around right now.”

“Well, what are the police saying about—”

“The police ain’t gonna be around to protect me 24/7, Pop! Just take the fucking vacation man, damn! Please!” he yelled at his father for the first time he could ever remember.

Ryan hung up on his son in frustration, not knowing what else to do at the time. Kwon wrapped his hand around his steering wheel, squeezing it like a therapy ball as he looked up and saw the Ford Rd and 94 exit. He’d driven so far out of the way of any destination he could think of, he just kept driving.

Tae was sitting up in the hospital bed, calm and collected, when Endy and his mom walked in. He’d had time to process everything now, but just a few hours ago he was watching his life flash before his eyes. Before today, Tae had never seriously thought about dying. Even with everything going on, he just assumed that because he didn’t bother anybody and he wasn’t a bad person he would live a long life. Today he realized none of that really mattered. Today he realized it could all be over in the blink of an eye.

“Hey, son, how you feeling?” his mom said as she approached his bedside.

Endy was right next to her, shoulder to shoulder, almost like she was shielding herself from the release of any negative energy Tae might've wanted to zap her way.

"I'm alright, Mama. The bullet didn't hit no organs or nothing."

"Well, shit, you still got shot. Who did this?" his mom demanded.

"I don't know, Mama."

"You don't know?"

"Naw, they were in a van I never seen before with tinted windows."

"This happened to you because of Kwon's ass. I know it did. Now I appreciate what he's tryna do for the kids, but evidently, he's going about it all the wrong way. Everybody around him is getting shot up or killed."

"None of this is his fault, Mama. Kwon hasn't done nothing but tried to help those kids since he been home."

"So why did this happen, Tae? What is it you not telling me?"

"Nothing!" He looked at Endy. "Would you tell her we haven't done anything wrong?"

Endy shook her head in agreement.

“They haven’t. Tae goes to work and comes home, or he goes to the clubhouse to help out with the kids. We don’t have to worry about this being his fault, Mama,” Endy said.

His mom looked at Endy and then at Tae.

“And what’s going on with y’all two? Why was she at my house looking for you at damn near one o’clock in the morning?”

Endy cleared her throat nervously.

“We just going through something right now,” she said before Tae could answer.

His eyes changed as he stared coldly at her now.

“Go ahead and tell her. Tell her what we going through.”

His mom looked at Endy, waiting as she let out a frustrated sigh.

“You don’t have to put me in y’all business if you don’t want to. I was just asking because I thought it might’ve had something to do with how we ended up here.”

“I can assure you it does not, Mama,” Endy replied.

“Okay, well, I’ll stay out of it.”

Endy turned to Tae.

“You need to come home.”

“I’m not about to talk about this right now.”

“Yes we are, because if you're not being admitted then that means you're being released, and where else would you go? I know you upset, but you can't hate me that bad that you gonna avoid coming home after being shot.”

“Do y’all need a minute?” Tae’s mom asked.

“Yes,” Endy said.

“No,” Tae disagreed.

“Yes!” Endy repeated.

“I’ll step out for a second.”

As his mom left the room, Endy glanced at the other patients in the room pretending not to listen. She moved closer, lowering her voice, as if that made a difference.

“I can’t take back what I did, but I don’t wanna lose my husband. Yes, I should’ve thought about that way before now, but Tae...when I heard you got shot I almost lost it. I believe we can come back from this if you still love me enough to just try.”

Tae stared coldly.

“I slept with somebody,” he revealed.

The shock of his revelation struck her heartstrings. She felt like the wind had been knocked out of her, but she tried to digest it calmly.

“Okay. That was revenge sex. I deserved that,” she responded.

Silence.

“I can’t guarantee that I’m gonna stop seeing her either.”

She pleaded with her eyes.

“Tae?”

“I’m serious. How long did your affair last?”

“I didn’t come here to argue with you. Tae, please just come home.”

“I’m just being honest. If I come home, that doesn’t mean I’ll stop seeing her.”

Endy’s hurt slowly turned into anger then snowballed to rage. She wanted to punch him in the shoulder he’d just gotten shot in with all her might. Came close to doing it. She turned around and stormed toward the door, stopping just short of it.

“Go to hell, bitch!” she lashed before making her exit.

Hours later, Kwon ended up back on the eastside parked outside of Treach's apartment on Cadieux. He desperately needed to be around someone that was thinking the same as he was at the moment. Someone he could align with on revenge, retaliation, and get back. Kwon hadn't smoked weed since he was a teenager, but today, the pressure of life was just too much to bear and he needed something to knock the edge off. He pulled the blunt Treach had rolled long and hard before passing it back to him. He coughed in spasms before his mouth filled with saliva, and he pushed open the car door, retching with his head leaned out of the car.

When he didn't vomit, he pulled himself back inside with watery eyes.

"The fuck kinda weed is that?" he said, looking at Treach like he was crazy for smoking it.

"This that shit that's gon' get your head right, I'm telling you."

"Fuck that. I'm straight," Kwon decided as he coughed again, covering his mouth.

Treach had a Ruger with a 30-round clip in his lap as they sat out in the truck discussing their next move.

“I know me and you ain’t been knowing each other a long time and all that, but I’m solid, Kwon. I can’t vouch for them other niggas though,” Treach said. “Whatever happens, dog, I’ma keep it G, you feel me?”

After Kwon finished coughing, the weed kicked in and he felt his mind beginning to ease.

“You know what’s crazy, my nigga? My whole goal was to show these kids around here that they could grow up to be something else besides a gangsta. And yet here we are plotting and planning some gangsta shit. But sometimes I think the ends justify the means, you know?” Kwon said, giving him a stern gaze.

“What you said? That’s the American way. We live in a world that kills in the name of peace and progress all the time, they just have it more organized. In the end, our people are never better off. I’m glad I never went to war for this country, but I’ll damn sure go to war to protect this community.”

Kwon extended his hand in solidarity, and they slapped fives as his cellphone rang. It was an unknown caller but that wasn’t abnormal, so he quickly answered.

“Hello?”

“Yo.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s yo’ big bro fam, what’s good?”

Kwon thought for a minute as the voice registered.

“Boo?”

“Yeah, nigga. I just talked to my moms,” he said.

“Oh, so you know?” Kwon said.

Boo and Kwon never talked on the phone because of the sacrifice Boo had made to get him home. When the call came straight through, Kwon knew that it was three-way call from county and he was using another inmate’s line.

“Yeah, I know.”

“He gon’ be straight though, bro. I’m taking care of everything.”

“I need you to do me one last favor, dog,” Boo said, getting right to the point.

“What’s up?”

“You got something to write on or you can put it in your phone, but take this number down.”

Kwon grabbed the paper and pen from the glovebox. He jotted down the number as Boo called it out.

“Who is that?”

“That’s my man, Banga. I need you to take him a ten pack for me. You been looking out since you touched down and I appreciate it, but I need this one last thing from you.”

“A ten pack you said?”

Kwon made sure Boo had everything he needed. He even offered to pay for a lawyer on his charges, but Boo refused. He definitely would give Boo whatever he asked for as long as he was alive.

“Yup.”

“He expecting my call?”

“Yeah, just tell him I sent you.”

“Bet.”

“Love, bro. I’m out.”

“Love,” Kwon ended the call.

He peered out of the window in a daze momentarily after ending the call with Boo. Half of it was the weed and the other half was the

implications of the conversation he'd just had.

“What’s up, you good?” Treach asked.

“Yeah...yeah, I’m good,” Kwon replied, snapping out of it.

Chapter 18

Des didn't get on her knees to pray much these days. She prayed where she was when she felt prayer was needed. She prayed in the car, she prayed in the shower, and sometimes just standing in the middle of the kitchen floor.

Today was different because what she was praying for meant so much to her that she felt obligated to humble herself and get down on her knees in hopes of making a deeper connection to her life's source. She was worried about all of them. Kwon, Endy, Tae, and everyone involved with Boyz in the Hood, including herself. Things had gone from good to bad to worse in a matter of days. Snapshot images of Kwon's enemies being triumphant flashed in her head, sending her rushing off to her bedroom for prayer.

When she heard Kwon's movement inside the house, she tried not to break her concentration, still in the middle of a profound conversation with God. In the distance, she could hear Kwon calling out for her. She ignored him at first, but his voice only grew louder, breaking her thought process until she finally gave in.

"I'm up here, baby!" she called out.

When Kwon made his way up the stairs and into the bedroom, she was still beside the bed on her knees. She turned to glance back at him and could tell he had been drinking. His eyes were low and red like he'd been smoking too, but she brushed all of that off and signaled for him to join her.

“Come pray with me.”

“Where my son at?” he asked.

“He’s in his room. Probably still awake, but come here.” She signaled again.

Kwon walked over and got down on his knees with her. She grabbed him by the hand and closed her eyes.

“God, please watch over this family and guide us and protect us. I pray that you grant us all an abundance of time with one another and...”

As she prayed, Kwon closed his eyes and bowed his head. He squeezed her hand just enough to let her know that he was there in that moment and wanted the same things she wanted. When they were done, he stood and turned to leave.

“Let me go see if he sleep.”

Kwon turned up the dimmer on the lights just enough to see his son's eyes staring back at him.

"You still up?" he said as he came in and sat down on the bed.

"I only laid down a little while ago," Jevonne replied.

"Listen, since you're on spring break from school, why don't me and you hang out tomorrow and do something."

"Like what?"

"Whatever you wanna do. If you don't think of something by tomorrow then you gonna leave it up to me."

"Is Mama coming?" Jevonne wanted to know.

"Naw, it's gon' be just you and me."

"Hmmm. I gotta think on that one," Jevonne said.

Kwon smiled.

"You gon' think on it and get back to me, huh?"

"Yeah, because we kinda did everything already. But that's a good thing. That means we're together a lot," he explained.

Staring at his son who was almost his mirror image lifted Kwon's spirits, but it was his words that warmed his heart. He understood that his

son, in his own way, was trying to tell him that he was a good dad. He rubbed his head roughly.

“I love you, man.”

“I love you too.”

When Kwon came back into the bedroom, Des followed him with her eyes as he took off his shoes and placed them on the shoe rack. He felt her watching him, and he turned and locked eyes with her.

“He needs you,” she reminded him.

“I know that.”

“You scared me when you didn’t answer my calls earlier today. In times like this, don’t do that to me, please.”

“In times like these, it might be moments when I can’t talk, baby.”

“I understand that, but you didn’t return my calls for hours.”

He sat down next to her on her side of the bed.

“Just trying to figure some stuff out.”

She laid her head on his shoulder as he put his arm around her lower back.

“Did you?”

“Somewhat.”

“So what happens now?”

“I can’t talk to you about it,” he assured her.

She lifted her head and looked at him in shock.

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t.”

Des removed his arm, stood up, and faced him.

“Don’t start keeping secrets from me again, Kwon. I swear I can’t handle any more lies.”

“I’m not lying. I’m telling you this is something we don’t need to talk about.”

“But why? You just told me you know that your son needs you. Now you sound like you’re about to do something crazy again.”

“I didn’t say that, you did.”

She grabbed him by his shirt and got in his face, pulling and tugging aggressively.

“YOUR SON NEEDS YOU!”

“Lower your voice.”

“YOUR SON FUCKING NEEDS YOU!” she said louder.

“AND SO DO ALL THOSE OTHER KIDS WITHOUT A FUCKING FATHER!” he shouted back. “And I’m man enough to be what I need to be for all of them. This one time you just gonna have to trust that I know what I’m doing and I’m doing the right thing. If somebody don’t stand up now, then when?”

They went into a stare off, neither willing to look away as Kwon’s piercing gaze made her eyes begin to well with tears. She knew she wouldn’t be able to change his mind about whatever he had planned. As much as she wanted to be a part of all of this, she never saw it getting to this point.

“Right now, you have a chance to be smart. If you do something stupid, I’ll never forgive you.”

“That’s fair...and I won’t,” he told her before he pulled her into his arms and held her tightly, kissing her cheek.

Despite all the tension at home, Tae quickly grew tired of being in the streets and went back to the house when he checked out of the hospital. He knew it was the best place for him at the time. For the first few days, nothing was said between them. Now that the roles had been somewhat reversed, it was Endy who was stomping through the house slamming doors, pots, and pans every chance she got. They ordered separate takeout and delivery every day until the kitchen stove was replaced. Endy found a gym nearby her house and canceled her membership at the YMCA. She needed her workout routine now more than ever just to keep from snapping. It was hard living with someone that you never said a word to. Tae slept in the guest room or the basement every night.

He still texted Shelli when Endy wasn't around, but he hadn't been back to her house, still recovering from the gunshots. When they got the new stove, Endy decided to cook for the first time, and she went and found him in the living room.

“Do you want some or not?” she questioned.

The arm he used the most was the shoulder he got shot in. She knew he couldn't cook at the moment, and she just didn't want to cook more food than necessary.

“It don't matter,” Tae replied, not taking his eyes off the television.

His lackadaisical manner the past week had her ready to punch him in the throat. She wondered about the girl he claimed to have slept with. She knew he hadn't just made it up to make her jealous because of the way his anger had subsided since the day he confessed. When she was finished with dinner, she made her plate and went to sit down at the table. He could make his own plate if he wanted to eat. As he came into the kitchen shortly after, she watched him babying his shoulder as he fixed himself a plate.

For some reason, watching him prepare to eat the food she'd just cooked was the final straw that made her speak.

“Do you wanna talk or not?” she simply said.

“About what?” he played dumb.

“Our marriage.”

Silence filled the air. She could tell Tae was caught off guard by the question.

“You can talk if you want. I don't have nothing to say,” he told her.

“How is that gonna work? I can't fix this shit by myself.”

“You broke it by yourself.”

The room fell silent again as the tension rose.

“Fair enough. I don’t want a divorce,” she told him, trying to open up the dialog.

“Can I eat first?” he replied.

She cut her eyes away from him and fixated on the plate of food in front of her. She began to eat in silence as her emotions stirred. She didn’t feel the need to kiss his ass. If he had cheated on her, then they were even now. She was, however, ready to quit ignoring the problems they had. When they were both done eating, she came and sat down in the living room in the chair catty-corner to the sofa he was sitting on. If he didn’t speak to her with some sort of receptiveness, then she would start to think about her next move and even possibly divorce.

“I don’t want a divorce,” she repeated.

Tae clasped his hands into one another, fiddling with his thumbs.

“Endy, I just don’t understand why any of this happened. And the fact that I don’t understand it only makes me think it will happen again. Then you gon’ sit up and tell me I don’t think I’m man enough for you?”

“I love you, Tae. You’ve been very good to me. Ever since high school, you have always loved me the way I wanted to be loved. I took you for granted. I was selfish as fuck and I’m sorry—”

“But why though?”

“I don’t know why. Our sex life was great and I don’t feel like I was lacking anything. I just...we were together since eighteen and even though we had that break, I don’t think I was really ready to be the wife that I needed to be when we got married. I don’t want that man, but at that moment the curiosity just got the best of me.”

“It wasn’t just a moment, Endy. That shit went on for a while. I don’t know how long and I don’t even wanna fucking know.”

“We won’t fix this overnight, but I believe we can fix it. I just need to know, are you willing to try?”

Tae was shaking his head, and she couldn’t tell if it was in disappointment of his wife or just him telling her he wasn’t willing to work on his marriage. His phone rang and Tae immediately jumped at the chance to answer the phone instead of replying to Endy.

Kwon had just pulled up and told Tae he was outside. He didn’t bother trying to go in, knowing the friction that was still between Tae and Endy. Tae came out and slid in the seat carefully, watching out for his arm

in the sling. He didn't wear the sling all the time, only when the shoulder was bothering him a lot, like today.

“What's good?” Tae greeted him.

“Just coming to check on you like I said I would.”

“Yeah, you was right on time too,” Tae replied.

They knew there were things they had to discuss that shouldn't be said over the phone or in front of the women, but on the surface, today was supposed to be about a friend checking in on a friend.

“It's still like a icebox in that muthafucka, huh?” Kwon assumed.

“She trying to talk to me right now, but I don't wanna hear that shit.”

Kwon shook his head.

“I'll be honest with you, my nigga. I don't see you leaving Endy and starting your life all over.”

Tae shot him a careless glance.

“You don't know me like you think you do then.”

“I'm just saying, I can't see it.” Kwon slapped his chest.

“Whatever. Anyway, I wanna talk about this other situation.”

“Yeah, me too.” Kwon nodded.

“Whatever move you finna make, don’t leave me out of it, dog. I want the niggas that shot me to feel my pain. I’m not letting that ride.”

Tae peered straight ahead from the passenger seat like Money Making Mitch crying in the car after finding out his little brother was killed. “I know what I said before, but...things is different. A lot of shit done changed overnight, and besides that, I can’t let you take on all this shit by yourself.”

“I’m not gon’ lie, my brother, that’s music to my ears. You know I don’t trust nobody the way I trust you. I trust you with my life, dog, and I trust you with my son’s life if something happens to me.”

“Naw, ain’t shit gon’ happen to us. We done taking punishment, it’s time to issue out some.”

“I agree. I had a long talk with Des, and I think I got a plan that’s the best decision I can make right now under these circumstances. My Pops took me up on my offer to send him on vacation. He’s leaving in a few days. I’m calling a meetup at the clubhouse the day before he leaves town. Just the five of us. Once that happens, I don’t know what you wanna tell Endy, but we might not be home for a few days.”

Tae was off work because of his injury, so he had time to commit to whatever plan Kwon came up with. He wanted revenge, but more importantly, he wanted to have Kwon's back the way he always did.

"I'm with it."

"Bet."

Kwon sat behind the wheel rubbing his beard, with something else on his mind. "You know we ain't never talk about the night we ended up scrapping."

"We ain't gotta talk about that shit, man. It happened and I'm glad we got to get whatever the fuck we had to say off our chests that night."

"Yeah, some of that shit probably needed to be said," Kwon agreed.

"It did...it definitely did."

The night before Ryan was set to leave for Aruba for two weeks, Kwon called all the members to the clubhouse. He was the first to arrive and it was the first time he'd been in the neighborhood for a week and half. He drove a lowkey rental car so he wouldn't be made and targeted without warning. As he arrived at the clubhouse, he saw the black spray paint all over the side of the building. THIS MY HOOD was sprayed in big letters,

making a bold and disrespectful statement on what was supposed to be a sanctuary for kids. Kwon's blood boiled at first, but he quickly swallowed his pride and talked himself down. He had to be on point from here on out.

“Not for long, nigga,” he mumbled as he pulled inside the lot and parked.

Moments later, he saw Treach pulling in followed by Harold. Clyde and Tae didn't arrive until they were inside. Everyone saw the spray paint on the wall, and it made for a somber mood to start the meetup, coupled with the fact that the news had reported just yesterday that the clubhouse had been shut down for reasons unknown. They even went so far as to speculate that it was due to the rising violence in the neighborhood. But the head honcho of it was far from throwing in the towel on his brainchild. He'd devised a plan that he was ready to lay it all on the line for.

“So, over the past couple weeks, I been mapping shit out, right. Me and Treach found out where all these dudes' drug houses is at. This how they make they money and this how we crush 'em. We gon' burn all that shit down. Daveon got three houses, and Mook only got one. We can hit two or three a night and be done with it. Whoever in the houses, they get out or they can stay inside in die. We ain't coming to kill, but if they want a gun battle, we gon' give it to 'em.”

“What about the money in the houses?” Clyde said.

“Exactly! We gon’ get that too. Give it to the kids,” Kwon explained.

“Wow, man,” Harold said. “Y’all really serious, huh?”

“Hell yeah!” Treach said. “If you ain’t with it, let us know right now.”

“We just need you to drive, Harold. If you not with it, now is the time to speak up.”

Harold slowly agreed.

“Naw, I’m with it. Something gotta be done, I know that. I can drive.”

“And you need to carry a pistol just for your own protection while all this is going on.”

“Okay,” Harold agreed.

Kwon looked around the room at each man, and he could see that not only did he have their full attention, but he had their trust. They were willing to ride with him into a warzone, jumping right into the fire, and he refused to let them down.

“Okay, so this how we gonna play it...”

Chapter 19

The night that Ryan left town on his two-week vacation, Boyz in the Hood set the play in motion. The block was scarcely active with the exception of the target house. Standing outside on Lakepoint across the street from a drug house was a bunch of men in black clothes and ski masks, looking like a bunch of stickup kids or a tactical raid team. They'd been hiding in a vacant house for the past hour, now they were all bunched up in the driveway so they could see the street from all angles. Kwon stood out in front of them, looking at the headlights approaching the corner. When they turned left, he signaled for Treach, the only one wearing camouflage, to move across the street and get into position.

They had to move fast, so as soon as Treach was in position, Kwon darted across the street with his pistol in hand. By the time the front door came open, he was standing there with his gun pointed at Daveon's worker and the customer he was letting out of the house. He backed them both up as shock riddled their faces.

"Get back inside," he calmly told them.

"What the fuck?" the worker shouted, throwing his hands up, backing away as he was forced inside.

Kwon spotted a second worker playing *Call of Duty* on the PlayStation. He didn't even realize the house was being hit. "My man, get on the ground," he ordered as Treach came through the door with the AR-15 in his hands gripped tightly.

"Everybody down! Everybody get the fuck down!" Treach ordered louder.

"I don't got shit to do with this, man. Y'all can let me go!" the customer pleaded.

"We will in a minute, right now I need you on the floor. We ain't asking again," Kwon said.

Terrified, everyone in the house slowly dropped to their knees and laid down on the floor.

"Hands where I can see 'em, big fella!" Treach told the worker that answered the door, who was moving around a lot.

"Where that bread at?" Kwon demanded.

"It's in the backroom," the second worker answered immediately.

Tae came through the door carrying a can of gasoline while Kwon snatched up the worker and took him to the back. Treach searched the big fella's pockets and found a bankroll.

“Where the dope at? That’s in the backroom too?” he questioned.

“Some of it.”

“Where the rest?”

Clyde was standing outside of the house, making sure no one approached while they were inside. Tae went to the kitchen and started pouring gasoline on the floor, creating a trail out to the front room.

“Come on, man! What’s going on?” the customer questioned nervously as he began to fear he would die in a house fire.

Commotion could be heard out front where only Clyde was stationed.

“What’s going on, dog?” Treach called out.

Kwon brought the second worker back out to the front holding a grocery bag full of drugs and cash.

“We good, go ahead!” Clyde shouted out.

Kwon went to the window and saw customers leaving.

“Was that everything?” Kwon asked the two workers.

“Yeah, that’s it, man!” the bigger one said.

“I got the rest of it,” Treach said.

He already found the guns under the couch and the extra drugs and cash.

“You take they car keys?” Kwon said.

“Yeah, I got they phones too. Everything.”

“Alright, blaze this bitch. Come on, all y’all walk outside with us real slow,” Kwon ordered their captives.

Both the workers and the customer got up and walked out of the house in a single file line, still showing their hands. When they made it to the steps, Kwon called out.

“Stop right there. Y’all two go that way, and you go that way.”

He split the workers up, and they took off slowly in opposite directions, shoulders slumped in defeat, vowing revenge. Kwon let off two shots in the air just to alert the neighbors as Tae lit a match and torched the house. He didn’t want anyone harmed if the fire department didn’t come quickly. The shots made the workers skedaddle as Harold sat down the street in his truck with no license plate on it. Once he saw the Boyz coming out of the house and off the porch, he drove down and picked them up. Headed to the next spot, Kwon called the 911 from a burner phone and reported the fire.

“I said getcho bitch ass on the floor, nigga!” Treach growled as he slammed the butt of his rifle into the worker's cheekbone.

The second house belonged to Mook and had men and women inside. Kwon didn't want to hurt any of them, but he wasn't above it.

“Shoot his ass if he think you playing,” he called out as he stepped on a dude's hand that was on the floor reaching for something. “Whatchu doing, dog? You tryna die tonight?” Kwon questioned, gun aimed at his head.

Clyde came in to help control the room. Tae stood outside and watched the block this time.

“All y'all women, come over here and sit on the couch,” Clyde instructed them, following the plans Kwon had laid out. “Don't pick up no purses, don't make no sudden movement. We don't wanna have to hurt nobody, especially a female.”

There were seven people in the house in all. A couple of guys seemed to be just there to hang out. They didn't have any money, guns, or drugs on them. Kwon took the spokesmen for the group to get the stash. He found eight thousand in cash, a few pounds of weed, plus a small amount of

pills. Blocka! No sooner than he secured the findings, he heard the sound of a single shot ring out as he stuffed it all into a knapsack. He drug the worker back up to the front by his collar to find out what was going on.

“Ahhhhh!” The young dude that Kwon had told Treach to shoot was now lying on the floor bleeding in pain with a bullet in his calf.

Kwon looked at Treach.

“Bitch ass nigga gon’ tell me he gon’ kill my whole family. Nigga, you gotta live through tonight first!”

Treach stood over him, sticking the AR barrel right to his temple.

“Say some more slick shit!”

“Aaaaaa, fuck!” his victim grimaced.

“Chill,” Kwon told Treach as he rushed to the front door. “Come on, hurry up.”

Tae scrambled inside with the gas can in hand, ready. The women panicked immediately.

“UN UN, NO! NO! Let me out! Let me out!” they cried.

“I’m not dying in here!” one shouted, in fear for her life.

“Calm down, ladies. I told y’all we didn’t come to hurt nobody. He hurt ‘cause he don’t know how to shut the fuck up!” Clyde told them, pointing to the man on the floor bleeding.

Kwon began to lead the women outside as Tae poured gasoline all over the floor, including on the men lying on it. As far as he was concerned, one of them could’ve been the nigga that shot him. He wanted to pull out and shoot every one of them, but he knew that wasn’t the plan. Treach and Kwon let them get up and led all the dudes into a bedroom near the front door as Clyde continued to search for any extra cash or weapons. The amount of gasoline Tae had poured in the house had everyone dizzy from the fumes.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Tae called out to them all.

“What the fuck, dog? We did what you said, you ain’t gon’ let us go?” a frightened young dude called out from the bedroom.

“Yeah, after we leave. Count to fifty then you can come out. If you come out before then,, you better not let us see it, ‘cause we gunning anybody down that come out that front door before we leave the block,” Kwon said.

“Believe that,” Tae backed his words.

Moans, groans, and mumbled threats came from inside the room as they made their exit. Kwon wasn't planning to burn them alive, but he wasn't taking any chances. He knew they wouldn't spare his life if given the opportunity. When all the Boyz had made it outside of the house, Tae stood at the front door and struck a match. POOF! As soon as the match hit the floor, the house practically exploded with flames, knocking Tae backwards. He stumbled to the steps and made his way off the porch.

“Ahhhhh, ahhhh!”

Screams could be heard coming from inside the house and moments later, the door came open as bodies started to pile out on fire.

“Shit!” Kwon spat as he realized that Tae had poured too much gas inside the house.

They rushed to the truck and got inside as some of the workers could be seen rolling on the ground outside. Once they were all in the truck, Harold put the truck in reverse and backed up the block at top speed. He spun around in the opposite direction as Clyde called the fire department as instructed. Kwon hoped they hadn't killed anyone, only because it wasn't the plan.

Mook had enough money to move away from the hood and let his pups handle all of his dirty work. When he got the call about what happened at his spot, he was in the bed with his pregnant girlfriend in Eastpointe. As soon as he got the call, he jumped out of bed and got dressed, shooting out the door in less than five minutes. When he made it to the hood, he realized he had his weed but no blunts. He stopped at the gas station to grab some Backwoods, feeling like he needed to smoke ASAP.

He didn't know who was behind the attack, but he wasn't about to let his reputation get tarnished this way. Blood would fill the streets as soon as he got a name. He was going to kill everyone involved, starting tonight. As he exited the gas station, he spotted a dude he knew from the block but didn't consider a friend.

“What's up, Mook? You good? I heard about what happened,” the dude called out.

“Yeah, I'm good. Shit about to be on fire around here though, literally.”

The two went their separate ways, and Mook climbed behind the wheel of his brand-new Challenger. He quickly broke down the blunt and tried to roll up one. He didn't want to wait another minute to smoke before he pulled up and got the worst of the bad news and surveyed the damage.

He didn't even notice Banga creeping low up the side of pump seven with death in his eyes. He didn't even get a warning that he was about to die. From the corner of his eye, he spotted Banga as he quietly raised the gun and pointed at his temple, squeezing off four rounds that knocked his upper body over onto the passenger seat. Banga fled in the same direction he'd come from, grinning and feeling accomplished for another hit gone well.

The whole hood was on fire with police and the fire department, but the Boyz still didn't leave the area. They only hid the truck and the rifle that had been used by Treach to shoot one of Mook's workers. After that, they went to the clubhouse and turned off all the lights as if no one was inside. They planned to spend the night there just in case someone figured out it was them and decided to try and hit the building in retaliation. All the chairs and tables were pushed to the back and replaced with blow-up mattresses. They still had plenty of guns to protect the fort plus cameras watching from every angle.

Kwon received a text message from one of the older kids that Mook had just been killed in the hood. His first reaction was shock then a lingering fear of some possible repercussion. If anyone found out what they had done tonight, he would definitely get blamed for Mook's murder. He

didn't ask questions when Boo asked him to take ten thousand dollars to Banga. When he met Banga face to face, he had his suspicions of what the money could've been for. Now his suspicions had been pretty much confirmed. He wouldn't tell the other Boyz about Mook's death tonight. He didn't know if it would be too much for some of them. They'd find out soon enough. He did send Tae a message about the new information. When Tae read the message, he just looked at Kwon and nodded. He knew just like Kwon that it had to be a hit. They didn't feel bad about it. Things were going better than expected.

It was Des' sister Kadajah that called her and told her about everything that was going on in the neighborhood. Kadajah had gotten multiple calls from people who still lived in the hood. She knew Mook and had gone to middle school with him. When Des found out about all the chaos, she phoned Kwon but he didn't answer. She phoned Endy to see if Tae had come home, and he hadn't. While they were on the phone with each other, they both received text messages from their mates telling them not to worry. At the same time, it was two o'clock in the morning and they still weren't home. Kwon had promised her he wouldn't do anything crazy, and now she didn't know what to think.

“What did Kwon tell you about what they were going to do today?”

Endy pressed, knowing that her friend probably knew way more than she did.

“He wouldn’t talk to me about it. He didn’t even tell me he was leaving when he left.”

“What should we do, Des? I’m scared.”

“I don’t think there’s nothing we can do. I should’ve forced Kwon to be honest with me, but I...I just felt like in the back of my mind maybe there was some stuff I was better off not knowing at this point. I don’t know if what he’s trying to do is wrong, but I know he believes it’s right.”

“And I know Tae has been shot and he’s angry, so he could be looking for revenge, and I know that the boy who was killed on Kwon’s old block was close to Kwon. I just feel like this can’t be a coincidence that neither one of them is home or even telling us when they coming back.”

“No, you’re right. You’re absolutely right, and they won’t tell us much because they want to protect us from whatever is going on, but this... this is too much. Kwon just keeps telling me to trust him, and I’m trying, but if something happens to him or Tae, I will never forgive him.”

For the next couple of days, Kwon and Tae still didn't go home. They showered and changed clothes at Ryan's, wanting to keep an eye on his place as well as the clubhouse. What they'd done to Mook and Daveon was a declaration of war and they played it as such but with Mook's death, the path to complete the mission became clearer. Kwon wanted to hit Daveon's second spot the night after hitting the first one, but the hood was too hot. He took the drugs he'd gotten from both spots and took them to Banga as payment for a hit on Daveon's head. It just made sense.

Kwon realized that he couldn't open the clubhouse again until he was gone. In the meantime, they still planned to hit the second house to shut down any chances of his underlings rebuilding. After the last incident, they decided burning the houses up wasn't a good move. Kwon knew burning down the community wasn't the best way to rebuild it, but in his experience, he saw how things always got worse before they got better.

They knew hitting the second spot would be risky. They expected that whoever was inside would be on high alert. As they surveilled the house earlier that day, they spotted one of the men from Daveon's first house inside. He'd been burned in the fire but not bad enough to keep him away from the hustle.

Kwon decided they would have to take a different approach this time since the element of surprise was no longer an option. They would pretend to be the police, and that would hopefully give them enough time to get inside and secure the house. This time, they only planned to rob the workers and shut the spot down. As they drove to the house, Kwon rode shotgun, as usual, with Harold behind the wheel. There was complete silence except for the sound of a slight squeak of the frame on the aging vehicle as it hit bumps in the road.

“If anybody is nervous, that’s okay. I’m nervous too. This ain’t guaranteed to go as smooth as we want, but remember why we doing it,” Kwon said to them all.

“You either stand for something or fall for anything. So if I fall tonight, it wasn’t for nothing,” Treach replied.

Kwon glanced in his rearview. He could tell Treach wasn’t nervous at all. This was his element. This time, Harold parked the truck right in front of the house, and the rest of them all jumped out just like a raid team. Kwon stormed up to the steps with a rifle in hand and kicked on the door. Boom!

“Police, search warrant!”

The door didn't come open, so he kicked it again as they all shouted out.

“Detroit police, search warrant!”

Boom! The second kick knocked the locked door open wide, and they rushed in wearing ski masks, pointing guns.

As they made their way inside, someone was making their way out of the back door. The other people in the house couldn't be seen but could be heard scrambling up the stairs.

“Fuck!” Treach said as he gave chase toward the back of the house.

When they arrived at the kitchen, they spotted a connecting bathroom that had another side door on the inside. Kwon could tell the door led upstairs as he stood at the threshold. Whoever had run out the back door was gone.

“Let 'em go!” he called out to Treach before he hurried toward the upstairs. “Police!” he continued as he, Tae, and Clyde climbed the dark stairway.

Adrenaline circulated through his entire body as he reached the top of the steps, hoping someone didn't shoot his head clean off. He stayed low and gripped the rifle tightly. Upstairs was a dimly lit attic. Treach stayed

downstairs searching the rest of the rooms in the house. Kwon crept through the attic like a spider on the floor, followed by his comrades. The space was so huge, whoever was up there could've been hiding anywhere. He began to think this wasn't a good idea. Just then, loud scrambles erupted from the opposite end of the attic.

Kwon followed the noise and spotted a shadowy figure climbing out of the window.

“Come here, bitch!” he growled as he rushed to catch him before he jumped.

Boom, boom, boom! The thunderous sounds of a cannon-sized gun came roaring from the corner. Kwon ran right into Tae as he fell backward trying to take cover. When he hit the ground, he immediately returned fire, aiming in the direction of the sparks. Blocka, blocka, blocka! Boom, boom, boom! Gunfire erupted in the attic, lighting up the entire upstairs like the Fourth of July. Kwon, Tae, and Clyde all let off shots before they began to back down the steps one by one. When they stopped shooting, no return fire came.

“We gotta go!” Kwon said, knowing they had probably just killed someone.

Downstairs, they ran right into Treach who was running toward the gunfight.

“Everybody alright?” he questioned, eyes bucked in kill mode.

“Yeah, we good, we gotta go though.”

They rushed to the front door and ran down the stairs. Before they could reach the truck, Daveon emerged from house across the street brandishing an AK, and opened fire on them all. With a dark hoodie pulled tightly over his head, he sprayed recklessly in their direction. Bullets rained on the truck, causing Harold to crouch down as low as he could while the rest of the Boyz shielded themselves near the rear. Another pistol started cracking off as Treach crept around the bump of the truck until he was able to pop out in the middle of the street and open fire. Daveon was caught off guard as bullets zoomed right by his head. He ran to take cover as a second gunman fired from behind a car, striking Treach right in the stomach. He went down behind the back tire of the truck.

Kwon knew this couldn't go on much longer. He knew he had to end this right now, even if it cost him his life. He couldn't let bullets keep flying up and down the street and possibly kill an innocent bystander. He couldn't even tell who was shooting at him and who was shooting at Daveon. He had zoned out completely as he rose from the rear of the truck and ran to the

frontline. It all seemed to happen in slow motion as he spotted the targets ducked behind a dark sedan. He opened fire with the AR-15, spraying the car from left to right then right to left until his clip was almost empty.

For a second, he'd snapped back to that seventeen-year-old again holding Boo's Technine. He ran up on the car, dumping a few more rounds. He circled it to the other side, ready to finish the job. His heart pounded through his chest as his wide eyes stared down at the two men laid out on the curb. Both men laid lifeless just inches away from each other, with their weapons flung to the ground. Sirens blared in the distance as he stood over the men, slowly snapping out of the momentary blackout that had seized him.

"Come on, dog!" he heard Tae pleading.

Still feeling like everything was moving in slow motion, he turned to see Treach getting up off the ground and stumbling to the car. The bullet had slammed into his vest and knocked the wind out of him. As Harold slammed the truck in drive, Kwon snapped back to reality, lunging for the passenger side.

"Go, go, go, go!" Kwon heard Clyde shouting as they sped away from a bloody crime scene that had everyone fearing the worst.

Chapter 20

After that night, there was a lot of speculation and an extreme amount of police presence in the hood. The Boyz had to get rid of Harold's truck completely to make sure that the evidence inside, if any, would never come back to haunt them. Before they met up, the Boyz had their own individual lives that had led them to that point. And it was those individual lives, circumstances, and physiological make-ups that prompted them all to take the ultimate risks to dismantle the hood's infrastructure one block at a time. They were now bonded like brothers.

Mook and Daveon both had enemies, so there were all sorts of names floating around about who could've been responsible for their demise, but there was one or two that stood out about them all. Tae had been shot eleven days before Mook was killed. Kwon had been almost killed in a drive-by that took out a kid he was close to. Now both men were nowhere to be found, not even on social media. Soon, the rumors in the street took on an urban legend feel, snowballing into some of the most ridiculous stories about what happened.

If the police believed any of it, they sure didn't act on it. Mostly because no one would corroborate anything but also, they didn't care if

these murders were solved. In their eyes, the community was better off without them. It seemed like the worst was over after a few weeks went by and nothing happened involving the homicides, but Tae was still dealing with his shattered home life. He and Endy couldn't just pick up the pieces and move on even if they wanted to. They couldn't have sex because Tae couldn't get the image of another man stroking his wife out of his head. He slept with Shelli every time tension and trauma of the inciting incident became too much to bear.

One day, Endy followed him to Shelli's house and confronted them both. She tried to attack Shelli on her front porch. The police were called but no one was arrested. She drove home and tossed Tae's clothes out on the front lawn and bleached his shoes. He moved in with his mom temporarily, who lived in Roseville now, while he searched for a place to rent. One night, Endy called Des, drunk and crying about the reality of her impending divorce.

"I don't know what else to do," her voice trembled. "I can't sleep, I'm barely eating. I don't even need to go to the fucking gym because I'm over here starving myself to death."

"You will get through this, okay? We will get through it together just like everything else. Think about everything that has happened. Do you

really believe that we all went through this shit together just to separate?”

Des said angrily, trying to snap her friend out of it.

“I don’t, but that’s what’s happening,” Endy cried.

“No, it’s not...no, it’s not. You not getting a divorce. Unless that’s what you really want. If you want your marriage to be over, then it’s over. Is that what you want?”

“What else is there to do?” Endy yelled back in frustration.

It was easy for Des to have all the answers when her ass wasn’t the one in the fire.

“Pray and believe...because sometimes that’s all you can do, but you know what? That’s all you need to do right now. That’s more than enough, and if you want, I’ll come over and pray with you.”

Hearing her friend sound so confident in the power of prayer only made way for her own belief in it. Endy wasn’t the most spiritual person, but over the years, Des’ way of thinking had rubbed off on her somewhat. She’d witnessed the power of prayer bring Kwon home, she saw all the many blessings Des had experienced in her life. It was enough evidence to foster the seed.

“Okay, but do it tomorrow. I don’t wanna fall asleep on you, and I had too much to drink again.”

“Stop that. It’s not helping.”

“I know. HUUUUUU,” she sighed. “Anyway, I feel a little better. I’m gonna go lay down.”

She wiped away the remnants of her tears.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tae, Kwon, and Treach had met up at a local bar to celebrate Tae finding an apartment after searching seemingly far and wide. They were also celebrating the reopening of the clubhouse, which was happening in a few days. It had been three months since the clubhouse was shut down. This week was the last week of school and they all knew that summertime was the worst time to have the kids without those resources. They sat at the table that had a bird’s eye view of the small dancefloor. R-Kelly’s “Step in the Name of Love” was blasting through the speakers as a lone couple danced on the floor.

A caramel-skinned woman wearing a miniskirt and a blouse with inviting cleavage walked up to their table and locked eyes with Tae.

“You wanna dance?” she said.

“I can’t dance, baby, I gotta pass. I’ll buy you a drink though. You wanna drink?”

“No, thank you.” She walked away, disappointed.

Kwon shot him a look.

“Why you ain’t go dance with her, nigga? That girl fine as hell.”

“You go dance with her, nigga. I can’t dance,” Tae replied.

“She didn’t wanna dance with me. She didn’t even look at me, she wanted you.”

“I tried to buy her a drink, she didn’t want it.” Tae shrugged.

Tae wasn’t ready to jump back into dating, but he knew he couldn’t just sit around and think about Endy all day. After the incident at Shelli’s house, it was a wrap for him and Shelli, so he was back at square one. After a couple of drinks, he was feeling loose and more females had filed into the bar. He stood to go mingle while Kwon and Treach were engrossed in a fit of laughter, having a good time.

“I’ll be right back.”

He'd spotted a tall, curvy drink of chocolate at the bar that was right up his alley. She ran her fingers through her straightened hair as he approached.

"How you doing? I'm Tae."

She half turned. Gave him a once over.

"Hey."

"Can I get that drink for you?"

"I'm with someone," she replied.

"Oh, my bad," he said as the man he didn't see emerged from the bathroom.

Instead of walking off awkwardly, he ordered himself a beer that he wasn't ready to drink. He'd nurse it while he scanned the area. At the opposite end of the bar, three girls were giggling amongst themselves. He looked around to see if the girl that asked him to dance was still there. She wasn't. He poked his head out to get a better look at the girls at the opposite end of the bar. Feeling extra confident since he'd already been chosen once tonight, he decided to step to the slim light-skinned girl that sat between the three.

"How y'all doing ladies, my name's Tae," he introduced.

“Hey Tae,” brown-skinned honey spoke first, then the others followed.

He looked at light skin.

“I came to ask about you though,” he told her.

“What about me?” She giggled.

Brown-skin grabbed her by the hand.

“She’s with me, babe, sorry,” she announced.

He would’ve never called that one. He apologized again and headed back to his table. Maybe he’d just wait to get chosen again. Two strikes were enough. But as he went back to the table and sat nursing his Corona, he had to ask himself was this the life he was really ready for. Did he really want to walk away from the woman of his dreams and start all over? He didn’t have to ask himself did he still love her or not. It was more about was he moving in the right direction? At that moment, it didn’t feel right. In fact, it felt flat-out wrong.

It was an unusually warm night even for June, so Endy chose to sleep naked, wearing nothing but her bonnet to bed. Lately she’d been using sleep aids to make sure she had enough rest to function and be productive at

work the next morning. Tonight was especially rough because she'd gotten wind that Tae had found an apartment, which made the idea of her divorce seem imminent now. Just as the melatonin was kicking in, she heard the doorbell ring. She glanced at her phone to see who was at the front door this late.

When she realized it was Tae, she jumped up off instinct and threw on her robe, thinking something had happened. When she opened the door, Tae's eyes locked with hers then quickly shot to the floor as he stepped inside.

"Is everything alright?" she wondered as she closed and locked the door.

"Not really."

"What happened?" She followed him into the living room where they settled onto the sofa.

"We getting a divorce, that's what happened."

His words were a little slurred. He wasn't drunk, but he'd definitely been drinking. She fixed her robe nervously as Tae focused his eyes on the floor, fumbling with his hands.

"That' what you wanted, Tae. Isn't it?"

“I don’t know what I want anymore. I don’t even know why I came.”

Her concern turned to irritation.

“You know why you came here. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have come through the door talking about a damn divorce.”

His neck turned and he peered at her.

“What do you want from me?”

“What do you want from me?” she shot back with pleading eyes.

“Cause I’m tired, Tae. I really am. We been through this over and over, and I know it’s all my fault, but I’m tired.”

“I want the same thing I always wanted. A wife I can trust. A wife that can trust me. You fucked another nigga, Endy.”

“Got damnit, Tae! How long are you gonna use that as a reason to hate me? I fucked, you fucked, everybody fucked fucked!” she riddled.

“What now?”

“You tell me,” he replied calmly, focusing on the floor again, still not able to look at her.

“I still love you, nigga. Do you still love me?”

He didn't answer. She grabbed his chin and forced him to make eye contact. "Do you still love me?"

He pushed her hand away.

"How could I ever stop? You my everything. My every fucking thing, and that's what makes this shit so hard."

Endy got up and went to him. She straddled his lap and kissed his face.

"I don't wanna lose you, baby. Let's figure this out."

She stroked his hair and stole a kiss on his lips. "Let me be your dream girl again, baby. I don't wanna divorce. I want you. All I want is you."

She kissed his face again. She draped her arms around his neck and hugged it tightly. He wrapped his arms around her waist and held on to her. It felt so good to be in each other's arms again. It felt so good to be...still in love.

Chapter 21

/We some boyz in the hood sell anything for profit/

/Five in the morning on the corner clocking/

/Yeah we wrong but dare a nigga try to stop it/

/And you can get it anywhere anybody/

The Boyz N Da Hood “Dem Boyz” throwback jam played mid-volume through the speakers as it always did every Saturday afternoon at the clubhouse. It was a theme song meant to keep the culture of the clubhouse intact without changing the true message. All the teens that had initially joined were back with even more friends waiting to join. The clubhouse had reached maximum capacity the first week of reopening. Dressed in a fly white and red Montclair short set with matching Alex McQueen sneakers, a Cuban link, and Cartier frames, Kwon paraded around the room checking on and kicking it with the kids that were sectioned off in groups playing video, card, and board games.

In the back, Des and Endy were selling plates of food to raise money for the clubhouse, which was another Saturday ritual now. But money for the Boyz in the Hood organization wasn’t a problem, and Kwon

didn't predict it to be in the near future. More monthly donations were coming in than ever before. It was like the whole city had stood up and taken notice of what he had accomplished in a short period of time. Even the neighborhood hustlers that were still doing their thing had grown to love and respect what Kwon was doing. They donated money to the cause as well. Kwon had become a revered fixture in his hood like Neighborhood Nip in South Central. People flocked to the building on the weekends when they knew he was most likely to be there. He was in talks with two other community activists that wanted to expand Boyz in the Hood into their neighborhoods.

Kwon was eager to make it happen. It all felt worth it now as he stood back and gazed at all smiles on the faces of the future. All of the volunteers came back to help once they realized the clubhouse was here to stay. There would always be whispers about what it took to keep the dream alive, but no one defamed the Boyz because of it. Were the measures he'd taken all part of God's plan too? He doubted it. He'd never know for sure, but he didn't regret it one bit. Tae walked up and draped his arm around Kwon.

“Somebody want us to come outside and take a picture in front of the building.”

“Who?”

“Come see, nigga. I gotta go get Endy and Des,” Tae said, walking away.

Kwon went to the door and cracked it open. He spotted his mom standing on the sidewalk, smiling and conversing with one of the mothers of a teen that had recently joined the clubhouse.

“Why you outside, Mama?”

“I’m coming in to get a plate, but I wanted to take a picture of y’all first.”

It took Tae a minute to get Des and Endy switched out with some of the other volunteers to serve and sell food while they came to take a picture. Endy and Des came out and walked right to Chanel and hugged her as they greeted each other. Once they were done yapping, the four of them stood in front of the building, getting ready to take the picture. Tae held Endy by her waist, wishing his brother was there to see how things had changed in the hood. Back in March, Boo had taken a double life sentence on the chin for the deaths of Reo and SB’s son. He would have to live vicariously through them now, but Tae was determined now more than ever to give him something to smile about.

“Tae, stop rubbing my booty in public,” Endy said, snapping him back into the present moment and making Des laugh out loud.

“Alright, y’all ready?” Chanel said as she stepped back just enough to get the Boyz in the Hood sign in the picture. “Smile y’all!”

The End

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