



# BELIEVE

PATH TO THE CROWN AIN'T PRETTY

KING BENJAMIN

Believe

A King Benjamin Novel

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# Chapter 1

**September 2010**

It was senior year for seventeen-year-old Markwon and eighteen-year-old Devonte, known to friends as Kwon and Tae. Both barely made it to the twelfth grade due to overindulgence of everything not pertaining to school or homework. It was the third week of school and everyone was finally getting settled in. Guys were making the final cut on who they wanted to get with now and who they wanted to get naked before the school year came to a close and life changed as they knew it forever. Devonte had already decided he was going to push up on Endy. She was just too fine to let her get away. Fascinatingly beautiful, like a view of the sunset from the beach.

Since she and Markwon's girl, Destiny, were best of friends, to him, it was only natural the two of them hook up. Endy and Destiny were two of the most head-turning, hormone-inflating girls Denby High School had to offer. As far as he was concerned, if Devonte bagged Endy, they may as well put his name up high on a banner in the gym because he'd be the goat. As the last bell rang and the students began to spill out onto Kelly Road, Markwon and Devonte had their first conversation about Endy and Destiny.

“I’m trying to play catch up, nigga. You got one of the baddest bitches in Denby and your game ain’t even that tight.”

“Stop calling my girl a bitch, nigga! I told you ‘bout that shit,” Markwon warned.

“My bad, my bad. I’m just saying. Your girl bad, man.”

Markwon was light brown skinned, of average height, and had impeccable three-sixty waves that he managed like he was a paid hairstylist. He wore long sideburns with sharp points. His hope was that his beard would grow in and fully connect all his facial hair one day, but he was a long ways away, so he just rocked some puny chin hair he had and a teeny mustache. Markwon was five-nine and slim at a hundred and fifty pounds, but he talked a good fight game whenever fronted with aggression.

His bark had kept him out of a few confrontations in the past. Devonte, on the other hand, was taller and heavier. He was a few shades darker than Markwon but still not enough to be considered dark skinned. He was more of a peanut brown if anything. He was five-eleven and a solid one ninety. The two had only been close friends for a few years, but it’s safe to say that Devonte was Markwon’s main man and vice versa.

“I wanna fuck Endy sooo bad, dog,” Devonte confessed.

“Get at her,” Markwon encouraged.

“You see how she was on me today?”

“Yeah, I seen that, but she do that shit with everybody and don’t give nobody no pussy. She just a flirt.”

“That’s ‘cause most of them niggas is lame as hell and they broke. She ain’t gonna fuck with none of them niggas she be flirting with. It’s just something to do. Like, Ralph gonna ask her today, ‘do you wanna come over and smoke a blunt?’ She don’t even smoke weed, lame,” he went on, referring to Ralph.

Devonte had just found a little part-time gig working for Fed-Ex, packaging four hours out of the day. It was just enough to keep him with some money for the weekend, but his mom had promised that whatever he could save up towards a car, she would match it. He knew once he got his hand on a vehicle, his pussy rate was going to skyrocket. He felt he was a handsome dude with a little game about himself but needed to get a vehicle just to have that extra leverage and availability. He had brush waves too but not as deep as Markwon’s.

They quick-stepped down Morang as Tae’s stomach began to explain to him he needed to hurry up and make it home so he could refuel the tank.

“I think we all need to go out on a double date or some shit,” Kwon suggested. “I don’t think she would fuck with you unless we all went out somewhere.”

“Fuck outta here, nigga. I don’t need y’all to cosign for me. I’ll get her number tomorrow, watch. How much you wanna bet?”

“How much you wanna lose?” Kwon asked.

All of a sudden, they heard dudes yelling obscenities from the opposite side of the street.

“Hoe ass nigga! I should come beat yo’ ass!”

They both looked around in confusion as they spotted Phil, Stacey, and Red across the street. They were a few of the bullies in the neighborhood that ran around kicking up dust whenever possible. Phil and Stacey were the ones who always tried to intimidate people with their size. Red wasn’t big at all, he was just a trouble maker.

“Didn’t you have some words with Phil a couple days ago?” Tae asked.

They were both hoping Phil was not talking to them, but they knew more than likely he was since he was staring straight at them.

“Yeah, that nigga tried to mug me while I was walking with my girl. We had some words, but it wasn’t shit. Niggas just hating.”



Phil was of the opinion that Kwon was soft and had too much mouth, but his jaw hadn't been tested as far as he knew. A lot of times if Kwon's mouth didn't get him out of a situation, Tae would. Everyone seemed to like Devonte and although people didn't dislike Kwon, he could be a little arrogant at times. The fact that he had bagged Destiny did cause him to have a few more unjustified haters, and Phil was one. Phil knew Destiny wouldn't give him a glass of water if he was choking to death.

“Oh, y'all scared now, huh,” Stacey yelled out.

They were obviously looking for trouble. Kwon knew he didn't want that problem, so he gritted his teeth and tried to keep walking. The harsh words were tugging at his pride. The truth was, Kwon wasn't that good with his hands. He hadn't had enough experience to be, and he didn't want that fact exposed. Tae, on the other hand, wasn't used to being disrespected at all and had heard enough.

“Ain't nobody scared of y'all niggas, what's up?” he responded, throwing up his hands like Doeboy from *Boyz n the Hood*.

Now Kwon had no choice in the matter, so he chimed in.

“Bitch ass niggas, all y'all can suck my dick one by one.”

They had taken the bait just like Phil was hoping.

The trio swarmed in like birds on a loaf of bread, cutting through traffic on Morang until they reached the other side of the street. Fear took control of Kwon before the fight even began. He wanted to run, but he knew Tae would stand and fight. Tae dropped the school folders he was holding and threw up his guards as Phil went straight for Kwon, punching him dead in the face. Stacey and Red jumped Tae, but he managed to get off a couple solid punches before they got the best of him. Kwon's brawl was completely one sided. Phil beat him out of his shirt, connecting with thunderous punches on the same side of his face over and over again. When Kwon broke free, he made a run for it.

“Dog, come on!” he shouted out to his friend as he ran like an escaped prisoner. Devonte was more mad than injured, so he continued to fight, giving all he had, but once Kwon was gone, Phil joined in and they triple teamed Tae.

“Dog, come on, man!” Markwon yelled out from a long distance, praying Tae broke free. He hated to leave his friend, but there was no way he was going back for more. Tae hit the ground and they began to kick him and stomp him. Once their point was proven, they took off running and laughing.

“Now suck on that, bitch!” Phil shouted out to Kwon, who stood by at the end of the block. Tae got to his feet and with his head bowed in

shame, he just walked away. Kwon's face was swollen and one eye was closed, but he was still talking tough as nails.

“It ain't shit. I'll be back though, bitch. Believe that! I'll be back,” he promised.

“And we gon' whoop yo' ass again,” Stacey warned.

Tae's lip was busted and he had a small cut on his eye. It was nowhere near the damage that Phil had done to Kwon.

“I'm killing that nigga. I'm killing that nigga,” Kwon ranted to Tae as they hurried home with bruised faces and much more than bruised pride. Tae didn't say a word. He was traumatized by the whole experience, and he was upset with Markwon for leaving him to fend for himself. He just continued to walk home as fast as he could, lost in his own thoughts. Kwon continued to huff and puff.

“I'm killing that nigga. I swear on everything I love.”

Kwon was far from a goon, but he was fired up. He didn't even own a gun and didn't exactly know where to get one, but one thing he knew for sure was this wasn't over.

## Chapter 2

Kwon made it home first, being that he lived in the middle block. Tae just kept walking when Kwon turned up his walk, still not saying a word. Before he could make it to his front porch, Kwon spotted a red Escort racing up the street. He knew it was Destiny, and he knew by the way she was driving someone had already called her and told her about the incident. She was the last person in the world he wanted to see right at that moment.

To make matters even worse, she had her sidekick, Endy, in the car with her. He unlocked the front door and went inside, feeling the throbbing pain on his face as Destiny pulled into the driveway. He wanted to close and lock the door, leaving her outside, but he left it open. The more he began to calm down, the more his face hurt. He went in the linen closet and grabbed a towel, then went into the kitchen and filled it with ice cubes. When Destiny walked into the kitchen, Endy was right on her heels.

When Destiny first took a look at Kwon, she wanted to cry. He looked like he had run into Mike Tyson in a dark alley and called him a bunch of names.

“Oh my god, what happened?” she squealed.

“Shit, you know what happened, that’s why you here,” Kwon snapped as he paced the floor, huffing and panting. The embarrassment he felt was even worse than the pain in his right eye. He had never been so humiliated in his whole life. Stuff like this just didn’t happen to him. To some people, Kwon was considered the man because he had bagged Destiny Brown, a five-five, redbone bombshell with long, dyed blond hair, freckles, and a body that made her peers envious. She stood at a safe distance, almost fearful seeing how upset he was at the moment. She knew he didn’t want to be bothered with her at the moment, but as his girlfriend, she felt obligated to be there.

“Them niggas just haters. They mad ‘cause they ain’t me, that’s all it is. Bitch ass niggas,” Kwon fumed.

There was some truth to Kwon’s statements, but they didn’t ease the pain of his reality at the moment.

“I can’t stand them niggas, they always trying to jump somebody,” Endy commented.

Endy was just as beautiful as Destiny, only caramel and taller. Her big almond-shaped eyes were her strongest quality, as they could mesmerize boys repeatedly, but her smile was infectious as well. The fact that she’d been curvaceous since ninth grade was just an extra added bonus.

“I’m killing them niggas,” Kwon repeated for about the fifth time.

“Don’t go do nothing crazy, Markwon,” Destiny pleaded.

“How is it crazy? Look at my fucking face!” he shouted.

“Don’t yell at me, I’m just saying.”

“Man... bye. Go home,” he urged.

“No,” she refused.

“He probably just want to be alone for—”

“Don’t,” Destiny said, shaking her head, cutting Endy off before she had a chance to butt in.

Endy knew it wasn’t her place, but it was awkward just standing there watching them go back and forth. After the look Destiny gave her, she decided to leave it alone.

“Well, I hope they asses get what they deserve anyway,” she added.

“Take my keys, Endy, I’ll call you when I’m ready for you to come back and get me.”

Kwon lived with his father, Ryan, who worked a second shift and left around the same time he got out of school. At eighteen, he could definitely fend for himself as far as cooking and maintaining the house while his pops was gone. His mother had sent him to live with his father

when he started acting up in the ninth grade. He was a spoiled only child who grew up in the west side Rosedale Park area. His parents, although divorced, were financially able and devoted to his future and well-being. His mother, Chanel, was a top UAW board member, and his father was a plant manager at GM. He always had more than what he needed and by ninth grade, it all just went to his head and he began to chase girls emphatically as his grades plummeted. His days were spent talking on the phone and hanging at the mall with his spoiled friends, with no desire to do anything school related. After he failed ninth grade, his mom had seen enough.

Hoping his father would get him back on track, she sent him to live with Ryan, and together they managed to get him to settle down and focus his attention on more than girls. As Endy took the keys and left, Kwon and Destiny stood in the kitchen with an uncomfortable silence between them. He really just wanted her to go home.

“Can we at least go in the living room and sit down on the couch?” she asked.

“For what?” he growled, becoming more irritated with her presence by the second.

“Because... what we gonna stand in the kitchen looking stupid for?”

“That’s why you should’ve went home.”

“Okay, but I didn’t, so I’m here now and my car is gone. Can we go sit down?”

He finally gave in and walked into the living room and flopped down on the couch with his homemade ice pack over his eye as he tilted his head back. Destiny sat on the opposite end of the couch with her hands between her knees, trying to think of something positive to say.

“They scared to fight head up, that’s why they always trying to jump people,” she offered.

Her words offered no solace because Kwon knew the truth. Tae was the only one who got jumped; he had simply got his ass kicked.

“I don’t even wanna talk about it. Can’t you see that? That’s why I asked you to leave, like, I don’t even understand why you here.”

“Because I just don’t think you need to be alone right now.”

“You don’t know what the fuck I need,” he lashed out.

“You know what? I’m about to call Endy and tell her to come back here right now, ‘cause you not about to sit here and take this shit out on me.”

“Okay, good.” He shrugged his shoulder and laid his head back, placing the ice pack back in the same spot. He knew he was being



unnecessarily mean, but at the moment he couldn't think about her feelings, which was why he didn't want her there.

The five minutes it took for Endy to pull up felt like thirty. Neither of them said a word and she left without saying goodbye. After Destiny left, Markwon's cell phone began to blow up with calls from his friends from school. There was no doubt they had heard about the incident or witnessed it firsthand. Most of them didn't care about Kwon as much as they just wanted to be nosey. He didn't answer any of the calls or texts that came through to his phone for the remainder of the day, except one. The one sent from Destiny right before she went to bed that night.

“I love you.”

“I love you too,” he texted back.

## Chapter 3

The next day, Kwon stayed home in bed instead of going to school. He knew his father would have something to say about it once he awoke and realized he wasn't in school. He was already awake, just staring at the ceiling with thoughts of bloodthirsty revenge, when his father Ryan knocked on his bedroom door.

“Markwon, why you ain't in—” His father's question was cut short by sight of the disaster area that was Markwon's face. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“I got jumped,” he lied.

“By who?”

“These dudes at my school.”

His father came in and leaned on the bedroom dresser. His demeanor, although calm, was showing grave concern. Kwon still didn't want to discuss the incident, but he respected his father too much to unload on him like he had done Destiny.

“Tell me what happened.”

He sat up in the bed.

“I was walking Destiny to class the other day and this one dude was just mugging me for no reason.

“Mugging you?” his father repeated.

“You know, just staring real hard or whatever. So then he bumped me and I said ‘watch where the f you going.’ He said ‘shut up, you ain’t gon’ do nothing.’ So I said ‘you ain’t gon’ do nothing either,’ and he said, ‘yeah okay, I’m a catch you outside and see what’s up.’ Then yesterday, me and Devonte was walking home and that’s when him and his boys ran up and jumped me.”

“So what Tae do?”

“He was helping me, but it was three on two.”

There was a long pause.

“So you think it’s over?” his father asked.

Another long pause. Kwon knew it was far from over, but he couldn’t tell his dad that.

“I don’t know.”

“If you don’t think it’s over then I need to come up to your school and talk to your principal. Now I know how it is when you’re young and you don’t wanna look like a snitch or whatever, but as a parent, I have to make sure you’re safe when you at school.”

“That ain’t gonna help. It didn’t happen at school anyway, it happened on Morang.”

“I’ma pick you up from school for the next few days before I go to work.”

“Naw, come on Pop, that’s just gonna make it worse than what it already is.”

Ryan found himself in a difficult situation. On one hand, he wanted to make sure his son was not in any danger of being harmed again or even worse, shot.

On the other hand, he understood his son was a young man now and wanted to save himself any further embarrassment. He could press charges on the teens that jumped his son, but he knew that’s not what Kwon would want either. He still had to go to school, and the backlash from pressing charges would only add to his troubles. Maybe it was just time to move to another area. The neighborhood used to be a nice lower-middle-class area that people were proud to call home. There were block clubs, and the community as a whole was working-class, decent people.

As of late, the area was quickly turning into just another hood on the decline as Detroit began to feel the effects of an oncoming recession. Ryan had been in denial about the downward spiral over the past few

years, but it was becoming evident by the number of police raids and news crews he saw in the area on a consistent basis. He couldn't let his son get caught up in the hood mentality that ruined so many kids' lives before they even got started.

“I'll tell you this, son, you gonna win some and you gonna lose some. You earn your respect by standing your ground. I never told you not to stand up for yourself, so you haven't done anything wrong, but I'll tell you this; you gotta learn to pick your battles. I know it doesn't sound like what you need to hear right now, but sometimes you just gotta be the bigger man and walk away.”

When Kwon's dad told him to stand his ground, he meant to literally stand and fight if he had no choice, but he didn't take it that way. He heard what he wanted to hear, and the rest went in one ear and out the other. He was already plotting his retaliation.

“You right, Pops. I understand where you coming from,” he said, nodding his head before lying back down on his bed.

“You think you gonna be alright?”

Through clenched teeth, he managed, “Yeah.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I'm straight,” he assured, staring at the ceiling.

“Okay. I’ll let you stay home for a couple days if you think it’ll help you get your mind right. But like I said, in the future, you gotta remember to pick and choose your battles wisely ‘cause it’s always somebody badder than you. And a lot of these kids nowadays is cowards so they don’t wanna fight you fair and square. They wanna jump you or they wanna run and get a gun.”

“I hear you, Pops,” Kwon said, eager to end the conversation. He had slept on it all night and his mind was made up.

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Tae went to school the next day as if the incident had never happened. His injuries were minor and unnoticeable after a good night’s sleep and time to heal. He woke up the next morning with a better understanding of what had happened to him. He got jumped, plain and simple. It was three on one and he still didn’t bitch up, so he wasn’t feeling too down on himself.

He knew it was something that could’ve happened to anybody. So while he still held a grudge, he wasn’t about to stay home and hide from the world like he had something to be ashamed of. In class, he answered all questions truthfully about the incident, even the part when Kwon ran off and left him to fight alone. He wasn’t purposely trying to make Kwon look like a punk, even though he was still upset about it. The facts were

the facts, and anybody that was there to see it knew what happened. He saw Destiny and Endy in between classes, and he wondered what Kwon and others had told them about the fight.

At the end of the day, he stood outside sliding his backpack on his shoulders, about to walk home. He heard Destiny's voice calling out his name. He turned to see her and Endy quick-stepping towards him. A hint of embarrassment came over him in the presence of Endy, but he shook it off. Her flawless skin was glowing and her beautiful eyes were penetrating him as they usually did. But the thing that got him worked up the most personally was her smile. It was captivating.

"What's up, Tae," the girls spoke simultaneously then giggled at the fact.

"What's up," he greeted.

"You alright?" Endy asked.

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm good," he repeated with confidence in his tone.

"Where your boy at?" Destiny asked.

"I don't know. You ain't talk to him?"

"Not since earlier yesterday. Anyway, you want a ride to the crib?"

“Naw, I’m cool, thanks though.”

“Wit’ yo’ cool ass, you know you want a ride,” Endy teased.

“Shut up, girl, if I wanted a ride I’d say it,” he countered, getting in her face with a playful grin. He was happy to see they weren’t treating him any differently since the incident. It made him feel glad he came to school and kept it real with everybody.

“Forget you then, you don’t wanna ride with us,” Endy said.

“I’ll have my own car in about two weeks anyway,” Tae informed. It was ambitious thinking, but he did expect to have a car soon. As the three of them continued to chat in front of the school, he spotted Red out of the corner of his eye walking past. Red was conversing with a girl but his eyes were on Tae. There was a smirk smeared across his face that irritated Tae to the max. He knew in his heart he could take Red in a one-on-one brawl.

“Haha,” Red let out a loud, taunting giggle aimed at Tae as he went past. It made Tae’s blood boil, and he couldn’t let it slide.

“It ain’t shit, y’all had to jump me though,” he responded before Red got too far. Red turn to face him but continued to walk backward with the girl.

“Shut up before I come spank that ass again,” he threatened.



“Come on. I’m ready, let’s do it!” Tae encouraged as he took off his backpack.

“Un un, don’t do this Tae, you gonna go to jail,” Endy warned.

“I don’t give a fuck!” he growled.

By now, Red had already took the challenge and was quickly approaching him. He dropped the book bag to the ground.

“Yeah, what’s up?” he steamed. Red ran up and took a hard swing that didn’t connect, and Tae came full force, connecting with a hard right then a left uppercut that sent Red stumbling backwards. The crowd of onlookers moaned as they shared in Red’s pain. Tae ran up on him before he could recover and hit him with a combination that made Red grab hold of him in order to stay on his feet. The short jabs Red threw had no effect from the close distance he was punching, but Tae began throwing roundhouse flurries with his adrenalin on ten. Before he knew it, DPS officers were jumping out and pulling them apart. They tossed him and Red to the ground and quickly put cuffs on them.

“I ain’t do shit, let me go,” Red yelled as some kids laughed and began to taunt him.

“Man, shut up! You out here fighting right in front the damn school, talking about you ain’t do nothing,” the black officer said. “Stand

up. Both of y'all, stand up," he ordered, pulling Red up by his arms forcefully. He and his partner walked them over to the squad car and instructed them to sit in the back.

"And if y'all say a muthafucking word to each other without me asking y'all something, y'all both going straight to jail."

Devonte sat in the back of the police car with his hands cuffed, staring straight ahead. He didn't even glance at Red out of the corner of his eye. His mission was accomplished as far as he was concerned. The trip to jail would be well worth it because he had turned the tables back in his favor. Now Red would look like a pussy if he ran and got Phil and Stacey to help him fight the battles he couldn't win alone. That still didn't mean he wouldn't try it anyway.

Either way, he could live with whatever the outcome because they both knew the truth. The black officer got behind the wheel while the white officer sank into the passenger seat.

"Now...what the fuck y'all out there fighting for?" the driver asked. He seemed to be the one that would be doing most of the talking. When his words seem to fall on deaf ears, his voice escalated.

"If y'all don't wanna talk, y'all can just go to jail. I ain't got time for this bullshit."

The more Tae thought about it, he really didn't want to go to jail. He was just about to start his new job and his mother was about to help him get a new car. He didn't need something like this setting him back right now, so he spoke up.

“Him and his friends had jumped me yesterday. So when I saw him today, he was laughing at me. So I said ‘y’all had to jump me though.’ They didn’t wanna fight me one on one ‘cause they some punks,” he added.

“And what he say?”

“He said ‘shut up before I come spank that ass again.’ So I said ‘come on, let’s do it.’ Then, you know... we just started fighting.”

“Is that what happened, Reggie?” the cop asked, calling Red by his real name.

“Huh?” Red said.

“You heard me, muthafucka. Did you and your boys jump this gentleman yesterday?”

Red refused to answer his question. He just sat in silence, steaming mad at the fact that Devonte had given him a good ass whooping.

“Oh, Reggie ain’t talking, huh? Yeah, I know your name. I know everybody’s name you hang with. Now, what’s your name?” he asked.

“Devonte.”

“And Reggie still ain’t talking, huh?” the officer said. Devonte could see Endy holding his backpack, waiting to see if he was going to jail. “You know what? Let Devonte out. Reggie, yo’ ass going to jail.”

The white officer exited the patrol car and let him out then uncuffed him. He felt bad about telling the cops about being jumped. It wasn’t his intention to be a snitch, but he had to tell them something to keep from being arrested, so he just did what he was used to doing and told the truth. He instantly thought of his big brother, who was currently in the county jail, and he wondered had he just done something that his brother would frown upon.

Still, he didn’t feel a bit sorry for Red as the cops drove off with him in the back seat. Destiny and Endy were still standing there waiting on him.

“I bet yo’ ass want a ride home now,” Endy teased.

“Hell yeah,” he chuckled.

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That night, Destiny sat in her room listening to her iPod and doing homework. Her mind was not on schoolwork, but she tried her best to stay focused and push through it. She knew when Stacey and Phil found

out about what happened to Red, things could escalate even further. She knew their reputations, and she was worried about Kwon and Devonte.

Phil and his friends were the ones to be voted most likely dead or in jail in the near future by their peers. She had called Kwon all day and he still wasn't answering his cell phone. It was bad enough he didn't want to be bothered with her, but now she was truly concerned for his safety. She knew his ego was severely bruised, so she decided there wasn't much she could do but give him the space he desired.

Destiny grew up in a big family consisting mostly of a bunch of aunts and cousins. Her mother had six sisters and they all had kids. Her mom and her aunts were very spiritually grounded and strong in their Christian faith. They weren't obsessively religious but they were consistent with their practices. It was the only way they ever knew how to keep sanity amongst them and keep the family together. Destiny had a ten-year-old sister named Kadajah, and in their household, it was only the three of them. The sad thing was her mother and father had met in church, the one place her mother always thought was the best place to find a good man. After a quick two-year marriage and divorce, her father skipped town and moved to Atlanta without even informing her mother of his whereabouts, leaving her with a newborn baby to raise on her own.

After ten years, she finally tracked him down and began forcing him to pay child support but even then, he still wasn't ready to be a father to his daughter. Throughout the years, Destiny had witnessed how her mother's faith had brought her through some of the roughest times she faced as a single mom. Her longest lasting relationship had been with Kadajah's father but in the end, they both realized it just wasn't meant to be. Lately, all her mom had was her faith, and that faith-based life heavily influenced Destiny's way of thinking.

She knew the power of prayer at a very young age. When things were going good, she didn't hesitate to drop to her knees and give thanks. When things were going bad, she just prayed even more. Frustrated and scared, she took the ear buds out of her ears and got down on her knees. She prayed that Kwon would understand he could get past this without doing something that would ruin the rest of his life. She prayed for his safety as well as Devonte's, and she prayed that everything would just blow over and eventually go back to normal.

The second she finished praying, her phone rang. She could feel it in her gut that it was Kwon before she even looked at the phone. She rushed to the nightstand to pick it up and answer.

“Hello.”

“What's up?” she heard Markwon say.

“Hey. How are you?”

“I’m good,” he answered, still sounding a little annoyed.

“I’ve been calling you all day. Why you ain’t answer none of my calls? Don’t ignore me!” Destiny fumed.

“Is this why you been calling me, so you can talk shit?”

“No...” she answered calmly, deciding she needed to relax her tone. “I been calling because I was worried about you. You didn’t come to school today and—”

“You think I’m about to come to school looking like this? With a fucking black eye?”

Kwon’s appearance had been seriously altered by the beating he took, and he couldn’t face the world with that fact laying heavy on his conscience. The swelling was almost gone, but now his eye was turning black and one side of his face was noticeably bruised. The same side as his black eye. He’d taken the majority of the blows all in one area of his face, and being light skinned wasn’t working in his favor at all.

For a guy that took huge pride in his appearance, it was a colossal blow to his pride. The mirror was his worst enemy. Destiny was speechless at the moment. She understood how walking around the school with a

black eye would be torture for a guy like Kwon. Still, she reached for words of encouragement.

“Kwon, I know what happened was really bad, okay. I know it’s fucked up that you got a black eye to remind you of it all every time you look in the mirror, but you know what? You ain’t the first or the last person to get a black eye in a fight, and you gonna be okay. Stuff happens.”

“You right, I am gonna be okay, just as soon as I take care of my muthafucking business.”

“What business?”

“Don’t play stupid, Des.”

“See... uugh! I’m gonna call you back!” Destiny said, getting frustrated that her words meant to prompt some kind of positivity were being overlooked.

“Oh, so now you don’t wanna talk to me after calling me all goddamn day?”

“I don’t wanna talk to you if you gonna continue to talk stupid.”

Kwon grew livid and began to shout.

“You don’t know what this shit feel like. You don’t know what I’m going through, because it didn’t happen to you, it happened to me!”



“I never said I did. All I’m trying to do is be there for you and help you get through this, but you keep trying to take the shit out on me. Do you even know what I was doing when you called me?” She didn’t give him time to answer. “I was on my knees praying for you and Tae. Do you even know what happened at school today with him and Red?”

“Red and who?”

“Tae!”

“Naw, what happened?”

“They got into another fight after school, but this time Red didn’t have his backup with him and Tae whooped his ass. And then the police came and took Red to jail ‘cause even they know that they ain’t shit but a bunch of bullies.”

This latest news gave Kwon a small amount of pleasure.

“Damn, why he ain’t call me?”

“I don’t know, did you call him?”

“Naw, I ain’t talked to nobody all day.”

“Maybe you should call him and find out what’s going on,” she suggested.

“Alright, I’m about to call him now. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay, but listen, Markwon. Before you go to bed tonight... just pray on everything.”

“Yeah, alright, whatever.”

## Chapter 4

Kwon went to bed that night without calling Tae or calling on the man upstairs to help with his current situation. The more he thought about it, his pride was crushed all over again knowing that Tae had now redeemed himself while he was sitting in the house licking his wounds. But Tae didn't have to look at the visual reminders of what had happened to him in the mirror.

Tae was much better with his hands than Kwon. He always felt like he was a lover not a fighter, but he was still nobody's punk. He had no faith in himself winning a one on one with either of the young boys that he had beef with. This had to be handled another way. The next morning, he sat around the house plotting his next move carefully.

Kwon went into the basement and got his bike out of the storage closet. He hadn't ridden it in over a year. He expected to be driving by now, but he didn't want a job and his parents had assured him he wouldn't be getting a car until he graduated. He took the bike outside and after locking the house up, he peddled off to his destination, the weed house. Kwon wasn't really big on smoking weed, even though he did smoke every blue moon. That wasn't the reason he was going to the weed house.

When he arrived at the house he could see the front door open as he peered inside through the screen door. He did have intention on buying some weed while he was there, figuring it would help ease his troubled mind. He could smoke it with Tae if he could just swallow his pride and call him. He felt he owed Tae an apology for the way things went that day, but he couldn't bring himself to go through with it. Once again, his egotism was affecting his judgement. He parked his bike at the walkway and lightly tapped on the screen door. Lonzo answered the door with his pants hanging all the way off his ass and a blunt dangling from his lips. Lonzo was a light-skinned dude with braids. He looked like a younger version of the Jamaican rapper Sean Paul.

“What's up, my nigga?” he greeted Kwon.

“What up doe?” Kwon returned. He stepped in when Lonzo cracked the door open and quickly spotted the pretty, young girl Lonzo had sitting on the couch with him. She should have been in school but instead, she was hanging out at the weed house for the free get high. Knowing Lonzo though, the weed eventually came with a price. He studied Kwon's face.

“I heard about that bullshit them niggas tried to pull on you and yo' manz,” Lonzo informed.

He didn't want to make Kwon feel bad about his situation. Lonzo actually sympathized with him. Not much older than him, Lonzo grew up being labeled a pretty boy, which got him tested many times throughout his teenage years. But nowadays Lonzo stayed strapped, and he had a reputation as a nigga that would shoot in a heartbeat. Only thing was, he wore his pants so low you could always see his gun sticking out of his side. He already had a pistol case for that same reason but still hadn't learned to pull his pants up. Kwon knew that Lonzo was a big gun fanatic, which was why he was there. He had no one else to turn to.

“It ain't over, believe that,” he assured Lonzo.

“I feel that. So what's up doe, you need some weed?”

“Yeah, let me get a bag. And I need to holla at you about something else,” Kwon announced. He wouldn't look the unfamiliar girl in the face, hoping she wasn't looking at his eye that was just starting to open up again. He hoped Lonzo would have enough courtesy to pull him in another room where they could speak privately. He didn't want to put his business out there in front of the girl.

“Come back here,” Lonzo yelled out from the kitchen. Lonzo dug in his stash inside of a cookie jar and gave him a nickel bag of weed. Kwon handed him five dollars and Lonzo leaned against the kitchen counter.

“So, what you wanna holla about?”

“I need a banger,” Kwon explained.

“Oh yeah? What kind of banger?”

“Something cheap.”

“Something cheap?” Lonzo repeated, like he was hard of hearing.

“Hell yeah. I ain’t working with much.”

“Shiiid, what you trying spend?”

“I only got like thirty-five dollars on me, but I’ll get the rest to you next week.”

Now, Kwon knew he and Lonzo weren’t really that cool to expect him to do those kind of favors for him, so he wasn’t that surprised when Lonzo laughed in his face.

“Thirty-five dollars? What the fuck I’mma do with that?”

“Naw, I’m saying nigga, I was gon’ pay you the rest next week.”

Kwon usually got fifty to seventy-five dollars a week from his mom. It wasn’t much he could do with that but buy some weed or hang out. He usually tried to hold on to most of it until the weekend so he could do something with Des. His parents bought him all the latest designer gear but didn’t see the need for him to be walking around with hundreds of dollars to

blow, so he stayed “Fresh and Broke,” like the song by local rapper Tone Tone.

“But I don’t really be selling my guns anyway, my nigga. Shit be too crazy out here for that.”

“Well, shit, can you call somebody for me?”

“Yeah, I can call somebody, but you gonna need more than thirty-five dollars.”

“How much you think I need?”

“At least a hun dun,” he assured Kwon, using slang for a hundred dollars.

It was a little deflating to know he was so far away from his goal.

“I mean, I wanna help you out, my nigga, but you gotta come better than that thirty-five dollars.”

“Damn... alright,” was all Kwon could manage as he headed to the door with his head bowed in defeat. Coming up with the money was the only thing on his mind. He pulled out his cell phone before he reached for the doorknob.

“Give me your number and I’ll call you when I get the rest,” he said.

Lonzo called out his number and Kwon punched the numbers in and saved it. Truthfully, he didn't know where he could get the extra money from. He couldn't ask his parents for more than they already were giving him without good reason. He had too much ego to ever ask Des for money, and it definitely wasn't the right time to ask Tae for any favors. Markwon rode his bike to the store to grab some flavored blunt wraps. He thought he'd better keep a close eye on the door to make sure nobody tried to steal his bike. As he stood at the counter, he looked up and saw Tae walking in dressed in his regular street clothes instead of the school uniform.

“What up doe?” Kwon spoke first but then quickly lowered his head in shame.

Tae took in his appearance first. His wounds were healing, but he still looked bad. His light skin was really working against him.

“What up doe? Where you 'bout to go?”

“Back to the crib. Why you ain't go to school?” Kwon asked.

“I got suspended. You ain't hear about what happened?”

“Yeah, Des told me,” Markwon admitted, bowing his head in shame again.

“Yeah, they called me at home and told me I was kicked out for three days.”



Kwon got his blunt wraps and Tae grabbed some chips and a Sprite.

“You want something?” Tae offered. Kwon was glad to see he wasn’t holding a grudge. If the shoe was on the other foot, he was quite sure he would have.

“Naw, I’m good. You wanna come back to my crib and hit this blunt with me?”

“Hell yeah, I ain’t got shit else to do.”

Tae was a lot like Kwon when it came to weed. He hardly ever went looking for it or bought it, but if it was right in his face on a day like today, he’d indulge.

The two headed back to Kwon’s house with Tae speed walking and Kwon going extremely slow on his bike so Tae could keep up.

“So what’s up dog? You alright?” Tae finally asked.

“Yeah, I’m good. I’m still popping them hoe ass niggas though,” he said with his chest, zig zagging on the bike.

“Man, you ain’t even gotta do that. We can catch one of them niggas by theyself and just beat they ass since they like jumping niggas so much.”

“Man, fuck all the fighting. I’m about to body me a nigga. Them niggas done ran up on the wrong one.”

Tae began to breathe harder from walking so briskly.

“Dog, I’m just saying. Niggas got they whole life ahead of them. Too many girls to bang and too much money to get to be just throwing it all away over a fight.”

“On some real shit though, I don’t even wanna talk about it, my nigga. It is what it is,” Kwon said with a hint of finality in his tone.

They made it back to Kwon’s house and sat on the front porch. Tae decided if Kwon didn’t want to go there, he would just leave it alone and change the subject.

“Endy gave me her number,” he said, watching Kwon roll a blunt.

“Oh yeah?” Kwon responded in shock.

“Hell yeah. I told you, nigga, that’s about to be all me. I’m calling her today too.”

“That’s what’s up,” Kwon said, happy for his friend.

“Oh yeah, before I forget, I talked to my brother yesterday. He told me to tell you what’s up.”

“Damn, foreal? You told him what happened?”

“Naw, I ain’t tell him about none of that shit, he got enough going on.”

Tae’s older brother went by the nickname Boo, and he was a certified gangster. He was the main reason Tae never had many problems in the hood, but he was also the reason he was good with his hands. Both Kwon and Tae admired Boo, but neither wanted to follow in his footsteps as a street hustler. Boo was currently in the county jail fighting weapons charges with a probation hold that was keeping him from bonding out.

“Damn, I wish I was there to talk to him when he called,” Kwon said. Boo was cool as hell, he thought.

“He said he should be home in a couple weeks.”

“Cool, I hope so.”

As they began to float the blunt back and forth, Kwon was itching to hear the whole story about the fight between Red and Tae. On the other hand, he really wanted to take his mind off of anything related to his situation, so he veered the conversation in another direction.

“I hope you and Endy do fuck with each other though. That’s my nigga,” he said sincerely.

“It’s going down, my nigga. Trust me.”

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After Tae left, Kwon put some Visine in his eyes and showered, hoping to rid the smell before his father woke up and began to get ready for work. He was a night owl, so he usually wasn't up and out of bed until at least one o'clock. Around two o'clock he was in his room playing Madden on his PlayStation 2 when his father came knocking on the door. He knew he had to return to school sooner or later, but he just wished it could be later; much later. He knew what the conversation with his father would be about before it even started.

“Come in.”

“How you doing, son?” his father asked with concern in his eyes.

“I'm aight.”

“Your face looking better. You been putting any cocoa butter on it?”

“Naw, I will a little later,” he said truthfully.

“You gon' be ready for school tomorrow? I said I'd give you a couple of days, and it's been a couple days so I need you back in school tomorrow, okay?”

“Yeah, aight,” Kwon mumbled.

“I told you if you need me to come up to the school I will.”

“Naw, I’m good, Pop,” he assured as he began to brush his three sixties while the game was on pause. His hair was all he had left at the moment, being that his face was ruined.

“Okay, now if you tell me you got this under control, I’m gonna have to trust you. I wish it was some way I could help you get through this, but sometimes as a man you gonna have to find your own way. And sometimes you not gonna be able to figure it out on your own, and that’s when you gotta be man enough to get down on your knees and give it to God.”

Kwon listened to his father out of respect, but the words traveled in one ear and out of the other. It was odd to hear his father even speak on any spiritual level, because it wasn’t something that he practiced or even tried to instill in Kwon growing up. For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, someone was telling him to turn to God for answers. But Kwon had no relationship with God, and he wasn’t about to start now. As a kid, he was never forced into attending church because neither of his parents attended frequently. He knew they were Baptist, but that’s about all he knew. He knew nothing about prayer and doubted if they owned a Bible. The few times he attended church, he just remembered it being extremely boring.

“Okay, Pops, I got you,” he finally said, hoping it was the end of the conversation. As his father left the room, he could only try and believe that he’d said something that would sink into his son’s head as he searched for guidance.

## Chapter 5

Kwon didn't get much sleep that night. Anxiety danced through his body as he tossed and turned, with his mind racing about his return to school in the morning. He thought about how his image was shattered now. His reputation battered and punctured full of holes. He had to get a gun from somewhere, somehow. It was the only way he could make things right within himself.

When Kwon arrived at school the next day, some of the people that always spoke to him shied away from him. No one really had much conversation for him with the exception of Endy. But the thing that hurt the most was the constant snickering and whispering as he walked past. Some of them were the same girls that were just dying to fuck him just a week ago, he thought. He felt like everyone was staring at his bruised face. His blood boiled every time he looked up and spotted someone whispering, assuming the conversation had to be about him. The hours in class felt like days.

He didn't see Des until fourth-hour lunch. They all had lunch together, so Markwon, Endy, and Des all sat together at a separate table away from everyone. Des tried to keep Kwon occupied by flirting and

constantly joking with him. Endy saw what she was doing and decided to help keep the mood light as well.

“Look at Kisha’s dusty ass over there trying to turn up,” Endy said. They all burst into laughter as they turned to see the young girl twerking in front of a group of guys.

“Swear she somebody, girl, you ugly and dusty with a fat ass, sit down somewhere,” she continued.

“I can’t deal with you, you always blazing somebody,” Des said, giggling. Just as Kwon was starting to relax a little, he looked up and saw Phil headed his way with a lunch tray in his hand. For a second, he thought Phil was about to try and sit down at their table, but he stopped in front of the girls.

“What’s up, Endy,” Phil said in a deep baritone. Endy gave him a look of contempt without responding to him. “Damn, it’s like that?” Phil said, never acknowledging Kwon’s presence.

“Sholl is,” Endy finally responded. Stacey came out of nowhere, standing behind Phil.

“What’s up, Endy? What’s up, Destiny?” Stacey said.

“Hiiii! Bye!” Des replied coldly, getting more aggravated by the second.



Kwon just looked on, staring both of them in the face. His anger wouldn't allow fear to set in, but they weren't paying him any attention.

“Oh, they mad at us. Let's go,” Phil finally said. As Phil began to walk away, he finally shot Kwon a glance. “Bitch ass nigga,” he mumbled, but it was loud enough for everyone at the table to hear it.

“Yup...yup,” Kwon said, nodding, never breaking eye contact with his mind fixated on revenge. He didn't care if things escalated again, because there was no way he was backing down in front of his woman. As far as he was concerned, Phil was already a dead man walking. Now, more than ever, he knew what he had to do.

“Kwon, fuck them, ignore them niggas, okay?” Des pleaded.

“Right,” Endy agreed.

“That's aight. Just watch what happens next,” he warned, nodding his head again as he became more and more bloodthirsty. It wasn't bad enough that Phil had waxed his ass. He wanted to add insult to injury by taunting him. The brief exchange had ruined Kwon's appetite. He sat at the table with his mind spiraling out of control. The girls could see he held so much rage in his eyes that they no longer tried to rationalize with him. Endy just felt he was really upset and hopefully it would all pass with

time. Des knew better. One thing about Kwon she knew was once he made his mind up, there was no changing it.

As soon as Kwon got out of school he called Tae, who had already gotten a text from Endy and knew everything about the run-in with Phil.

“What up?” Tae answered.

“What up, man? I need a favor,” Kwon said as he quick-stepped up his block, as if he was in a hurry to be somewhere. Really he was just still upset about the day’s events.

“What you need?”

“When you get paid I need to borrow a hundred dollars.”

“Damn, a hundred though?”

“At least fifty. I know you don’t make that much, but I gotta get this strap. Niggas still talking shit.”

“There you go,” Tae complained.

“Naw, dog, shit real out here. I ain’t got no older brother to have my back, nigga. I gotta have my own back.”

“Don’t say it like that, nigga. I had your back even when you didn’t have mine,” he reminded Kwon.

He was angered by the statement but even more angered by the fact that Kwon was still talking about bringing guns into the situation. Tae understood his situation, nobody wanted to take a loss, but he felt like it was just something that happened and they could eventually get past it. He also understood that it didn't help Phil was antagonizing and adding fuel to the fire. Still trying to be a good friend in the midst of all the confusion, he agreed.

“Aight man, I get paid tomorrow. I'll see what I can do.”

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It was Friday night and Des was home stressing about Kwon. She had just gotten off the phone with him, and his whole attitude had changed. He hadn't come to school that day and he wouldn't say where he was, but for some reason, he was acting like everything was just fine all of a sudden.

It would have been nice to believe that Kwon had just up and decided to put it all behind him and move on, but after the lunchroom encounter, Des knew there was a fat chance of that happening. He was planning something foolish, and she could feel it in her bones. She offered to take him to the movies, hoping to keep him close and out of trouble for at least tonight, but he declined, citing unfinished business as his reason.

She wasn't about to argue with him about it, so she left it alone. She really wanted to go on a double date with Endy and Tae, who were going on their first date tonight. Now since Endy was on a date and Kwon didn't want to be bothered, she knew it would be one of those in bed by twelve kind of nights. She checked her Facebook page then made a post expressing exactly how she felt at the time.

***: It's hard to help someone when they keep pushing you away.***

***Don't know how much more of this I can take.***

Then she went on her Twitter page and posted the same thing. Some people who knew her commented, offering her encouraging words. While she was reading the comments, her little sister Kadijah knocked on the door.

“Come on, Dede,” she invited.

Dede came strolling in with a look of intense boredom smeared across her face. Kadijah was the spitting image of their mother. Fair skinned and very short. Even though she was only ten, it was obvious she was going to be almost a mirror image of their mother.

“What's wrong, Dede?” she asked.

“Ain't nothing to do.”

“What you think you supposed to be doing at ten o'clock?”

Dede plopped down on the bed.

“I don’t know. Something.”

“Girl, bye, you better go read a book or something.”

“Why you ain’t go out with Markwon?” she inquired.

“Long story, Sis,” Des replied.

“Well, I got time,” Dede said.

“You just wanna be nosey,” Des giggled.

She played around on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube with her little sister until she was tired and bored enough to lie down and go to sleep. Before she did, she got down to her knees like she did often, but this time her prayers were a little more self-motivated. She wanted answers and she wanted guidance. If there was something she could do to help in Kwon’s situation, she needed it spelled out in big bold letters, because right now everything was just a blur of confusion. Even though she didn’t even want to think of losing Kwon, her last prayers were for strength to endure whatever trials she faced in the near future.

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This was going to be by far the most memorable day of the year for Tae. It was the day he got his first check, the day he got his first car, and the day he would go on his first date with Endy. His mother was so

proud to see him working and not following in his brother Boo's footsteps, she went ahead and dipped into her savings to make sure Tae could drive himself to work and school the following week. Her brother had a beautiful, burgundy Crown Victoria for sale, and he gave it to her for the family price of a thousand dollars.

Tae gave up all the money he had to help with insurance and tags, except a hundred dollars. He needed some gas money; plus, he needed some money to take Endy to the movies. Only problem was he had promised Kwon he would loan him some money, but now he didn't see a way he could still do it without putting himself in a bind. No way he was backing out on his date with Endy just to loan Kwon some money. That made no sense at all. Still, once again, he wanted to try his best to help his friend in need. It was seven o'clock and he had told Endy he'd pick her up in thirty minutes.

The first time Kwon called him, he didn't even answer. He was still trying to figure out what he should do. There was only one reasonable solution he was able to conjure up, even though his conscience fought against it. He brainstormed hard for a full five minutes, trying to think of a better way, but he came up empty-handed. He went downstairs to see where his mother was. She was in her room preoccupied with a phone conversation. He went back upstairs and grabbed an empty Macy's bag

and took it into the basement. In the basement was a pantry filled with everything from paint and tools to yard rakes and shovels.

Since he and his brother usually did all the yard work growing up, his mother never went into the pantry. Inside was a big toolbox with a lock on it. His brother gave him the key to it just in case he ever needed to move the gun. He unlocked the big heavy toolbox, and inside was a loaded Tec-nine with an extra thirty-round clip inside. Again, he had second thoughts, but knew he didn't have time to go back and forth with himself. It was only the second time he had laid eyes on the gun.

He didn't want to be an accessory to murder, but then again, he knew Kwon would get a gun from somewhere sooner or later. Guns weren't ever that hard to find in the hood. He also had another problem. He was going to have to explain to his brother what happened to the gun when he came home. His phone rang again. He knew it was Endy or Kwon. He ignored it without looking, believing it was Kwon. He stood there staring at the gun. The shelves had been removed from the toolbox, so the big assault weapon could fit easily inside. He was supposed to be getting ready for his date right now; instead, he was busy making life-changing decisions.

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Kwon was home alone, getting more frustrated by the second. He was starting to feel like Tae was ignoring his calls and wasn't going to give him the money. Even with the fifty dollars he had coming from his dad, he still wouldn't have enough money to buy the gun. He hoped the gun came with bullets, because even if he did get the money from Tae he probably wouldn't have enough to buy bullets. He wanted to retaliate tonight. He was ready. He didn't want to wait another day or go to sleep another night thinking about everything that had happened. He grabbed his phone, about to call Tae for the third time, when it rang in his hand. It was him.

“What up dog?” Kwon answered angrily.

“Aye...”

“What up?”

“Come down to my crib, right quick.”

“I'm on my way.”

Kwon hung up the phone and grabbed his keys, leaving right out the door. He immediately began to feel better, knowing his friend wasn't going to let him down.

“We 'bout to see who the bitch ass nigga is now,” he mumbled to himself, clenching his fist with Phil on his brain. He analyzed every



scenario walking up the street. If Tae gave him the hundred he initially asked for, he'd have more than enough money to buy bullets if the gun wasn't loaded. If he only gave him fifty, he'd probably have to wait until tomorrow when he got the money from his dad. *How much do bullets cost?* he wondered. When he reached Tae's house, he was already standing outside next to his new Crown Victoria. The fall air was slightly breezy and it was extra dark out because half the street lights were out this night.

“What up, I see you got the whip, huh?” Kwon acknowledged, seeing it for the first time.

“Hell yeah.” They slapped fives, and Tae signaled him to the trunk of his car. He peeked around to make sure no one was looking.

“Listen, man, Boo gon' kill me for this shit, but I'm gon' look out for you.”

He keyed open the trunk then opened the bag, pulling the Tec-nine out.

“Oh shit!” Kwon said, wide-eyed, in shock.

“I'm giving this to you and whatever you do, don't bring it back here.”

“Aight. Is it loaded?”

“Hell yeah, and you gon’ have to help me pay Boo for it when he get out. I don’t know what I’m gon’ tell ‘em happened to it.”

“Aight.”

“No bullshit, nigga?” Tae said sternly.

“Aight, nigga, I got you,” he agreed, becoming overwhelmed with excitement.

He handed the bag to Kwon.

“You my nigga for life,” Kwon exclaimed as he tucked the gun into his leather Rocawear jacket. Devonte almost immediately regretted giving him the gun, but what was done was done.

“Just be careful, my nigga. I’m about to go finish getting ready for this date. I’m already running late.”

“Aight, I’m out.” They slapped fives again. Kwon walked back home feeling more excited than he could remember his entire life. The time had come. The moment he had been waiting on almost since that first punch rocked his jaw. Not only did he have what he needed, but he had more than enough to finish the job. Kwon had never shot a gun this big, but he had a little practice with Tae and Boo when Boo let them bust his guns off last New Year’s. He imagined the look on his rivals’ faces when they saw the Tech about to spray, and he grinned.

When Kwon got home, he still had the house to himself until around one when his dad came home from work. He shot straight to his room with the gun in his hand. He ejected the clip, exposing a fully loaded magazine filled with hollow-tip bullets.

“Hell yeah,” he moaned lustfully. He pulled the slide back a little, revealing an empty chamber.

“Oh, ok.” He racked it hard, popping a bullet in the chamber. His phone rang and he knew it was his pops from the caller ID. His dad never called him on his breaks at work, but he knew his dad was still worried about him.

“Hey, Pops,” he answered.

“Hey. What’s going on?”

“Nothing much, I’m just chillen.”

“Oh, okay. You ain’t hanging out with your girl tonight?”

“Naw, not tonight.”

“Not tonight? On a Friday night, you and Des ain’t hanging? That’s a shock.”

“Right,” was all Kwon would offer.

“Hmpt. Now... you been going to school, right? You ain’t been skipping on me?”

“Naw, I been going,” he said, giving half-truths.

“Okay, I’m just checking on you, son. If you sleep when I get home I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Aight, Pops.”

Kwon hung up the phone and got right back to business. He knew where to find Phil and his crew. That was the easiest part. They hung out at Phil’s house about seven blocks away. He changed into some black Levi’s and a black hoodie. He went into the basement and brought his bike up, then set it outside on the front porch. The Tec-nine was too big to tuck in his waistline riding the bike, so he put it in a plastic shopping bag that was thick enough to conceal its contents.

Outside, he took off on the bike like a man on a mission. He peddled fast with a sense of determination and lust for blood. When he got closer to his destination, he stopped and put his hood over his head. He passed by some kids he knew from school just walking around and hanging out. He didn’t make eye contact with any of them because he didn’t want to be noticed. As he peddled faster, the gun began to bang metal to metal against the bike’s wheel shaft. He wrapped the bag tighter around the handlebars to stop it from swinging.

When he reached Phil's block, he rode past the first time, just peeking down the street to see what he could observe from the distance. He quickly spotted shadowy figures standing in front of Phil's house. He knew it was them, and he only hoped it was everyone he was looking for. He wanted to kill three birds with one stone. Even though Red and Stacey hadn't laid a hand on him, he was riding for Tae as well. After tonight, he could hold his head up high again. He stopped on the next block and planted his feet firmly on the ground while he tied the drawstring to his hoodie extra tight. Now no one would recognize his face.

He opened the bag and wrapped his finger around the trigger of the Tech then placed the gun on his lap. He took off slowly, steering the bike with one hand. As he reached Phil's block, not once did he think about turning around and going home. All he could think about was the humiliation he had suffered over the past week. The closer he got, he began to recognize all of his targets.

When Kwon reached Phil's house, there were five guys in total hanging outside, all around his age. Phil and Stacey stood out front on the sidewalk talking to another dude from school. Red sat on the porch conversing with another dude, but Kwon couldn't get a clear enough view to make out who he was. When the three kids on the sidewalk realized the dude on the bike had his face intentionally hidden, their antennas went up

but by then, it was too late. Kwon stopped on a dime and planted his feet firmly on the ground, then raised the gun and opened fire. The barrel of the Tech was aimed directly at Phil as the war cry began. Boka! Boka! Boka! Boka!

The first shot missed him, but the next few caught him right in his chest, lifting him off his feet then crashing him on the concrete with his body twisted like a pretzel. Stacey took off running, but he was soon mowed down by the semi-automatic weapon punching holes through his side and back. Kwon began to pull away from the scene, still trying to aim and fire at Red, but the kick was more than he could handle and the gun began to spray wildly as he lost control of it. By now, Red and the others had run inside and taken cover. Kwon stopped shooting just long enough to turn the bike around to head back to the house. He kept the barrel pointed to the ground until he was directly in front of Phil's house again.

At this point, Kwon was no longer himself. He was a stone-cold killer having an out-of-body experience. He got off the bike and stood in front of the house, firing round after round until the clip was empty. When he was out of ammo, he hopped on the bike and took off as fast as he could.

As soon as he was away from the crime scene, the fear and reality of what he had just done slowly began to sink in. He couldn't believe what

had just transpired. It was like someone else had taken control of his body. The plastic bag was ripped to shreds but still wrapped around the gun. When he made it to his block, he noticed the trash cans were all sitting outside for the garbage pickup tomorrow. He stopped and tossed the gun and the shredded bag inside the neighbor's trash. Kwon peddled fast and hard all the way home, frantically ignoring all moving traffic, darting dangerously from the streets to the sidewalk.

When he finally made it home his heart was pounding so fast it scared him. He nervously rumbled through his pockets until he found his house keys, then rushed inside dragging the bike behind him. He stopped at the landing area that divided the basement steps to catch his breath. He took deep breaths, taking in as much air as he could, hoping his heart would stop pounding. All he could think of was he hoped like hell he had gotten away with it. There was no remorse in Kwon's heart, only the haunting fear of being arrested.

He placed the bike back in storage and went to his room, where he flopped down on the bed with his mind running a mental marathon. He shot to his feet and stripped down to his boxers before finding the clothes he had on previously. He was slowly starting to calm down now. He went to the bathroom and glanced in the mirror at his face, which was still

bruised up. He was glad he had done it. He showed them who the bitch ass nigga was.



## Chapter 6

Tae and Endy had a great connection, but she could tell he had something on his mind. One minute he was actively involved in the date, the next minute he was quiet and seemingly lost in his own thoughts. What she didn't know was that Tae was going through a myriad of mixed emotions; enjoying Endy's presence, regretting his decision to give Markwon the gun, and fearful of what was next to come. While leaving the movie theater, she cuffed his arm tightly, which made him feel like he was the man and he had her in the bag.

“Your car looks good under these night lights, all shiny,” Endy complimented.

“It do look good, don't it?”

“You must've got a car wash today.”

“Hell yeah. As soon as I got my tags I went straight to get it cleaned up.”

“You gon' get some rims put on it?”

“I don't know, I might. Niggas be trying to steal anything with some rims on it.”

“Man you betta—” she stopped, snapped her fingers, and twirled her hips. “Throw some D’s on the bitch,” she sang, thinking about the old song by Rich Boy. Devonte chuckled while realizing how much he enjoyed her company. There was so much he liked about her from her impeccable caramel skin, her curvaceous figure, and her extroverted personality. Even though he felt he deserved a shot, he still didn’t really understand what made her agree so easily to a date with him when so many had failed in the past. He wanted to ask her but thought it better to leave his self-doubt unexposed. As they pulled out of the lot, Endy’s cellphone rang and the caller ID read **Best Friend**. She answered immediately.

“Best friend, I’m scared,” Des said with a groggy voice from waking from a deep sleep.

“Why, what’s wrong?”

“I think Kwon is up to something crazy. I think he really gonna do something crazy, I just feel it in my soul,” she confessed.

“Is he still on that bullshit, talking all crazy?”

“No, that’s just it. He ain’t even talking like that no more like, he not saying nothing at all about the incident, which is why I think he up to something. All of a sudden he just act like everything is just cool.”

“Well, maybe he just feels different after he had a little time to calm down.”

“You don’t know Kwon like I do. He’d hiding something.”

Endy never thought Kwon had any real intentions on going through with any of his threats. To her, he just didn’t seem like that type of guy. She covered the phone with her palm unconsciously.

“You talked to Kwon today?” she asked Tae.

“Yeah, earlier, why?”

“Was he straight? Was he still talking all crazy like he was a gangsta and stuff?”

“Whachu mean?”

“You know, like he still just wanna kill everything and everybody?”

Tae shook his head no as he began to feel guilty again, knowing the conversation that he and Kwon had earlier.

“What happened, Endy?” he asked, but she was already back into her conversation with Des. Tae thought when she didn’t reply she must have been hiding something, which made him even more anxious.

“Endy, what happened?” he repeated a little louder as she continued to talk to Destiny, holding one finger up at him.

“Endy!” he yelled out of frustration.

“Nothing! Nothing happened, stop yelling. Des just said she scared that he was gonna do something crazy soon.”

Tae exhaled, even though he knew it was only temporary relief.  
*What was he thinking? Why did he give Kwon that gun?*

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That night, the news began to spread quickly throughout the hood that Phil was dead and Stacey had also been shot. Phil and his crew had a lot of enemies, so there was widespread speculation and accusations. Police were roaming the blocks surrounding where the incident took place, searching for answers. Markwon cut his phone off and sat up in the bed, staring at the ceiling until five o'clock in the morning. All he could think about was the TV show *First 48*. He figured if he could make it until Monday, there was a good chance he would get away with it.

When he finally dozed off, he was only asleep for a few hours before he woke up and got out of bed. His thoughts were coming too fast to sleep. When he turned on his phone, he had fifty missed called from Des, Tae, Endy, and some people from his school. He knew that they knew, but he didn't know how much they knew. At that moment, he didn't want to find out because as far as he was concerned, the less he said about

Phil to his friends from this point on, the better. If there was one other thing he had learned from watching the show *First 48*, it was to keep quiet.

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No one had heard from Kwon since early Friday evening, so it was a big shock when he popped up on Tae's porch before nine o'clock the next morning. He was dressed in a True Religion, blue denim fit with white Jordans and a Detroit fitted. His eyes were bloodshot red, and he looked as if he had been smoking weed already. Tae cracked the screen door, still in his sleep shorts and house shoes.

“Why you ain't answer the phone for nobody last night, nigga?” he asked.

“Shit, you know why,” Markwon said in a matter of fact tone.

“Hold on, let me throw something on right quick.”

Tae didn't invite Kwon in since his mother was still sleeping and they had some things to discuss that were nobody else's business. He came back about five minutes later with a jogging suit and some Jordans on. When he stepped out on the porch, Kwon pulled half of a blunt from his shirt pocket.

“Let's take a ride and smoke this,” he suggested.

“We can take a ride, but I’m good on the weed. I gotta work today,” he said as they headed toward his Crown Victoria. Kwon’s phone rang, and he saw it was his mother so he answered without hesitation.

“Hello.”

“Why I ain’t heard from you?” she started.

“Sorry, Mama.”

“Mmmhmm,” his mother moaned.

He knew his dad had decided to keep the whole fight thing between the two of them. They both knew if his mother found out she would start worrying herself to death about what kind of trouble he would get himself in. Ironically, the worst had already happened.

“I was gonna call you later on today.”

“You lying through your teeth and you know it, boy.”

Kwon chuckled, “I’m not lying, Mama.”

It was good to talk to his mom. They were always close, but once he became a teenager, somehow everything else just became more important.

“You been telling me you was coming over here for the past month, now don’t act like I won’t come get you myself,” she threatened.

“I am coming, Mama. I promise.”

“When you coming?”

“I’m coming tomorrow. I’ma have Dad drop me off.”

“Okay, now don’t play with me, because if you not hear by three o’clock tomorrow I’m coming for you,” she threatened again.

“I’ll be over, Mama.”

“Okay. How’s Destiny?”

“She’s good, she hasn’t called you?”

“Nope, not lately. I was hoping y’all weren’t broke up or anything.”

“Naw, we good. You know I got her on lock,” he boasted.

“Boy, please. Well, I didn’t mean to call you so early, but it sounds like you were already up.”

“I was, I’m riding with Tae.”

“Devonte got a car now?”

“Yeah. It’s nice too.”

“Hmpt. Well y’all enjoy y’all selves wherever y’all about to go do, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, Mama.”

Kwon hung up the phone thinking about his mom. The conversation was a brief and much-needed diversion from his badgering conscience. It would truly break her heart if she knew what he had done. He could never make her understand why it had to be done. Nobody could walk in his shoes and live his life, so he justified his actions in his mind over and over until Tae broke his train of thought.

“You don’t even gotta tell me, bro. I already know you did that shit.”

Kwon lit the blunt he had been holding the whole time. He inhaled deeply and let out a big cloud of smoke, releasing small amounts of tension that were constantly building inside of him.

“You know what, dog? I gotta tell you something else. The truth is, I owe you a big apology for running off and leaving you that day. I know that was some hoe shit, and if it was me I probably would’ve held a grudge about it for a long time. But you didn’t. You helped me get my name back right. I’m not even about to speak on that shit foreal. People can say what they want, they ain’t got no proof.”

Tae was feeling like an accomplice instead of a friend. He didn’t want to tell Kwon just how much he regretted giving him the gun. All he could do was listen as Kwon continued to vent in between taking long pulls from the blunt that was quickly dissolving to ashes.



“I had fifty missed calls this morning. Muthafuckas who ain’t called my phone in months calling me out the clear blue in the middle of the night.”

Kwon’s phone rang again.

“See, look at this shit,” he said as he reached in his pocket and pulled out his phone again. It was Des, and he immediately began to feel bad about ducking her calls last night.

“Hello,” he answered and heard her sniffles through the other end of the phone.

“Why you turn your phone off last night?” Des questioned through a cracking voice. He could tell she was crying, and it made him feel even worse to know she was probably crying over him.

“I just didn’t feel like talking. I was about to call you though.”

“Markwon, what did you do?” she accused.

“Whatchu mean? I ain’t do nothing.”

“Don’t play dumb, I knew something wasn’t right with you yesterday. I really can’t believe you just gonna throw your life away all over something so stupid.”

Here she was again, pretending to know what it felt like to walk in his shoes. Nobody knew his shoes but him, and he wasn’t about to

apologize for walking in them the only way he knew how.

“Des, foreal, I don’t need to hear that shit right now. I love you, but you gotta chill out. I told you I didn’t do anything, ok? I was at home all night by myself and that’s it, so just leave it alone, ok?”

Des could hear the insincerity all in his voice as he stressed his alibi. She couldn’t believe he would lie to her in a situation so tragic and devastating. She was at a loss for words, so she just hung up.

“Hello? Des?” Markwon called out. He looked at his phone and realized the call had ended.

“She flipping on you?” Tae said.

“Yeah, man. I understand the way she feels, but it ain’t shit I can do about it now.”

As they pulled up at the stoplight, Kwon realized the police were pulling up right behind them. Seconds later, Tae spotted them too. Kwon grew nervous and antsy, just waiting for the flashing lights to come on. Tae looked cool, but he was nervous inside as well. They had no way to know if the police were following them or just happened to be in traffic. Kwon had made up his mind if they pulled the car over, he was gonna run for it. It was at the moment the reality of what he had done sunk in the hardest.

“Damn, you shouldn’t have lit that weed up in here,” Tae said.

“Crack the windows,” Kwon suggested.

“Shit, it’s too late for that, then they gonna know we been smoking.”

As they pulled off from the stoplight, Tae turned the music all the way down and Kwon tried to hide the blunt tail by pulling out the ashtray and place the tail behind it. Tae did exactly the speed limit as the police trailed one car behind them. Each time Kwon looked in his passenger side mirror, it seemed as if the police were staring right at them, waiting on them to slip up in any kind of way.

“They pull us over, I’m bailing, dog,” he warned as his heart rate increased.

“Then they gon’ fuck with me about why you ran, just chill.”

“Naw, nigga. This my life, I gotta bail.”

Kwon was panicking whether he had good reason to or not. Just then, the police put a signal on and veered into the turning lane. The exhale escaped his body, and Kwon couldn’t help but thank God at that moment.

“Take me home, dog,” he ordered.

“Shit, nigga, you ain’t even have to say that. I’m way ahead of you.”

Tae was ready to get as far away from Kwon's hot ass as he could.

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Kwon stayed home the rest of the day, trying to avoid his father for the first half of it. He was so high he didn't want to run into his pops, fearing he'd notice and get on his case. In actuality, that was the least of his worries, but he still had enough respect for his father to never let him see that he smoked weed. Ryan had a date as he usually did on the weekend, so Kwon knew around six or seven o'clock he'd be going out for the night. His phone rang all day with the same numbers from the night before, but he didn't want to talk to any of them. They couldn't talk to him, so they began texting him. **Phil and Stacey got shot, you heard about Phil and Stacey, Phil and Stacey...**

Ryan was dressed for a night out when he knocked on Kwon's bedroom door that evening.

"Hey, what's up?" his father said, stepping in the room.

Kwon was busy cleaning some of the dozens of pairs of sneakers in his closet to keep his mind occupied.

"Nothing much. You gotta hot date tonight?"

"Yeah, I'm hanging out with Betty tonight."

"You and Betty getting serious, huh?" Kwon said with a grin.

“Yeah, hell, I been divorced five years. It’s time to get serious, don’t you think?”

“Aye, do you, Pops.”

Markwon admired his father's sense of style and the fact that he never lost his swag with the ladies. He'd had learned a thing or two from his old man growing up, but some things he felt he had to learn on his own.

“You hear about the shootings last night?” his father asked. “That’s why police all around here.”

“Yeah, I heard about it. Everybody talking about it,” Kwon said, feeling extremely uncomfortable with the subject. He was trying desperately to keep his mind off it.

“Yeah, it was all on the news. Did you know the guys that got shot?”

“Yeah, they went to my school.”

“Oh. Well, this shit is getting too crazy around here. We’re gonna be moving just as soon as I can find a house. I’m putting this house on the market Monday morning, but I’m not even gonna wait to sell it. We just gonna have to pay rent for a while, because we can’t stay in this area any longer with things getting out of control like this.”

Kwon couldn't help but think about the irony of his father in a rush to move to get his son away from himself.

"I feel you," he replied.

"Well, I know you gonna have your girl over here after I'm gone, but only thing I'ma tell you is the same thing I always tell you."

Ryan paused and waited for Kwon to finish his sentence.

"Use a condom," Kwon said.

"That's right, use a condom. I'm ain't ready to be a damn granddaddy."

Markwon had to laugh at his pops because he reminded him of the same thing it seemed like every weekend.

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Kwon was in no shape to be alone that night. He had spent the last hour and a half on the phone with Des, trying to get her to come over. She was still very upset and distraught. She knew Kwon wasn't being honest with her about things. But Des was his world and he couldn't make her understand why she should just stop trying get him to own up to something that could possibly cost him his life. Finally, after some continuous begging, Des decided to come be with him. Her phone had been ringing off the hook all day just as much as his.

Already people were implicating Kwon's name in the shootings just because his visibility had all but diminished from school over the past week. There were other names floating around, but all in the know seemed to believe nobody had more motive than Kwon. All the accusations had given Des a migraine, and the fact that Kwon was still lying only made it worse.

When she pulled up in his driveway, she sat outside for a minute to gather her thoughts. Continuously she'd contemplated about whenever she saw Kwon she may never look at him the same. How could she when she knew her boyfriend was a cold-blooded killer? She wasn't a girl that thought of gangstas in high regards. In her mind, the devil had taken control of Kwon's soul.

When she walked in the house, her demeanor was cold and uncomfortable. She sat her purse and keys on the coffee table and took a seat on the couch closest to the door. She had already decided she wouldn't be staying long. Kwon's face was lit up with joy as soon as he laid eyes on her. Finally, he could be in the presence of his girl and feel comfortable in his skin again. There was something about Des's presence that made everything feel okay again. He hadn't even noticed that she clearly didn't want to be there at that moment.

"Take your jacket off," he said.

“I’m okay.”

“Damn, it’s like that?”

“You said you wanted to see me, so here I am.” She shrugged.

“Man, take yo’ jacket off,” he demanded as he attempted to unzip her North Face, but she shoved him away.

His heart sank when he realized she really didn’t want to be there.

“Des, I...I need you now more than ever, so don’t do this to me right now.”

“When I tried to be there for you, you kept pushing me away, so why you need me now more than ever?”

“Because I do. Because you mean more to me than anything in this world besides my mama and my daddy. You know how much I love you, but I just went through some crazy shit.”

“So every time things get crazy, you gonna push me away? That’s not a relationship.”

“I’m sorry, I won’t ever push you away again,” he promised just to end the argument. The last thing in the world he wanted was to argue with her. He needed her to be the sweet, loving, caring girl that she always was.

“Please take off your jacket. I’m asking nicely.”



The tone in his voice was soothing her anger. She loved him so much it was hard to stay upset, when truthfully she missed him just as much as he did her. She began to unzip her jacket and take it off as Kwon grinned, because he knew Des was his and she would always give in to him. He admired her body, feeling the discord of not having her touch or feeling her goodness in weeks. He kissed her softly without permission. It felt good to both of them, but Des was still in her feelings about what was being spread throughout the neighborhood. As he moved in for another kiss, she recoiled.

“Markwon, what is you gonna do? You know what people is saying, and you walking around trying to act like everything is everything.”

“Man, fuck them people. All I care about is you right now. I’m trying to tell you how much I love you and how much I miss you, and you wanna talk about everything but us. Can we just spend some time together and not worry about nobody else right now?”

She didn’t want to say yes, but she didn’t want to say no, so she said nothing. Too many emotions going on at one time had her ready to scream. When Kwon kissed her the second time, all she could think of was the fact that it felt better than worrying about the future. When he continued to kiss her, Des’ heart fluttered and the sexual chemistry

between them began to slowly wash away both their growing anxieties and apprehensions.

She relaxed and gave up all resisting thoughts as she lay her back on the soft leather arm of the sofa. Kwon smooched her neck softly, moving down her neckline to her breasts. All the tension Kwon felt throughout the day began to magically drift away as her scent aroused him, prompting him to undo her button-up top. He buried his face in between her C-cup breasts as she massaged his wavy head of hair.

Every kiss on every spot made Des more anxious and damp between her thighs. She had told herself she wasn't going to do this, but she wanted it. She wanted it badly. She grabbed Markwon's head with both hands and pulled him into her, giving him a long, passionate kiss as a tear ran down the side of her face. She was on a complete emotional rollercoaster.

Before long, Kwon had undressed and was thrusting inside of what to him was heaven on earth. He gave it to her right there on the couch before she had time to change her mind. She closed her eyes and panted in his ear as her arms clung to his neck. She found his lips in the dark and kissed him continuously until she needed air. With every stroke, his dick could feel the bliss of her warmth running through him. Her moans were

like the sweet sound of birds chirping as the morning sun beamed through cracks of light.

Her hips began to gyrate faster. He stroked her harder. She clung her arms around his torso, calling his name. Lost in a moment of pure ecstasy, her body began to tremble as Kwon came inside of her with animalistic strokes. He continued to fill her with his passion until it winded down to a slow grind, ending with panting and heavy eye contact that spoke volumes. It was the only time they had never used protection.

## Chapter 7

Monday morning, no arrests had been made in the shootings that took place Friday night. Word on the streets was Stacey was gonna live, but he was paralyzed from the waist down. Kwon grinned when he first heard the news in his class that morning. He was literally on a natural high when he stepped into the school building. All eyes were on him as he swaggered through the hallways, knowing what all the whispers were about.

His name still wasn't the only one connected to the shootings, but since no one was taking credit for it, he welcomed the rumors as long as no one asked him any questions. Since the first forty-eight hours had passed, he started to feel more relaxed and comfortable moving forward with his life. He knew Stacey wouldn't cause him any more problems and as far Red went, after the beating he took from Tae and the near-death experience he'd just had, he was willing to bet that Red was waving a white flag as well.

Kwon sat in math class that morning daydreaming about the sex he had with Des over the weekend. He believed it was some of the best sex they'd shared since being together, but couldn't put a finger on what made it so good. Maybe it was all the built-up tension and the fighting that came

before it, or maybe it was just the fact that he went in raw. Whatever the case, he knew it was a memorable moment that would last forever in their hearts. Kwon looked up and saw six Detroit police officers standing at the doorway of his class talking to the math teacher. His heart jumped out of his school uniform shirt. Before long, all the officers plus the math teacher were staring directly at him.

He was trapped. Nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

“Markwon, can you come here for a second?” the math teacher called out cautiously.

All of a sudden, the room started spinning and Kwon felt on the verge of passing out. His throat felt like it was closing tighter every second that passed. The whole class sat quietly with bucked eyes as the officers didn’t wait for Kwon to gather himself enough to get out of the seat. They came inside the classroom and made him stand up and place his hands behind his back while informing him that he was being placed under arrest and he had the right to remain silent. He could feel his entire body shaking as painful chills ran through it. It felt like he was watching something happening on television, and he couldn’t fathom that this was his real life at the moment.

“He didn’t do that. Y’all arresting the wrong person,” a female student called out. Kwon’s mind had escaped his current reality, so he

didn't even hear the comment as he was led out to the hallway and towards the back entrance of the school. Police felt they were doing the school and Kwon a favor by not bringing him out the front door in cuffs. At the time, he gave a fuck less which exit they took him out of to haul his ass to jail. His first rational thoughts were of his parents and Des. *How could this be happening?*

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Endy heard the news first, and she didn't want to believe it, but it kept coming so fast and often that she knew it had to be true. When the bell rung, she scrambled through the hallways trying to find Des. She didn't want to call or text her because she knew her best friend needed her by her side. There was no way she was going to handle this calm and collected, Kwon was her everything. Everyone she passed that they were friends with she'd stopped them, asking had they seen her friend. Finally, she got lucky.

“You seen Des?”

“Yeah, she around the corner crying.”

Endy took off running and was heartbroken when she reached her friend, who was on the floor in the hallway with her arms wrapped around

her knees, bawling uncontrollably. She unconsciously pushed the other girls out of her way that were standing by trying to console Des.

“Get up, best friend,” Endy said, grabbing her arm and pulling her up and into her arms. As they hugged each other tightly, Endy began to cry as well, still trying to be strong for her friend.

“It’s gonna be okay, he’s gonna be okay. We gotta have faith, remember? Ain’t that what you always tell me? We gotta have faith.”

Just the mention of her own words thrown back at her began to massage Des’ aching heart a little. She did truly believe that faith could conquer anything, but the sad reality was Kwon didn’t have any, and he’d brought this all on himself. The thought made her burst into tears again just as she was trying to gather herself.

“Come, let’s go to the office and tell them you going home. You can’t be here right now,” Endy suggested.

“Okay,” Des cried.

Endy began wiping the tears from her friend’s face as Des tried for a second time to pull herself together. All she could think of was the serious nature of the crime he was probably charged with. It would have been different if he had been caught selling drugs or something, but Kwon didn’t sell drugs, Kwon didn’t carry guns, and Kwon didn’t run with the

wrong crowd. He was just a somewhat spoiled kid that had managed to escape much of the dramatics of the Eastside up until now.

For the life of her, she couldn't understand how he ended up in this predicament. At first, she blamed Phil and his crew for corrupting his mind to the point that he felt he had to commit murder in order to gain his self-worth again. Then she had to face the fact that Kwon alone was responsible for his own actions and even if he wasn't, the courts would surely see it that way.

"Endy!" they heard a voice call out as the bell rang. They turned to see Tae quick-stepping in an effort to catch up with them. His face was full of fluster.

"Y'all know they came and got Kwon?" he said, but after seeing the look in their eyes, he knew they had heard the bad news.

"Yeah, we was just about to go to the office so she can tell them she leaving. I'll probably leave too," Endy said.

"You got his dad's number?" Tae asked Des.

"I got his mom's number. I can't even be the one to call and tell her this shit," she admitted, shaking her head. Des knew his parents would be even more heartbroken than she was, if that was even possible.



“Well, somebody gotta let them know they son in jail,” Tae said as he walked with them towards the main office.

“Will you call her, Tae? I’ll give you the number. I can’t...I can’t do it.” Des shook her head.

“Yeah, I’ll call,” Tae agreed hesitantly. He didn’t want to be the one to make the call either, but he knew somebody had to do it. The guilt that was smoldering inside of him over the weekend was now a towering inferno. He considered himself an accomplice and also feared being arrested next.

“Damn, I hope he can get up out this shit,” he said.

“All we can do now is pray,” Destiny said, but inside she didn’t know how to even feel about the statement. She didn’t know what she wanted to pray for. *Should she pray for him to go unpunished for something she was sure he did? Should she just pray for the best possible outcome?* At seventeen, Des was still getting to know her God, and while she was no saint she had witnessed his love and his power. She wasn’t big on the commandments or even claiming to be saved. All she knew for sure was that her God was very real and very powerful, and she had to find a way to walk with him during this trying time.

“Text me the number and I’ma call y’all later, okay?” Tae said as he turned and headed in the opposite direction.

“Aight,” they said simultaneously.

## Chapter 8

Tae drove home that afternoon thinking about if he should make the call or not. By now, he realized that they were going to allow Kwon to make a phone call at some point, so maybe he had already reached out to his parents and they knew what was going on. At the same time, there was no way to know unless he called, so he was still going back and forth with himself as he pulled into his driveway. *Maybe I should just call and ask his mother had she talked to Kwon and from there, I would know what to say or do.*

He knew how much of a blow this would be to Kwon's mother, and he didn't want to make the call for the same reason Des wouldn't make the call. A mother's love for her only son was indescribable, and his young mind understood that. After another few minutes of contemplating, he came back to the bottom line. He had to call Kwon's mom and make sure she knew what happened.

One ring. Two rings. Three.

"Hello," he heard Chanel answer the phone sniffing, and he grew nervous, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that someone had already given her the bad news.

“How you doing, Ms. Sanders?”

“Not good, who is this?” she asked in weak voice.

“This Devonte, Ms. Sanders.”

“Devonte? Can you tell me what the hell happened and why my son just called me from jail saying he’s been charged with murder?”

“The police came and—”

“All my life I busted my ass to make sure Kwon never turned to the streets for any reason. There was never anything he wanted that he couldn’t come to me or his father and get. Why would he be walking around with a gun to shoot somebody?”

“Ms. Sanders, all I know is—”

“And before you say another word, don’t even think about lying to me. This is my one and only son, my one and only child! You called me, I didn’t call you. Now you were man enough to call me, so be man enough to tell the truth, and don’t you offer me no bullshit, you hear me?” she scolded.

Tae was at a loss for words. Kwon’s mom had gone from sad to furious in seconds. He wasn’t sure he was going to be able to offer any words at all because she wasn’t letting him speak. He had met Kwon’s mom a lot of times and he’d never heard her curse, and definitely had

never seen her this upset. But he knew what she was going through, so he tried his best just to make it through the conversation.

“Ms. Sanders, I don’t know everything that happened. All I know is we got into a fight about a week ago and the other day, some of the guys we got into a fight with got shot.”

“You got into a fight? Why is this the first time I’m hearing about this?” she pressured.

“I don’t know, but I think he didn’t want you to know.”

“Who was y’all fighting with? You know what? Never mind, because you’re not the person I should be talking to. His father more than likely knew about this. Thank you for calling to inform me of the situation, Devonte. Goodbye.”

She hung up the phone and Tae just sat behind the wheel of his car, dazed and confused. This wasn’t the life he was used to living. Guns, death, jail; that was all the things he stayed away from seeing his brother living a life he didn’t want for himself. He got out of the car and was walking to his porch when a black Camaro with tinted windows pulled up and the windows rolled down. Tae stopped in his tracks as his life flashed before his eyes, but then he saw a face that he’d never been so happy to see.

“What up, boy?” his brother Boo called out in a raspy tone from the passenger side. Tae was still so dazed by the conversation with Markwon’s mom, he just held a blank stare at first. He was happy to see Boo, but it didn’t reflect on his face.

“Damn, nigga, fuck you too then,” Boo said as he hopped out of the passenger seat and approached Tae.

Boo moseyed up the walkway wearing a crème YSL sweatsuit and wheat Timberlands. His demeanor was cucumber cool, as usual.

“My bad, bro. My head kinda fucked up right now,” Tae explained as he reached out to embrace his brother with a hug.

Tae’s brother Boo was as gangsta as they come. It was close to a miracle that Tae had been able to withstand his influence. About an inch taller than Tae, they favored a lot, only Boo was a shade darker. He had puffy eyes that squinted while he talked and a dozen tattoos.

“What up man, when you get out?” Tae asked as they released each other.

“Don’t worry about when I got out, nigga. Why you ain’t rake these leaves in the yard? Mama been letting yo’ ass slide, huh?”

Boo had been moved out of his mother’s house, but one thing he always did was come by and help out with the yard or make sure Tae did it

all. But Tae always gave him a hard time when he tried to go too hard.

“Man, fuck you and these leaves, nigga, you ain’t running shit over here.”

Boo stepped to the side and sized him up.

“Lil’ bro, this ain’t what you want, man, I’m tryna tell ya,” Boo teased.

“Check out my whip though,” Tae said as he led Boo over to his car he had been talking about since the day he got it.

“Oh yeah, you riding clean. You need some rims on this bitch though.”

“Everybody keep saying that, but I just got it. Ain’t even got no alarm on it yet.”

“That’s ‘cause you ain’t about that bag life, nigga! If you had a bag you would have an alarm, rims, and banging ass sounds in this bitch. But you wanna work for the feds.”

“I work for Fed-Ex, nigga, not no fucking feds.”

Boo burst into laughter.

“You know I know where you work man, I’m just talking shit like always. It’s good to see you, lil’ bro. Mama made it home yet?” Boo asked, staring at the house to see if anyone was inside.

“I don’t know. I just pulled up, but her car ain’t here. You heard about Kwon?”

“Oh yeah! I heard about yo’ manz. They said he done popped a couple of niggas and caught a charge. The fuck is going on with yo’ manz?” Boo asked, eyes big with shock.

His eyes stayed bucked as he waited for an explanation. He knew Kwon pretty good, and this one just didn’t seem to add up. It had to be some valuable information missing from this story.

“Man, I ain’t wanna tell you, but we had got into it with them niggas about a week ago. They tried to jump us and shit, but I caught the nigga Red by hisself the next day and beat his ass.”

“Why they try and jump y’all?” Boo asked with concern in his eyes.

“I don’t know. Kwon and this nigga named Phil had some words before that, and that’s what led to it all. But Kwon got fucked up kinda bad so... he ain’t wanna let it go.”

“So the niggas that fucked him up, is them the same niggas he popped?”

“Yeah, but... they really didn’t jump him. He was just fighting Phil while the other two was jumping me.”



“Oh yeah?” Boo said. This information had him heated. He thought by now niggas knew better than to fuck with his family.

“Yeah, but I handled that shit like a G, nigga, so don’t even worry about it. Besides, you just got out, you gotta lay low, bro.”

“I been out since yesterday, nigga, but you know ain’t shit about to lay low with me, it’s back to business. But I ain’t gone bring no bullshit to the home front no more, that’s why I ain’t been through. I’m just stopping by to holla at you and Moms and I’ma out.”

There was no changing Boo. He was going to live and die a gangsta, and he was fine with that. Part of him wished his brother would follow in his footsteps because he could use the loyalty that usually came with family, but the other half knew he couldn’t take it if something happened to Tae.

For that reason alone, he never tried to lead him astray. Just then, they saw their mother pulling up to the house, looking suspiciously at the Camaro that was parked out in front of her house.

“Look, she don’t even know it’s me,” Boo said with a smirk. The Camaro driver blew the horn, as if they were trying to get Boo to speed things up. Boo calmly walked over to the driver’s side window of the Camaro.

“Fuck you blowing the horn out in front of my mama house for, nigga? I just told you I’m ‘bout to go holla at my moms. Chill the fuck out.”

As Tae’s mother pulled into the driveway, her face momentarily lit up when she realized it was Boo. She was also tired of him going to jail and worrying her, so she put her poker face back on, never revealing how she was truly feeling inside. She parked behind Tae and took her time getting out of the car. When she was out, she stared at her two sons over her glasses, glancing back and forth at them and the Camaro.

“Who is that nigga parked in front of my house?” she asked bluntly.

“Dang, Ma, I don’t get a hug or nothing first?” Boo said.

“Yeah, I’ma give you a hug and kiss before I slap you upside yo’ goddamn head. I’m tired of throwing welcome home shit for yo’ ass.”

Ms. Gordon was a straight no chaser kind of woman. Growing up in Detroit, she had seen it all and you couldn’t sell her any bullshit because she’d smell it coming.

“Ma, come give me a hug.”

“Let me tell you something,” she said while still extending her arms for a hug. “You not about to have no police running up in my

gotdamn house no more. Okay? I'm tired na, I'm getting old."

"You not getting old Ma, you getting better," Boo said, trying to charm his mother.

"I'm serious, Boo. I don't wanna tell you don't come around, but if you finna be on that bullshit don't come around here with it."

Ms. Gordon worked hard for her sons to have a chance at life, and sometimes she felt like Boo never appreciated her. She had long given up on trying to change him, but she had one more son who she was determined to see grow into a man she could be proud of. When she wasn't working, she spent most of her free time at the casinos in Detroit, but she always tried to keep up with her youngest boy and what was going on in his life. As Tae walked inside with his mother and brother, he began to try and conjure up a story about what happened to Boo's gun in case he asked for it. Something told him he would.

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Kwon had been humiliated, interrogated, and intimidated by the Detroit Police Department. He sat in a cold, single-man cell at the downtown headquarters, trying his best to keep cool after his second interview with homicide detectives. They knew he was just a kid, so they

tried to use all the smokescreen tactics they could never get away with on veteran criminals.

Kwon was led to believe the case was already in the bag and the interviews were just a formality before he was shipped off to serve hard time until his clock ran out. He was truly in fear of the future at that moment, and it didn't seem like that sweet revenge was all worth it now. On the other hand, he tried to convince himself that he knew something like this was a possibility all along, and if he kept a cool head maybe he could weasel his way out of it somehow. He had used his one phone call to call his mom and tell her what was happening. It tore a hole in her heart to hear her son calling from a jail cell begging for help.

Her reaction brought Kwon to tears as she scolded him, trying to understand. He had no answers for her, only question of his own. Surrounded by criminals facing serious charges, the reality sunk in that this could be his fate. All he wanted to do was defend his honor and gain his self-respect back, but now it looked as if he was headed to a place where there was no honor. He couldn't imagine a life without living by his own free will. He couldn't imagine a life without Des.

"The fuck did I do?" he mumbled as he sat head bowed in confusion, rubbing his sweaty palms together. If only he could turn back the hands of time.



## Chapter 9

Des had spent the last two days praying and crying, crying and praying. She was still trying to figure out why life was such a struggle. She and Kwon's mom had really been there for each other, but she could tell Ms. Sanders wasn't big on leaving things in the hands of the Lord.

Kwon's arraignment was set for today at nine o'clock, so Des took yet another day off from school to be there. She hadn't been to school since Markwon was arrested, and she had lied to her mother about why she wasn't going. First, she was just under the weather, and now she was claiming to be going to the kid Phil's funeral because he was a close friend of hers.

Her mother never watched the news and didn't have any friends in the neighborhood. She had no idea Kwon was in jail for Phil's murder or who the hell Phil was for that matter. When Des arrived at the courthouse, she was pissed to find she'd have to spend her last fifteen dollars for parking. Now she wished she would've taken up the offer Kwon's mom had extended to ride with her.

Inside the courthouse, she was rushed through the metal detectors as the lobby quickly filled. Court security gave her instructions on where to find the courtroom that Kwon's arraignment would take place. She

found the listings on a nearby wall and scrolled down until she found the judge that Kwon was to appear in front of. The elevators were jam packed with everyone from courthouse workers to lawyers and people with civil and criminal issues, all scurrying to be on time.

When the elevator dinged at the fifth floor, Des and five other females piled out of the elevator and made a beeline for the same room, reading the numbers on the wall. The closer she got to the door, the more nervous she grew. As she hesitantly entered the quiet courtroom, she immediately spotted Ms. Sanders conversing with who she believed to be Kwon's lawyer. His mom and dad had been lucky enough to get one of the best criminal defense lawyers in the city to show up for the arraignment. Dan Marsh was half-bald, half-Italian, and a half-wit, but he was one of the top three defense lawyers in the city and easily top ten in the whole state.

He was short, stocky, and too cheap to pay for a nice suit for court. He wore the same loafers year in and year out until the leather cracked and begged for mercy. Still in all, if you had Dan Marsh on your side, you had a damn good chance. He would cost Kwon's parents a pretty penny, but when it came to their son's life at stake, no amount of money would be too much.

When Ms. Sanders finished her conversation with Kwon's lawyer, she came over and greeted Des with a hug. During their embrace, Des spotted some of Kwon's other family members in the courtroom. Some of his cousins on his mother's side of the family had shown up in support of him. She took a seat next to Ms. Sanders, wondering would Tae show up for him. She hadn't had a chance to talk to him after she found out when Kwon would be arraigned. She figured the more familiar faces he saw when he came out into the courtroom the better. Just then, his father entered the courtroom dressed in slacks and a button-up. Kwon favored his dad so much, she thought.

"All rise," the court bailiff said as he introduced Judge McNamara, a natural blonde who looked to be in her late fifties. "You may be seated."

The judge took her sweet time getting the proceeding underway. It appeared that she was more concerned with shooting the shit with her court clerk and others instead of getting the ball rolling on calling case numbers. Thirty minutes passed before she called the first case number, and it took all of two minutes to set a quarter-million-dollar bond for a fleeing and alluding and weapons charge.

"Your Honor, that's a bit extreme," the public defender argued, speaking up for his client.



“Well, would it be extreme if I called him a flight risk?” the judge shot back.

The public defender didn't have a logical comeback, so he decided not to get on the judge's bad side too early in the day. Several more cases were called before Kwon's case number was finally up. He appeared from the holding cell in handcuffs, still wearing his blue and beige school colors. Des' heart sunk and chills ran through her body seeing him in such a helpless position. He glanced out at all his family members then at Des. He looked as if he were trying his best not to show the fear she knew was overtaking him at that moment. He held his head high with his chest out.

“Mr. Sanders, you are being charged as an adult with one count of first-degree murder, four counts of attempted murder, one count of assault with attempt to do great bodily harm less than murder, and felony firearm. How do you plead?”

Dan Marsh stood beside Kwon, leaning into the microphone at the podium.

“Your Honor, my client has been advised of all his rights and has asked that a not guilty plea be entered on his behalf.”

“I would ask that the defendant clarify for the court that he understands the alleged crimes he’s being charged with,” the judge said.

Kwon had to answer that question for himself. He leaned into the microphone nervously.

“Yes...yes ma’am.”

“Has bail been discussed?” she asked the prosecutor.

“Your Honor, I asked that the defendant be held without bond considering the serious nature of these crimes. He would be a potential flight risk.”

Before he could finish, Dan had interrupted him to begin his counter.

“Your Honor, the defendant comes from a very loving family. They're all here today in the courtroom. His mother is a head board member of the UAW and his father a plant manager for over fifteen years. I would ask that the court take into consideration Mr. Sanders also has no priors and a solid record as a student with promise.”

The judge gave a lengthy pause, knowing everyone was anticipating her every word. It was hard to say if she was mulling or milking.

“Well, Mr. Marsh, it wouldn’t make a difference to me if his parents were the president and the first lady. These are very serious charges and I do believe there’s a potential for flight risk. Bail is denied at this time.”

Des broke down in tears, and Kwon bowed his head in defeat as the judge announced his next court date. As he was led away, his mother’s heart was simultaneously shattering into a thousand pieces as she hugged Des, allowing her to cry on her shoulder.

“We love you, son,” she called out loud enough to make sure Kwon heard her. He continued to bow his head in shame until he was out of the courtroom.

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Tae went to school that morning, not wanting to see his friend in the situation he was in. Endy had opted to do the same for the exact same reason. When he got to school that day, she had already sent him a text that blew his mind as he was walking through the front doors.

**Endy:** Somebody killed Red last night.

Right after that, he was approached by friends and classmates with the same shocking news that had quickly spread throughout the school. The lunacy of the past few days was becoming overwhelming, and

Tae couldn't even think straight as he sat in class, praying he wasn't taken out in handcuffs like Kwon. He caught all the suspicious stares as he tried his best to get some actual school work done while he was there.

He couldn't help drifting. His mind just kept wandering back to the undeniable reality that there was a huge possibility his brother Boo had something to do with Red's death. He had finally broken the entire incident down to Boo, only leaving out the part about him giving Kwon the murder weapon. *But then again, after telling him Phil was already dead and Stacey paralyzed, why would his brother still feel the need to take it there? Maybe to protect him from retaliation?*

"I heard your brother Boo was out," a classmate uttered in a low tone, snapping him back into present time.

"Yeah... he out," he responded, wondering was this dude a mind reader. He also wondered was the comment just an observation or some sort of speculation. He shook it off and tried to engage in school work once again, but quickly paused. He even remembered Boo questioning him about Red's whereabouts and description.

"Damn," he said aloud, almost confirming his own suspicions.

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After school, Tae gave Endy a ride home. She usually rode with Des after school but since she had gone to court, he was more than happy to take her home. She could tell that Tae was a little distraught from all that was going on around him. It was taking a toll on Endy as well because she had grown to love Kwon as a friend and the main attraction in her best friend's world. All the drama seemed to be bringing Tae and Endy closer together much faster than either expected. They talked all day long because they had so much to talk about, and because they were trying to help each other sort out all the madness.

“Okay,” Endy started then paused. “I’m just gonna ask you because I know you didn’t have nothing to do with Red getting killed, but somebody said they think your brother Boo might’ve did it. Is that true?”

She waited for a response, but his hesitation told her he had to have at least considered it himself.

“Who said that?” he asked.

“I don’t wanna tell you who said it. I’m just asking do you think your brother might’ve had something to do with it? ‘Cause I heard Boo is crazy.”

“Endy, I don’t know, and even if I did it wouldn’t help for me to tell you so... let’s just not even talk about it no more.”

“Okay, sorry. I tried to call Des twice already, she ain’t answering her phone. I know they gotta be out of court by now.”

“Boo said they ain’t gon’ give him no bond. He got a bad ass lawyer though.”

“Damn man, this just ain’t right. It’s all bad,” Endy vented.

“Exactly, this shit got me feeling like I need to start carrying a strap,” Tae admitted. Even though he wasn’t into gunplay at all, he was beginning to wonder was he in danger of something coming back on him because of others’ actions. Everyone had family members, brothers, uncles, cousins, and nobody in the hood liked sitting by and watching their people die. As he pulled up to Endy’s house, he was seriously considering getting a gun, even if it was just until things died down.

“Well, I don’t wanna see you go to jail, Kwon is enough. Just be careful.”

“Always,” he said, rubbing his hand over his face in frustration. Endy leaned in and gave him a peck on the lips without warning. Tae tried not to let the initial shock display on his face. It was a much-needed show of affection at just the right moment. He appreciated her.

“I’ll call you later,” she said.

“Okay. Let me know if you talk to Des.”

“Okay.”

Tae pulled off slow, feeling like things could get serious with Endy. He would let nature take its course. With everything going on around him, a relationship was the farthest thing from his mind, but he really had a thing for Endy so if it happened, it happened. He headed home to prepare for work. It was only four hours a day, but the money sure came in handy.

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After court, Des just felt completely drained and unwilling to cope with reality at the moment. She'd been talking to Kwon's parents and trying to spread a little more insight on the situation and the circumstances leading up to his incarceration. After that, she drove home feeling like she just needed to go to sleep and wake up another day. Tired of crying, she promised herself she would try and be stronger for Kwon because she started to feel like all her breakdowns were only making things worse for all the people involved.

It hurt so bad, but she told herself if his mother could hold it together with her only son facing life in prison, then so could she. She had also made a decision that she could no longer hide the truth from her mother. Sooner or later, she would find out, and it was best that it came

from her. Too jaded to even move from the bed and get down on her knees, she laid in her bed talking to God, hoping he was listening.

“Dear God, I know you will never turn your back on me and I call on you for strength in my time of need. I don’t understand why all this is happening, but I know you have your reasons and I know you can turn anything around in the blink of an eye. I will let your will be done, but God, I just don’t know how I can make it out here with a piece of my heart gone. It’s hard to try and make a believer out of someone that has no belief system in place, but I ask that you work on Markwon and help him realize the error of his ways. I ask that you teach him a new way of thinking, and I ask that you find a way to make him a better person through all his trials. Amen.”



## Chapter 10

“I don’t give a fuck what kind of gun it was, I’m not taking no plea for no fucking ten years. Popcorn, you stank nigga, I be glad when they put yo’ ass in a room by yoself.”

Kwon sat in his bunk in quarantine, listening to Ace, his bunky, go on and on to another inmate about everything under the sun. His mind wasn’t in the county jail, it was outside in the free world where he knew he belonged. He still couldn’t grasp the complexity of all the charges he was facing, and when his mind tried to sort things out, he would try his best to focus on something other than the fact that he could be going to jail for the remainder of his life.

As his eyes scanned the spacious cell, taking in eleven other inmates, some of the faces looked vaguely familiar but not enough to say he knew any of them personally. He tried to lay low, knowing he probably looked more out of place than he felt. He still had the shining under his eye as stamp of defeat in battle. He was sure other inmates would view him as weak because of it, so he pressed his bunk and stayed out of the way. He could tell this wasn’t Ace’s first time being here. He was too comfortable with this environment.

“Even if the feds pick it up, I still wouldn’t be looking at no ten years,” Ace continued.

“I don’t know, nigga. You a fourth-degree habitual offender and you got two pistol cases on file. That shit don’t look good going in front of a judge,” the other inmate argued.

Ace was a big black nigga who had been pulled over and arrested for traffic warrants and for carrying an AK-47 in his trunk. The only reason he stopped was that he had completely forgotten about the two-year-old traffic warrants. But Ace wasn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer, which was why he was a fourth-degree habitual offender at twenty-nine years old. Kwon had small conversations with Ace, but they hadn’t really said much to each other. He was too busy thinking of what his own future may hold.

Ace did, however, offer to make some calls for him on his phone. Since Kwon didn’t have any money in his account yet, he figured he couldn’t make any calls to Des. No one had told him he could call cell phones collect. Ace was already in the county, so he had plenty of money for the phone and all his necessities. Around nine o’clock, an hour before the phones shut down, Ace offered to make Kwon’s calls and let him talk to who he needed to talk to. He called Des, dying to hear her voice for the

first time since he'd been arrested. The phone rang for a while and he thought she may not answer.

“Hello,” Destiny’s sweet voice came through the speaker, lifting his spirits.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Oh, hey. How you doing?” she asked.

“Not good.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“How you doing?”

“Going crazy.”

“Me too,” he admitted.

“I can imagine. I’m so glad you finally called me. I been sitting around all day wondering when would I get a chance to hear from you.”

“It took me all day just to figure out what I wanted to say you. Does your mom know I’m in jail?”

“Yeah, I told her today finally.”

“She hate me now, huh?”

“She doesn’t hate you, she’s praying for you and so am I. I’ve cried so much I don’t think I’m even capable of producing any more tears.

Kwon, I wish you would've just listened to me—”

“Listen, I didn't call you to talk about what did or didn't happen. I just wanna say can't nobody walk in my shoes but me, and can't nobody tell me how to live my life. All I need for you to do right now is to be there for me like you been doing. I'm innocent, Des, but I'm being charged as an adult, so if I can't somehow find a way to prove it, I gotta find a way to grow the fuck up and be a man about this shit, whatever happens.”

“That's true, but Markwon, I think you also have to grow some faith in God. No one else can help you right now more than Him. No one else can move mountains but Him and without Him, this whole journey will be twice as hard.”

Maybe it was desperation but for the first time, Des' words started to register. He needed to believe in something right now other than himself.

“Well... I need Him, so I hope you right.”

“Just believe, Kwon. Just believe,” Des said passionately.

“Will you be there for me? No matter what happens?”

“I will always be there for you, you should know that.”

“Okay, I'm on somebody else's time with this phone, so I'm about to call my mama. I'll call you again soon as I get a chance.”

There was so much more he wanted to say, but he didn't have the luxury of time at the moment. He knew she probably felt the exact same way.

"I love you and I'll be to see you as soon as I can," she told him.

"Okay... I love you too."

Kwon hung up the phone and gave it to Ace so he could reenter his pin number and call his mother. He decided he would take his girl's advice and say a small prayer before he went to sleep. He finally understood the severity of his situation, and the more the weight of the charges began to press down on him, he knew if God could help, he'd better start asking.

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Fresh out of county, Boo was having a hard time getting back into the mix of things. He had only been gone two months, but in that two months it seemed like everything had changed. Boo was an independent hustler with boss qualifications. He knew how to lead people, but he mostly led them down a path of destruction. His biggest problem was his hot head and his overly aggressive tendency for violence.

Not even out two weeks, he had already caught a body, killing Red right on his front porch. He had plans to kill Stacey too, but knowing he was paralyzed in a wheelchair, it wasn't a high priority. In Boo's eyes, his blood brother should never have to worry about being jumped or harmed in any way for that matter. He had put in too much work, earned too many stripes. But now that he was trying to get back to business, he seemed to be getting the cold shoulder from all his connects. What Boo didn't understand was his tendency to go to jail made him risky business.

He would always pay his tabs when he got hit off with some work, but anybody that chose to deal with him on consignment always ran the risk of taking a loss if he got caught in another jam. Boo could hustle anything, weed, pills, heroine, or coke, but his main hustle was weed. Knowing his tendency for run-ins with the law, he chose the hustle with the least amount of chaos. He knew all the top guys on the east side that had a heavy bag coming in, and he knew how to help get it off, so he didn't understand why he still didn't have any work.

It seemed like everyone was making excuses. The bag wasn't in yet or the bag was light this time and had already been distributed. Whatever the case, Boo was getting frustrated as he drove through the hood in his main chick's red Charger. Boo was smooth but a little arrogant

at the same time. He was the kind of dude every girl knew was bad for her, but they ended up fucking him anyway.

He decided to call his man T, which was his last option. He didn't want to call T because he still owed him fifteen hundred dollars from the bag he had before he was arrested. Boo had to spend all the money on a lawyer, but he figured if T hit him with another ten pounds of Kush, he'd make five hundred off each pound and have his fifteen hundred in no time. T's phone went straight to voicemail. Boo decided to swing by and check on his little brother while he waited on a call back from somebody... anybody. As he pulled up to the house, he called Tae's cell phone. He answered quickly.

“What up?”

“Get yo' ass outside, lil' nigga. I know you here 'cause I see yo' car in the driveway.”

“Man, who you talking to? You about to get hit in yo' mouth.”

“Shut up and come outside, nigga.”

Boo loved to talk shit to his little brother and he loved how he always gave it right back. He knew deep down in his heart that Tae really wasn't afraid of him, which made him proud. Tae came outside throwing the hoody over his head to block the late-night hawk from piercing his

face. He got in and immediately took notice of the weed aroma that lingered inside the vehicle.

“Jazz gon’ fuck you up about smoking weed in her car.”

“Jazz ain’t gon’ do shit but go to work, come home, and cook for daddy,” he assured with confidence.

“Yeah, whatever.” Tae smiled.

“So, what been up man? Yo’ manz went to court yet?”

“Yeah, they say he got a whole bunch of charges and they didn’t give him no bond.”

“They charging his ass as an adult, so he looking at life foreal.”

“I know man, it’s fucked up but I tried to tell him.”

“You tried to tell him what? Not to do it? You should’ve told him don’t get caught. Shit, he did what he had to. You can’t tell no nigga that it’s okay to get fucked over. Your reputation means everything out here in these streets.”

“We ain’t in the streets nigga, you is,” Tae reminded Boo.

“Yeah, well y’all still gotta deal with the same dumb ass niggas I gotta deal with, so what’s the difference? Can’t play no games with these niggas man.”



Tae had been waiting on the right moment to bring up his suspicions, and it didn't seem like he would find a better time than now, so he just came out with it.

“You popped Red?” he asked bluntly.

Boo rubbed his hand over his face before shooting a knowing gaze at Tae.

“Whatchu think?” he responded.

“Damn, you could've at least told me.”

“I shouldn't have told you shit. I ain't told you shit now.”

“I'm just saying, what if somebody try to get at me behind that shit? Kwon ain't out here no more, so they know he ain't do it.”

“Man, ain't nobody gon' be thinking about yo' young ass. You said you beat the nigga ass, right? What you gon' turn around and kill him for?”

“Right, so why the fuck you do it?”

“What I just tell you, lil' nigga?” Boo said, shooting another cold stare at his brother. “I ain't told you I did shit.”

Sometimes, talking to Boo was like talking to a brick wall. Tae knew it wasn't much he was going to say to make his brother see the error in his ways.

“Well, I might as well tell you now. The Tec-nine you left in the basement is gone. That’s the gun Kwon had the night he did that.”

Boo’s entire forehead immediately wrinkled up into a frown.

“Damn man, why you give the nigga my gun?”

“I don’t know, man. He kept asking me to lend him some money to buy one and I really ain’t have it ‘cause I had just bought the car.”

“So you gave the nigga my gun?” Boo shouted.

Tae fell silent. He knew Boo would feel he’d been wronged when he found out, but he couldn’t keep hiding it now.

“I’ll pay you for it,” he finally said.

“That ain’t even the point. You know how I am about my guns, nigga.”

“Well, I know you got plenty more and I think I might need one now. That was the only one you had at the house.”

“You really worried about these hoe ass niggas around here, ain’t you?”

“I ain’t worried about shit nigga, I’m just saying,” Tae argued.

“Aight. You want me to bring you something, I’ll bring you something tomorrow,” Boo said, forgetting about the fact he was upset

with his little brother. “You gon’ be carrying guns, you might as well get a bag and help me get this money.”

“Whatever,” Tae said, brushing him off. His cellphone rang, and Endy’s face popped up on the screen.

“Go ahead and take your call, man, I’m out.”

“Aight, I’ma call you tomorrow. Be careful, bro,” Tae said, knowing it would fall on deaf ears.

## Chapter 11

Two weeks before Kwon's next court date, an unexpected tragedy took place. His lawyer Dan Marsh was critically wounded in a shooting right outside of his office. He would survive his wounds, but there was no way he would be able to fight any cases for months. Kwon's parents had to take a partial refund from Dan and scrape up enough money to retain another lawyer for their son. They were still praying that somehow this all turned out to be one big mistake. Kwon was claiming his innocence but so far, that didn't seem like the direction things were headed.

He laid on his bunk with his arms behind his head, thinking deeply about how he could've gone wrong and led the police to himself as the suspect. He wondered what all they had against him and was there any chance in hell that he could beat the charges. Thankful that his parents had the resources to hire another lawyer, he also felt a ton of guilt for putting them through such a mentally traumatizing experience. Just like the past few nights, he wouldn't get much sleep as he dozed off in spurts, only to awaken an hour or two later by his increasing anxiety. This morning he received the first visit from his new attorney, which lifted his spirits a little when he grabbed the visitor's pass and headed out.

It was refreshing just to get out of the cell and away from his cellmate for a while. When he arrived at the visiting booth, Kwon took in the pudgy, white woman with gray eyes and dyed blond hair. She looked to be in her late 30s. He sat down slowly.

“Hello, my name is Cicely Powell. I’ll be representing you at trial should you choose move forward with one. Right now you’re being charged with first-degree murder, several counts of attempted murder...”

Every time he heard the charges read, Markwon would fade out, seeing his whole life flash before his eyes. It was like an out-of-body experience.

“Do you have anybody that can verify your whereabouts during the time of the shootings?” Cicely said, bringing him back to the present.

“Ummm...no. I was at home by myself, but I talked to some people on the phone.”

“What people?” she asked sharply.

“I remember talking to my dad around that time...”

He tried to think back. He was ignoring most of the calls he got, trying to stay focused. “That’s all I can remember right now.”

“Well, you need to think about that long and hard, because your life depends on it.”

“But why did they arrest me? What do they have on me that makes ‘em think I did it?”

“Well, there’s a living witness that puts you at the scene of the crime with a gun. Stacey Evans? Also, they recovered the murder weapon on the same block, literally down the street from where you live.”

A huge lump swelled in Markwon’s throat as he heard about the damaging evidence. He knew no one saw his face, but he was expecting the trash pickup to come before they found the gun.

“I don’t think they found any prints on the weapon but for your sake, you better hope not.”

He looked in his lawyer's eyes and maintained his innocence. What other choice did he have?

“Ma’am, I didn’t do this.”

She locked eyes with her client.

“You’re being one hundred percent truthful with me? You’re not guilty of these charges?”

“No ma’am.”

“You were never there at the scene at any time that night?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

There was a long pause.

“Okay...well, I’m gonna fight for ya.”

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On the outside, friends and family felt helpless as the days went by, not knowing what was going to happen. Des was slowly starting to come around and as her best friend, Endy tried to be there for her in every way she could. She always tried to do and say the most encouraging things, still not knowing what to think about it all. No one wanted to admit to the possibility of Kwon’s guilt, so as she rode home from school in Tae’s passenger seat, Endy continued to pick his brain.

“You think Phil and ne’em had beef with some niggas that wanted them that bad?”

“Shit, they might’ve. That nigga Phil stayed in some shit,” he replied, turning onto her block.

As they pulled up in front of her house, Endy didn’t rush to get out of the car. By now, the two had become closer and more comfortable with each other than they’d ever been. The current circumstances were also bringing Tae and Des even closer. He checked on her regularly, trying to be strong for all of them.

“I’m so scared for him,” Endy admitted, staring out at her front door.

“I just hope this new lawyer is as good as the other one,” Tae replied.

It was hard for him to say much knowing what he knew. Every conversation he had about his friend felt like an interrogation, so he tried to keep it brief.

“I hope so too,” Endy said as she saw her father pop up in the doorway.

Her parents had yet to meet Tae, so she wasn’t surprised at the way he was peering outside and into the car.

“We gon’ do something this weekend?” Tae asked.

Endy smiled.

“You taking me out somewhere?”

“I wanted to.”

Her father stepped out onto the front porch, scowling and folding his arms as he waited.

“I wanna go to The Butterfly,” Endy said, reaching for the door handle.

“We can do that.”

“Well, let me go before my daddy start tripping. I hope this nigga ain’t drunk,” she said before opening the door.



“Call me later.”

“Okay, I will.”

As Endy got out of the car and closed the door, she glanced up and caught her father’s eyes following Tae’s box Chevy as he pulled off.

“What’s that nigga name?” he questioned as she came up the walkway.

“Devonte, why?” she sassed.

Her father’s neck flew back and his eyes bucked.

“Fuck you mean why? Last time I checked, you was my muthafucking daughter,” he chastised.

Endy loved her father Carlos very much, but at the age of seventeen, she found him to be more annoying than ever. On his days off from work he usually just stayed home working everyone’s nerves and drinking until he passed out. Looking in his bloodshot eyes, she knew today would be one of those days.

“You right, my bad,” she apologized as she opened the door and stepped inside.

Carlos followed her in.

“Wait a minute. Come here and talk to me about this nigga,” he urged.

“Talk to you about what?” Endy wined.

“Come here.” He waved her over to the kitchen table as he sat.

“Oh my god,” she mumbled under her breath while her shoulders slumped as she joined him for another uncomfortable conversation.

“Yo’ mama met this nigga that keep pulling up at my house and not speaking to nobody?”

“It’s not even like that, he just going through something right now.”

“Going through something? Something like what?”

“Nothing, Daddy. Just forget it.”

“You ain’t answer my question. Yo’ mama met ‘em?” Carlos slurred.

“He not my boyfriend, daddy,” she informed.

“I don’t give a fuck. He must be something, he keep pulling up at my house.”

“Okay, y’all can meet him. I don’t care,” Endy decided, growing more frustrated. “Anything else?”

“When can I meet him?”

“We supposed to go somewhere this weekend.”

He sucked his teeth.

“Okay. Yeah, I wanna meet this nigga or you ain’t going nowhere.”

She smacked her lips and rose from the table.

“Whatever.”

Her daddy was always trying to play the disciplinarian of the family.

“Endy!” he called out with extra bass in his voice as she tried to leave.

“What?”

“Don’t get homeboy fucked up!”

She shook her head.

“You swear you a thug,” she mumbled under her breath.

“What!?” Carlos shouted at her back.

“I ain’t say nothing.”

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When Des got in from school that day the first thing she did was call Kwon’s mom to find out when they could go and visit him. Her life seemed so different already just knowing that the opportunity to just pick up the phone and call Kwon was no longer there. She felt sad and lonely

most days and continued to distance herself from her family. If she didn't have any homework, she usually just listened to music on her phone until she fell asleep. Later that evening, her mom came into her room to check her. Des took her earbuds out of her ears. Ms. Browner took a seat on the edge of the bed without saying anything at first.

“I know you care about Kwon, but don't lose yourself in caring for him, you understand?” she said with caring eyes.

“I'm not. I'm just sad,” Des assured her.

Cynthia and her daughter Destiny had a solid and honest relationship. Sure, Des told some lies to spare her mom's feelings or to try being grown before her time, but for the most part, there was nothing she didn't feel like she couldn't talk to her mom about. After two failed relationships with her children's fathers, for a long time all Cynthia had was her daughters. It was during this time she began to strengthen her faith and make that faith a part of her family's lifestyle.

“Yeah, I know. It's a really scary situation to be in at his age. I can only imagine what his parents are going through.”

“I talked to his mom today and she said we can go see him on Tuesday.”

“Is my name on his visiting list? I’d like to go see him,” Cynthia revealed for the first time.

“I don’t know, but I will ask when he calls. He think you mad at him.”

“Mad at him? He’s said he’s not guilty, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So why would I be mad at him? But regardless, I’m not his judge nor his jury,” she explained, and Des knew she was referring to a judge with higher powers than any court.

“I’m glad you feel that way, because he really didn’t do what they saying he did.”

Des’s mom lightly patted her thigh.

“Tell him I want to be added to his visiting list and that I’m praying for him,” she said before she stood to leave.

“Okay.”

## Chapter 12

It was a chilly Saturday afternoon, but the weather wasn't going to stop Tae from his mission. He and Endy had plans that he'd been anticipating since she confirmed with him. He wasn't looking forward to meeting her father, and he felt a little guilty pursuing Endy while his best friend was going through such turmoil, but at this point, there was nothing he could do to change this situation. He promised himself he would go see Kwon in the county jail before his next court date.

Around three o'clock, Tae got dressed and headed out to Endy's house. He wore his best knock-off True Religion jeans and an authentic True Religion shirt and hat that was handed down from his brother. When he got to the house, he called Endy and she opened the front door and stood there waiting. Even from the distance her beauty shined so brightly it caused a slight smile to ease across his face. When he made it to the front door and she let him inside, he spotted her father, Carlos, front and center with a stern look of concern in his eyes.

“Daddy, this is my friend Devonte. Devonte, this is my daddy,” Endy introduced.

He noticed the sound of a blow dryer in the distance as her father stepped to him and extended his hand.

“What’s happening?” he greeted.

“How you doing, Sir?” Tae replied as he shook his hand.

Carlos held a firm grip a little too long for his comfort.

“You feeling my baby girl, huh?” Carlos asked, finally releasing his hand.

“Something like that,” Tae replied bashfully.

“Something like that? Whachu mean nigga, is either you is or you ain’t?” Carlos pressured.

“Daddy?”

“I am...I am,” Tae decided, feeling more uncomfortable by the second.

“Good,” Carlos said, folding his arms.

His cornrows were starting to turn slightly gray and his breath reeked of liquor but when Carlos smirked at him, Tae could only hope the tension was about to ease now. “All I ask is that you respect my daughter and you respect my house.”

Just then, Endy’s mom came walking up the hallway with wild and straightened hair, blow dryer still in hand.

“Leave that boy alone, Carlos. How you doing, I’m Endy’s mom, Tammy.”

Tae shook her mother’s hand, a little taken aback by her beauty. The apple definitely didn’t fall far from the tree, and it was hard for him not to stare after seeing Tammy for the first time. She looked younger than Carlos, and he wondered how old she was. After the introductions, Endy put on her North Face and drifted near the door, trying to give Tae the hint.

“Okay, we finna go y’all,” she told her parents.

“Y’all look cute together,” her mother admitted.

“You think everybody look cute together,” Carlos replied.

“Shut up. Bye, have fun,” Tammy said as she turned to leave and Carlos followed shortly after.

“Remember what I told you, Devonte,” he called out as he left.

The two had plans to go The Butterfly arcade and game room and then go to dinner at Red Lobster nearby. Tae had been penny pinching all week just to make sure he would have enough money for his date. At The Butterfly, the couple played a few games of pool. With neither of them being seasoned at this particular game, they were evenly matched. The competitive nature of the game led to a lot of trash talk and taunting before



it ended. When it was over, Endy walked away the victor, giving him hell, but Tae would claim he gave her the last game.

At the restaurant, after the contentiousness from The Butterfly died down, Tae was able to relax and take in the sublime aura that was Endy. They talked about their plans for the future while devouring hot, buttermilk biscuits and salad while waiting on the main course.

“I’m definitely going to college, but I’m not sure what I’m going to major in really,” Endy said.

She was a good student with a 4.0 grade average, so she was confident that she would get into whatever college she applied for. Tae, on the other hand, was still trying to figure things out.

“I’m not gon’ even lie. I’m not the smartest nigga, so college might not be for me.”

“Why you say that?” she wanted to know.

“Shit, I failed the ninth grade for one. Even now my grades be looking at me like a nigga barely making it,” he laughed.

Endy laughed with him and not at him, but she appreciated his honesty.

“Well, maybe you one of those guys like my dad that’s good with his hands.”

Tae nodded with confidence.

“I am good with my hands,” he replied as his eyes danced around in his head as if he’d just realized it for the first time.

When the food came, the two of them ate in silence for a moment, making eye contact ever so often. Tae watched her with lustful eyes as she raised her napkin for a delicate dab at the corner of her beautiful mouth. He wanted to kiss her lips so badly. Again, he felt the wave of guilt come over him once he realized how much he was enjoying this date.

“I’m sick my manz ain’t out here with us. We supposed to be on a double date right now fooling.”

“I know we would’ve had fun at The Butterfly,” Endy agreed.

Tae’s head dropped.

“Damn, I hope they don’t slam my nigga. It’s a lot of innocent people locked up for shit they didn’t even do,” he added.

“We just gotta be there for him to help him get through this,” Endy replied.

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Kwon had so many family members trying to visit him in the county jail that Des wasn’t able to see him until the following week. By that time, her mom was on the visit list also, so they made the trip together

on a Tuesday afternoon right before visiting hours ended. She'd talked to him almost every day and was up to speed on everything concerning his coming trial. She just really needed to see him and look in his eyes.

When Kwon appeared in the dark-green county jail uniform that she'd seen so many wear on their nightly news television court appearance, it all became too real. His hair was starting to sprout into a mini afro, and his mustache was thicker than she'd ever seen it. The smile on his face as he sat down and they locked eyes spoke volumes of how their visit had warmed his heart.

"What's up, y'all?" he greeted as she noticed his arm bracelet with his inmate number for the first time.

"How you doing?" Cynthia asked.

"I'm holding up. Just ready to get my day in court really."

"Why you ain't get a haircut?" Des wanted to know.

"That waiting list to get to the barber is a mile long," he explained.

"You think you will get one before you go to court?"

"I hope so."

"Are they feeding you okay?" Cynthia asked, remembering she'd seen stories on television about how horrible jail food was.

"Not really, but I gotta eat." He shrugged.

There was a brief moment of silence as Des took in Kwon and his surroundings, wondering was he really handling it all as well as he wanted them to believe, or was it all just a front?

“Have you been praying like you promised me you would?” she asked.

“Actually, I have,” he said truthfully. “Like I said, I need all the help I can get right now.”

“We’re all praying for you,” Cynthia said. “Just as important as your prayers to God is your belief in him. You have to trust that his way is the right way and he will guide you to where you need to be.”

To that, Des could tell he didn’t know how to reply. She could only imagine how hard it was for Kwon to put all of his trust in a God he barely knew.

“I really appreciate you coming to see me, Ms. Browner.”

“I’m gonna try and make it to your court date if I can get someone to fill in for me at work,” Cynthia said.

“They say it looks good to the judge when you have a lot of support in the courtroom,” Des said.

A few more minutes passed before the guard came and alerted Kwon that the visiting hours were about to end. Des’ eyes grew sad, not

ready to depart with him after such a brief visit.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” she assured him.

“I’ll call you tonight. I still got a few dollars left on my phone.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks again, Ms. Browner.”

“No problem, honey.”

“I love you,” Destiny said as the tear that swelled in her eye finally fell.

“I love you too.”

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Kwon’s heart was heavy as he dragged his feet and slumped his shoulders on the way back to his cell. It was such a bittersweet moment to lay his eyes on Des momentarily, just to see her leaving an hour later. It felt like she was walking out of his life and taking any sense of joy with her. As good as it was to see her, it just made him miss her even more.

Kwon was now placed on the 12<sup>th</sup> floor in a two-man cell. When he made it back to the rock it was just in time for dinner. The mood was tense as usual with most of the inmates being on edge fighting for freedom. By now he’d gotten used to the crappy food and just wanted to put something

on his stomach to keep the hunger pains away. He jumped right in the line as the food cart was being parked.

The meal for the day was some sort of pasta and meat mix. It was possibly lasagna, but he couldn't be sure. He grabbed his tray and made his way over to the stainless steel chairs and table combined right near the television. Just as he was about to dive into his food, a dude that went by Trav walked up, leaning over his shoulder, and stuck a finger in his food.

“You gon' eat that shit, lil' nigga?” Trav questioned, giving Kwon the mean mug.

He was trying to intimidate Kwon with his angry eyes, and it worked instantly. Kwon's heart pounded in his chest at the thought of an altercation he wasn't mentally or physically prepared for. Trav was much older and much bigger. If he had to guess, the guy had to be at least in his late twenties. All Kwon could think about was the last fight that left him battered and bruised. He couldn't risk another ass whooping of that nature.

“Huh? You gon' eat it?” Trav pressured.

Then Kwon swallowed hard as his fear slowly turned to anger. He didn't want this smoke at all, but he refused to let the man take his food and walk away with it. As terrified as he was, he still had his pride. He hawked a big glob of spit and torpedoed it into this dinner. Now the meal

was ruined for anyone to eat except him. He never made eye contact with Trav, giving him nothing to escalate the situation further. He just sat there trying his best to not look as afraid as he was inside. Trav was disgusted and he decided to look for food elsewhere.

“Bitch ass nigga,” he growled as he walked away.

His words cut like a knife, adding more salt to the wound of having his meal ruined. Kwon wanted to fight Trav so badly. He wanted to show Trav he wasn't a bitch ass nigga. He had bodies under his belt to prove it. But here he was in a seemingly no win situation again. He thought long and hard about getting up and going to sneak Trav from behind. But he was still healing mentally and physically from the last brawl. He would have to let this one go but somehow, if and when there was a next time, he had to be ready for whatever because this was his life for now. Maybe forever.

## Chapter 13

As much as Endy was enjoying getting to know Tae better, she didn't talk to Des much about it all. It didn't feel right flaunting the joy of a new love interest knowing everything she was going through. If Des brought it up, only then would she speak on the latest developments. As Kwon's trial date grew closer, it was all any of them were talking about, so Endy just tried her best to be there for all involved however she could.

"Because that boy Red got shot after they arrested Kwon, so that should work in his favor as evidence they was beefing with somebody else," Destiny went on as Endy laid in her bed on the phone listening.

"Well, I hope they find out who shot Red, then maybe they'll be able to link the other shootings to them too," Endy agreed.

"Girl, I'm praying they do, 'cause I definitely can't see him doing no serious jail time."

"I'm praying for him too, girl."

Endy heard a knock on her door and moments later, the door came open and her father stood there with bloodshot eyes again.

"Fuck you got the door closed for? What I tell you about always closing doors in this house? If you ain't in here getting dressed and shit,



keep this door open.”

Endy huffed.

“Hold on, Des. Daddy, don’t start with me today, okay? I was doing my homework.”

“You ain’t doing no homework now, you on that muthafucking phone.”

“I know I’m on the phone, but that’s why I had my door closed, and I’m too old for you to be telling me not to close my door anyway,” Endy argued.

Carlos stood there with wobbly legs, still trying to form his rebuttal. He’d had a few too many again.

“Who you think you talking to?” was all he could come up with.

“You just tryna start something. Ain’t nobody about to argue with you today. Mama!” Endy shouted. “Come get Daddy, he trying to start something and I’m on the phone!”

“Carlos, leave her alone,” Tammy shouted back.

“I ain’t messing with her, shut up. So you finished your homework?” Carlos continued.

Endy’s eyes rolled back in her head.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Open the goddamn door then,” he ordered, pushing the door all the way open before he turned to leave.

“I can’t stand him sometimes,” Endy mumbled as she got up and shut the door once Carlos was gone.

As the conversation continued, Endy got a call from Tae that she wanted to take. “This Tae, let me see what he want,” she said.

“Okay, just call me later,” Des said, ending the call.

“Hello?”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing, just got off the phone with Des. What’s up with you?”

“I just came from seeing Kwon.”

“How’s he doing?”

“It’s hard to tell. You know he gonna act like everything is okay so everybody don’t worry. He seemed like he was good though.”

“I guess that’s good news. At least he ain’t in there getting in no trouble and stuff.”

“Yeah, same thing I said. Anyway, I wanna stop by and see you before I go home.”

“Do you?” Endy smiled.

“Yeah, can I swing by?”

With Tae’s part-time job and school, the two hadn’t seen much of each other over the last few days. She was hoping he would ask.

“I don’t know though. My daddy on his BS today, so I might have to take a raincheck if he still up when you get to the area.”

“I can come when he go to sleep if you want.”

“Yeah, that might be better, ‘cause I don’t feel like hearing his mouth.”

She hated the way her father made her feel like a kid sometimes but on days like this when he was on 10 for no reason, it just wasn’t worth the fight. Hours later, when her father was down for the count, Tae pulled up in front of Endy’s house. Her mom was still up in the bedroom watching television while she stepped outside to sit with Tae for a little while. She came out wearing her favorite lounge around sweats and a scarf tied around her head. She hoped he didn’t think she was about to get extra cute just to sit in the car and talk.

“Hey,” she said as she got in and shut the door.

Tae examined her attire.

“I never seen this side of you before.”

“You like it?” She smiled while making exaggerated gestures of her outfit on display.

“Actually, I do. It shows me that you fine as fuck without even trying.”

Endy blushed.

“Boy, whatever. Whatchu listening to?” she asked, reaching for the volume to turn up the music.

Drake’s song “Light Up” began blaring through the speakers. Tae turned it down some.

“You gon’ wake your daddy up and he gon’ come out here and make me whoop his old ass,” he teased, making Endy burst into laughter before she punched his arm hard.

“Don’t threaten my fucking daddy, we’ll all jump your ass,” she warned.

“And then I’ll have to ...”

He lifted his waist and playfully gestured, pulling a gun, but Endy noticed the butt of a real gun sticking out of his waistline. Her eyes widened and her whole mood changed.

“You got a gun foreal?” She panicked.

He brushed her off.

“Girl, chill out. I wouldn’t pull no gun on your daddy. I was just talking shit.”

“But why the fuck you got a gun, Tae?”

“Why would you ask me that with everything going on? I ain’t tryna get shot, that’s why.”

Endy grew furious. She shook her head in disappointment before reaching for the door handle. He grabbed by the arm.

“Don’t do that,” she warned.

“Don’t get out the car just ‘cause you mad. Tell me what’s wrong,” he pleaded.

“What the fuck you mean what’s wrong? Your best friend is in jail for murder and you out here acting like you haven’t learned anything from it. I don’t even know what to say to you right now, Devonte.”

Endy was way more upset that he was expecting her to be about him trying to protect himself. She went to open the door again. Got it halfway open until he reached over her lap and closed it back.

“Listen to me. This is just for protection, okay? Red is dead, Phil dead, and Stacey in a fucking wheelchair. I don’t know who they gonna try and blame or retaliate against, but would you rather I protect myself or hear about something happening to me?”

Endy calmed down long enough to see things from his point of view. He was in a tough situation, and she definitely couldn't stand any more death right now. He was still leaning over on her lap, gripping her forearms tightly to stop her from getting out.

“You understand where I'm coming from?”

“I think so.”

“I'm not gonna do anything stupid, okay?”

She pouted with her eyes as she came to acceptance.

“Okay.”

Tae lifted himself up enough to meet her at eye level then kiss her lips. She kissed him back and as they began to slowly introduce their tongues to each other, as sparks that were created a while back continued to grow.

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After the near train wreck with Trav, things died down between the two of them. Kwon was able to eat his food in peace for the remainder of his stay in county. Luckily, when he went to court with the other inmates the word got around of what he was actually charged with. His charges

carried some weight in the county, being that there were so many less violent offenders who made easy targets to choose from.

At court he learned that some of his initial charges had been dropped due to lack of evidence. After Red's death, it seemed some of the other potential witnesses were missing or uncooperative. He still had the most serious charges hanging over his head with a murder and attempted murder. As his trial date approached, Kwon quickly realized that his new attorney wasn't as prepared or confident as she initially seemed. After getting some charges dropped, she was seemingly open to any plea deal that would offer him a chance to see the light of day again.

Although plenty of evidence was still stacked against him, there was no way he was taking a plea deal that would have him stuck in a cage until he was 40 years old. Twenty years plus two for the gun was the offer on the table. In his heart, he knew that it was a good deal. He thought that his age and first offense was taken into consideration. After talking with his lawyer and a few inmates, he knew that for a murder and attempted murder charge, he would have actually been getting as good a deal as they come. But there was no way he could accept 20 years in prison as his fate. His life would be over before it even got started as far as he was concerned. And the harsh reality of what his life would be like for the next twenty years was enough to make Kwon roll the dice.

Several weeks later, he went back to court to fight for his life. It was a speedy trial with not a lot of witnesses called. Everyone that loved him was in the courtroom the two days it took to call witnesses. Stacey took the stand from his wheelchair with the most damning testimony, along with a couple of homicide detectives and a forensics tech. His lawyer did a half-decent job of cross-examining Stacey, but the evidence was the evidence. His fingerprints were in fact on the weapon.

No matter what type of rebuttal the defense could come up with, there was no way around the fingerprints that were a perfect match for Markwon's. He had motive and opportunity. It only took the jury a few hours to come back with a verdict of guilty on all the charges. It was a dizzying day for everyone that loved him and had shown up to support him, but that wasn't the day that stabbed his mother and father in the heart.

The 37 years he received on sentencing day was unbearable to hear coming out of the judge's mouth. Des and his mom rushed from the courtroom, choking down sobs, but both would completely collapse into a wailing fit right outside in the hallway. Endy held Des tightly in her grasp as she released all the pain her tear ducts could manage. His father held his mother in his arms as she cried on his shoulder, a trembling, involuntary jerking, gasping for air cry. Even after his conviction, no one expected this, but the reality of it was the punishment fit the crime.



As for Kwon, he'd shed his tears the day he was found guilty on all charges. This day he just went completely numb as he sat inside the holding cell, waiting to be transferred back to county jail. The tiny, one-man cell was like a snapshot of how he expected his life to be for the next 37 years. The worst part of it all was the people he'd hurt with his decision to commit murder. Not the victims themselves. He couldn't care less about them at the time. They had it coming, but his mom, his dad, his girl, and all the family and friends that had been there throughout the entire ordeal. They would have to live with this also and for that, he had deep regrets.

Watching his people leave the courtroom in tears like that was an image he just couldn't shake. This was the lowest he'd ever felt in his entire life. His chest was in a knot and he could feel the nerves in his body inducing anxiety as he tried to breathe. He sat there on the cold steel bench stiff as a log, in a complete daze just trying to breathe ...breathe.

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Boo was all out of patience with trying to bounce back since his release from county. Nothing seemed to be going his way and every step forward was like a setup for the two steps backward to come. It was time for him to break out some of the other tools in his arsenal of ways to earn income. He didn't like doing things this way, but when all else failed he had to eat, so out came the ski mask. At the moment, he was crouched

down in the bushes with his partner in crime, Reo, waiting for the front door to open.

He and Reo had been sitting on one of T's weight houses for a week now, and they knew the best time to hit to make sure it wasn't a waste of time. Reo was the only person he would do something this grimy with, knowing that if it went bad he would keep his mouth shut and let it play out.

"Come on," Boo said as he heard the locks twisting on the front door.

"'Bout fucking time," Reo fussed as he raised up and aimed his gun at the door.

Slowly, the front door came open, and a young man about Boo's age let a female friend out that he'd been fucking for the past hour. Not caring if the female was injured or not, Reo and Boo popped up and aimed at the front door, both firing one shot each. The shots caused the girl to fall over the railing without being struck by a bullet, while the man in the doorway had no choice but to turn and run into the house, leaving the front door wide open. Boo and Reo barged in quickly to chase him down before he could get to a weapon. As they caught up with the vic, he was just about to reach down into the couch for a weapon.

Blocka! Boo fired another round into the floor.

“Don’t do it, nigga, you gon’ die, I promise!” Boo warned.

The vic stopped in mid-reach and put his hands out in surrender.

“We don’t want you nigga, where that work at?” Reo told him.

“It’s in the closet, man, just don’t kill me,” he begged.

“Shut the fuck up, we just said we don’t want you, nigga. Just stay real still,” Reo said as Boo went and checked the closet.

Boo quickly found a trash bag in the corner with several pounds of Kush.

“Okay, now where the rest at?” he questioned, pulling out a trash bag from the closet.

“We don’t go no time to play. We ain’t gon’ ask again, so give that shit up, nigga. Where the rest at?” Reo pressured.

By the look in their eyes, he could see the killer instinct behind those ski masks. The vic wanted to live to see another day.

“It’s in the basement in the drop ceiling,” he told them.

“Go grab it, Reo, hurry up,” Boo ordered.

Reo snatched the vic by his collar and made him lead the way to the second stash. Downstairs in the basement, they found another ten

pounds, which gave them a total of fourteen. After that, they locked the vic in the trunk of his own car and fled the scene in a little over five minutes after entering the house.

“That’s what the fuck I’m talking about, nigga!” Boo shouted in laughter as he floored the gas up the block.

“We on now, nigga!” his partner in crime celebrated, slapping fives with Boo from the passenger seat.

“That shit was too easy. Make me feel like we in the wrong business,” Boo said, still laughing.

## Chapter 14

Tae had to think long and hard to convince himself to not try and kill Stacey for testifying against Kwon at trial. He had to remind himself over the coming days that simply wasn't who he was. He also had to remind himself that if the shoe was on the other foot, Kwon probably wouldn't go to those extremes for him. But weeks after his best friend was sentenced, it was hard for him to get focused on anything. His job was on the verge of firing him because of too many absences, and his schoolwork was suffering badly. He couldn't afford to let his mom down by not graduating, so he enlisted Endy's help with his studies, trying to get back on track.

Today she came over his house to help him with homework after making runs with Destiny. When Des dropped her off it was around 7 o'clock, and his mother was at the casino gambling away the money she got from Boo. Endy came inside wearing high-waist blue jeans, her North Face, and Ugg boots. Tae was wearing what he always wore around the house, some sweats and a T-shirt. They settled in his bedroom and she took her coat off and got comfortable, revealing how snug her jeans really were.

Just glancing at her beauty in the dim lighting, Tae knew he would have a hard time focusing on the task at hand. This wasn't the first time Endy had been in his bedroom, but it was the first time when they were all alone in the house. As of lately, the two had been inseparable during school hours as they continuously sought out each other between classes. It wasn't official, but it was obvious to everyone around them that they were a thing. Tae brought a stool from the breakfast bar so Endy could sit next to him at his desk in the bedroom. He sat in the armless chair and she began to draw out the lines and angles to go over his trigonometry homework.

“So, you know this is the hundred and ten-degree terminal arm, right?”

“Okay,” he agreed, and she continued drawing lines.

“And you know that two pie is three hundred and sixty degrees, right?”

“Okay.” He nodded.

As Endy went on, he listened close, trying his best to absorb the lesson, but what was really on his mind was how sexy her mixture of beauty and brains was at the moment. Every once in a while she'd make him chime in to make sure that he was paying attention.

“So these angles will look the same, but you’ll just have an arm going this way. Does that make sense to you?” she questioned.

“I think so.”

After about another ten minutes of review and examples, she let Tae take over to see if he was really grasping this whole trigonometry thing. He stumbled a few times in the process, but eventually he was able to get the hang of it. By the time they were done, he had a mild headache.

“Shit,” he vented as he relaxed into the chair.

“What?”

“My fucking head hurt from trying to figure all this shit out.”

“My back hurt a little bit from being hunched over on this damn stool,” Endy complained for the first time.

“Do it?” Devonte asked as he reached out and grabbed her by the hand, pulling her from the stool into his lap. “Is this better?”

Endy arched her back, trying to get it to pop.

“A little,” she moaned as she stretched.

Devonte watched her breasts rise as she stretched, and he began to massage her lower back.

“How about that?”

“I want a real massage for all this work I just put in,” she told him, even though the rubdown was feeling nice.

He looked at her and smiled.

“You want a massage foreal?”

“Yeah,” she replied vigorously. “You owe me that much.”

“Come on, I’ll give you one,” he said, gesturing for her to rise from his lap. “Go lay on the bed.”

Endy got up and moved over to the bed as she was told. “You gotta take your shirt off first.”

“You just wanna see my titties,” she claimed.

“I do, but I can’t give you a real massage with that shirt on.”

“So you be giving out massages and shit?” she questioned as she began to unbutton her shirt.

“Nah, this will be my first, so I wanna make sure I do a good job,” he said honestly.

Tae had been in relationships with girls before, but never had he felt the need to be this affectionate towards them. Endy took off her shoes and shirt and laid the shirt on the headboard.

“You sure your mama ain’t gon’ pop up and catch me with my shirt off in your room?”



“Nah, my mama won’t be home until after I’m sleep already.”

With that said, Endy stretched out on the bed wearing only her jeans and her bra. Devonte inhaled deeply as he admired her apple bottom spread out on his bed. He’d dreamed of this day for a long time. He rubbed his hands together, pretending to get them warmed up the way he saw it done on television before. He climbed in bed and mounted her so that his bulging rod was stuffed right between her ass cheeks. She giggled.

“What?”

“Nothing, go ahead,” she replied, blushing like crazy.

Tae began to slowly rub her lower back.

“Remember, I never done this before,” he reminded her.

“Suuuure you haven’t.”

“What that mean? That mean I’m doing it right?”

“Boy, just shut up and massage me.”

He began to massage her traps and shoulder blades. He couldn’t get to the middle of her back because the bra was constricting his movements.

“I gotta take this loose,” he said, tugging at her bra strap.

“Ummm, okay,” she decided.

He unhooked her bra and became even more aroused at the sight of her completely bareback and flawless cinnamon skin tone. He had a bright idea.

“Hold on,” he said, rolling off of her and onto the floor.

He rushed the dresser and found the cocoa butter lotion. He squirted a little on his hands and rushed back to bed and got back in position. He began to massage her gently, really getting into it this time.

“Mmmmm,” Endy moaned, turning him on so much it felt like he was about to bust.

His dick pressed harder against her ass, making Endy moist just the same. It was a combination of pleasure from two different angles. The more he massaged her the more he knew this had to be the day he got those draws. He leaned in and started to kiss her neck softly. The smell of cocoa butter mixed with whatever scent she was wearing drove him wild as he went from kissing to sucking on her neck hungrily.

“I guess you done with my massage, huh?” she wondered in the most relaxed toned he’d ever heard her speak.

He knew he had her right where he wanted her as he kissed her shoulder and all down her back. When he was done planting kisses all over

her, he turned her over and her bra fell to her elbows. He went to pull it completely off, exposing her juicy melons and erect nipples.

“Wait,” she said.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, all hot and bothered.

“Nothing. I just wanna know is you my man now or what?” she questioned.

“I wanna be,” he quickly answered and kissed her lips.

“So why you never said nothing?” she countered.

Leaning on his elbows, he shrugged.

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t want you to shoot me down.”

“After all this time we spent together, you think I was really gonna shoot you down, Devonte?”

He kissed her body before speaking.

“I don’t, but ... anyway, yes. I wanna be your man. I am your man,” he decided, looking in her eyes.

She smiled big as she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

“Okay.”

He lowered himself onto her and kissed her passionately. Her lips tasted so good he sucked on them slowly before he fumbled with the buttons on her jeans. As she began to assist, he yanked his sweatpants and boxers down with his free hand. Excitedly, he pulled her jeans off and flung them to the floor. He tasted her beautiful perky breasts for the first time, giving each one the same amount of attention. He kissed her neck right behind her ear, giving Endy chills up her spine before he pulled back just enough to insert himself inside of her.

The soft, warm, wet feeling of her entry felt better than he could've ever imagined. As he dove completely inside, Endy let out a gasp for air that made him pop his eyes open and look at her. She was so fucking gorgeous. He wanted to see her reaction to the dick now with each stroke. He tunneled his way inside of her slowly, savoring the moment as she pulled him in closer and kissed him again. He wrapped his hand around her big, soft booty and began to pound away at her.

With each stroke, he could feel himself falling deeper for her. Soon Endy began to convulse, accompanied by nonstop moaning as her body shook with explosiveness. He couldn't hold it back any longer, but it was too good to pull out. He had to stay in this pussy for as long as he could. As he felt his shaft fill up, his whole body tensed before he exploded inside of her.

The volcanic eruption was magnetic and long lasting, leaving both gasping for air and clinging tightly to one another. Their bodies now moist with sweat, Endy's arms stayed wrapped tightly around his neck. As she took deep breaths in and out, he could still feel her breasts rise and fall against his chest. His dick was still inside of her, and he still didn't want to pull out.

When she finally loosened her grip from around his neck, Devonte buried his face into her neck and began to kiss the sweat from her collarbone and in between her breasts. His dick started to pulsate and rise again, so he slowly began pumping as he geared up for round two.

## Chapter 15

The past few months had been the most emotionally draining experience of Destiny's young life. Since the very first day of getting the news about Kwon getting attacked at school, it seemed like the downward spiral never ended. She'd been trying her best to believe in him, be a supportive girlfriend, and just pray she was doing the right thing by staying by his side through it all. Now that he'd been sentenced to 37 years in prison, she didn't know what to think. She knew at some point her life had to go on, but she didn't know how to go about it.

Before she could get a chance to assess her feelings for Kwon, clarify the still-existing relationship, and strategize a plan for her future, she was hit with a monkey wrench that had been sneaking up behind her the entire time. With everything that was going on, Des had been ignoring all the signs of a possible pregnancy all the way up until today. The tenderness in her breasts, the spotty menstrual cycle, and even the day she woke up with morning sickness were all the evidence she needed to convince her it was time to buy a pregnancy test. But even before she even took the test, it was already confirmed in her on conscious.

Even now, sitting there on the lid of the toilet in the bathroom holding the confirmation in her hand, she didn't feel shocked. She felt a lot of things, fear, regret, heartbreak, but shock wasn't one of them. Tears began to trickle down her face for what seemed like the millionth time, and the worst part of it all was there was no one she wanted to talk to about it. How could she tell her mom she'd waited all the way until her senior year in high school to get pregnant by a man just starting out on a 30-plus-year sentence? How could she tell Kwon knowing everything he was already going through on the inside? This kind of news could just take him right over the edge.

Knowing she couldn't just hold it all in, she decided to tell the one person she knew she could confide in judgement free. She texted Endy.

**Des:** I've been keeping a secret for the past few days because I wasn't totally sure, but I just decided to take a test today and it's been confirmed that I'm pregnant.

**Endy:** What????

**Des:** Yeah.

Her phone started to ring seconds later with a call from Endy. She answered, wiping tears away and sniffing.

“Let me go upstairs in my room and I’ll call you back, ‘cause my mom is nosy and I’m downstairs in the bathroom.”

“Call me right back,” Endy ordered.

Des got up and hid the test in her pocket while she straightened herself up as much as she could to keep from looking a mess. She left out of the bathroom and darted past her sister and her mom up to her bedroom then called Endy back.

“Hello?”

“Yeah.”

“So you for sure?” Endy asked.

“Yeah, unless the test is wrong, but I kinda already knew before I took the test.”

“Oh my god. So that’s why you been so distant these past few days?”

“Yeah, I just didn’t want to face it, but I been feeling like it all week. I didn’t have a period at all this month.”

“What about last month?”

“Not really.”

“Oh my god. I can’t believe this is happening right now,” Endy replied.



“You? I’m over here with my head spinning.”

“Have you thought about—”

“I have no fucking clue about anything right now. I just took the test, I sat there about five minutes crying, then I texted you.”

“I’m sooo sorry all this is happening. We will get through it ... together.”

Des sighed heavily.

“Thanks, I really needed to hear that more than you know.”

“Girl, you know I got your back. You are like my sister, and I am here for whatever you need and whatever you decide.”

Talking to her best friend made some of the pain of her new truth subside, if only momentarily. She knew that with Endy being an only child that she truly was the closest thing to a sister she had. Whatever came next, Des knew she had someone that would be there for her every step of the way.

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Kwon spent more time than he was expecting in county jail and in transitional holding waiting for bed space. Eventually, he was shipped off to what would be his new home to Saginaw Correctional Facility. It was a level four prison, just a step below a maximum security level five prison.

Because of his lengthy sentence, he'd be serving his time with the hardcore criminals that made up some of the worst of the jail population. His mind had already conjured up a whole scenario of what he might have to do to survive, including one where he caught another body inside. He'd made up his mind that he would do whatever it took to stay alive.

When he arrived at the prison and was given the bedding and towels, a prison guard then assigned him to a cell. Walking the second level gallery, he spotted one cell open with a man close to his father's age standing outside. He assumed it was his cellmate as he approached the well-groomed man of average height and weight. His skin was the color of coffee mixed with heavy creamer, and his hair was cut low with a sharp line-up connecting to a thin beard and mustache. His eyes seemed to set deeply in the back of his skull, and his brows were thick and meaty.

"Goddamn, young blood, how old is you?" the man said as he stopped at the room number on his tag.

"Just turned eighteen," he announced somberly.

The man shook his head.

"You breaking my heart, young blood," the man announced in a disappointed tone. "Anyway, I'm Game," he greeted, extending his hand for a handshake.

Kwon sat his duffle bag down and shook his hand. It was firm, manly handshake that told Markwon he wasn't to be played with.

“In your cell, Game!” a guard shouted from the floor level.

“Yeah, alright,” he complied as the two of them went inside the cell and the electronic door began to close.

“What's yo' name, youngsta?”

“Kwon,” he replied, looking around at the small area, feeling defeated all over again.

“You got the top bunk, Kwon. I hate to see you up in here like this and yo' life ain't even started yet, but since you here, ain't nothing to it but to do it. I'ma tell you like this, I ain't no bully and I ain't no bitch. You help me keep this joint clean and give me some space sometimes, and we'll be fine. I like to have the room to myself when I can, so when yard open we gotta rotate, you understand? Sometimes I'll leave out so you can have the room to yourself, you know what I mean?”

Kwon nodded and listened.

“Other than that, man, you got lucky to get me as your bunk. A lotta these niggas would've seen you coming and started licking they chops. I treat everybody with respect and I demand mine, you dig?”

Kwon nodded again as he found his locker and started to unpack. His bunk didn't seem too bad so far. He knew he was right about how a lot of the inmates would view him. It was time for him to become a man very fast if he wanted to continue to survive in here.

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Tae and Endy were going strong as their relationship progressed, but it wasn't all peaches and cream every day. At school there were a lot of guys that wanted Tae's position, and they were adamant about making that known every time his back was turned. Endy being the flirt that she was would entertain some of it, but never to his face. He knew that she was a flirt before he started dating her, so as long as he wasn't disrespected, he tried not to let any negativity simmer on his brain. It was all good. That is, until it wasn't.

The couple only had two classes together, so they would usually seek each other out throughout the day. In the beginning, it was almost every hour when the bell rang whether she was with Des or not. As they grew more comfortable with the reality of being together, they slowed down on being stuck like glue. This left open opportunity for guys like Tino to implement himself into the picture when Tae wasn't around. So this day, when Tae bent the corner in the hallway and spotted Tino posted up at Endy's locker, he fell back just to see how she played it when she

thought he wasn't watching. Tino was peanut butter brown with a nice grade of hair and a couple inches taller than Tae.

He was also on the basketball team, which made him pretty popular with the ladies. Tae moseyed along the hallway, trying not to look like a stalker as he grew closer to Endy's locker. Endy, with her back turned to him, was soaking up the jokes and conversation Tino had to offer at the moment.

“Hahahhaa!” she giggled loudly, even slapping him on his arm.

Tino looked up and spotted Tae coming their way from the corner of his eye. He didn't react to Tae one way or another. He just kept on running his game. They were too close to each other. Close enough to kiss, and Tae's jealousy overcame him as he walked up behind Endy.

“So, y'all coming to the game?” he heard Tino say.

He walked up and draped his arm around Endy.

“We might,” he replied as he kissed her cheek.

Tino chuckled.

“I was talking about her and Des, but you can come too and watch me light it up if you want,” he bragged, making a shooting motion.

“I know I can come, nigga. I don't need your permission to come to the game.”

Tino's eyes widened as the spiciness of Tae's response took him by surprise.

"Aye, chill out fool. I know this girl, you ain't gotta—"

"Right, so go ahead about your business," Tae interrupted.

That pissed Tino off, and Tae could see it in his face.

"Tae, stop, don't do that," Endy tried calmly.

"Fuck that nigga, he better chill before I do him like Phil did him and his boy," Tino threatened, giving Tae firm eye contact.

"Fuck you too, nigga, you see what happened to Phil, right?" Tae fired back without thinking.

"No! Stop!" Endy pleaded, placing a hand on Tae's chest.

"What, nigga?"

"You heard me."

Endy jumped in between the two as one of Tino's teammates walked up and grabbed him by the arm to lead him away from trouble.

"Nigga, you think you tough because of your brother? Ain't nobody scared of Boo," Tino claimed, being led away.

"You is scared of Boo, pussy, but I don't need him for you," Tae shouted as Endy nudged him in the opposite direction.

“Tae, what is wrong with you? Why you do that?” she fussed.

“Because ... what you all in his face for anyway?”

“I wasn’t in nobody’s face, we was just talking!” Endy shouted.

“Stop fucking yelling at me, Endy,” he growled.

“No, because you shouldn’t have come up tryna start nothing in the first place. I can talk to people if I want to,” she continued with a roll of the neck.

“You better stop fucking yelling at me, I know that!” he warned, putting a finger in her face.

She smacked the hand away as the bell rang.

“Boy, what’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

The two of them engaged in a stare-off as tempers flared. Endy turned and walked away, realizing they were about to be late for class. They would have to finish this later.

## Chapter 16

The following days after Kwon landed at his new home, he and Game had no choice but to get to know each other a little better. Well, they could've sat in a cell for 20 hours a day ignoring each other, but Game wasn't that type of guy. Once he figured out that Kwon was not some little young punk that he would have to hurt or make him pack his things and move to another cell, he actually took a liking to him. Game was also from the eastside of Detroit. They shared a couple of stories about themselves and Game realized that just like him, Kwon was somewhat of a ladies man, or at least he could've been had he not been so in love.

He was sure to give Game the space he required just like he'd asked on the first day, so he was a bit surprised when one day Game was about to step out on the yard for a walk and he stood up and said, "Come on, young blood, come hit this yard and get some air."

Kwon laid their speechless and astounded at first, not sure if Game was really asking for him to join.

"You want me to hit the yard with you?" he asked for clarification as he sprang from his bunk.

"Yeah, grab your coat before we miss the gate," he ordered.



Dressed in his state department-issued clothes and coat, Kwon hit the yard with Game, who wore regular burgundy sweats and a blue bomber coat he'd ordered from a catalog years ago. Game lit up a Black and Mild cigar as soon as he hit the yard. The two of them walked the trail along with a few dozen other inmates scattered about.

“You don't smoke, do you?” Game asked before he attempted to pass the cigar.

“Shit, I need to start,” Kwon replied, realizing he wanted whatever would ease his stress level.

The first few days were the worst, just trying to face the reality of it all. Seeing other inmates going about their day so comfortable with being locked down all day every day was mind-boggling to him. It all seemed like they were just waiting to die. He hadn't asked Game how much time he had left, but he learned he'd been down for twenty years already. Game passed him the cigar and Kwon took a long pull.

“How you get through this ... doing all that time?” Kwon asked.

“One day at time, homeboy. You can't think about the time at all. Not next month, not next year. That shit will drive you crazy. Find something to do with the time to keep yourself occupied. Get you some books, work on your body, do whatever you gotta do, you know? But most

of all, stay sucker free in this bitch, you hear me? Won't nothing make your time harder than fucking with some sucker ass niggas."

"Whatchu mean?" Kwon had to know.

"I mean your name is your name. Your reputation in here is all you got. If you fuck with a lame, you gon' walk with a limp. And when that lame get pressed, if niggas think you with 'em, you gon' get pressed too. You hear me now?" Game questioned with a seriousness Kwon hadn't heard from him until that day.

"I hear you." He nodded as he passed the cigar back.

As the two of them continued on the trail, they moved at a fast enough pace to keep their body temperature up. It was a form of exercise that Game loved to partake in on the days he couldn't get to the weight room. As they continued to march around the track, Game gave Kwon bits and pieces of knowledge he'd gained during his stay that he knew would help with his transition. After about 40 minutes of getting schooled, Kwon felt comfortable enough to ask Game what he'd been wondering since they'd met.

"So how old is you, Game?"

"I'm 49."

"And how much more time you got left?"

“I’m here for the duration, young blood. I ain’t never going home. That’s why I know so much about how to make the best out of a bad situation.”

He couldn’t feel sorry for Game. He was still too busy trying to accept his own reality. But the sting of his words put Kwon in a trance-like state momentarily as he realized that even if he did every single day of his 37 years, he would still go home ... one day.

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Endy and Tae spent the next two days going back and forth about who was right in the situation that happened in school. They still hadn’t come to an agreement to disagree. Endy felt like Devonte was trying to control her while Tae’s issue wasn’t so much with her but how people might perceive things. He didn’t want anybody thinking they could steal her away or that she had an eye for them. He always wanted her to have both eyes on him. Today, the two barely said anything to each other in school but now at home, Endy was feeling suffocated by the turmoil unfolding in her house.

“I get tired of having to come home and clean up behind your fucking ass every day! I work too. I’m not sitting on my ass all day doing nothing. I come home and gotta clean up the entire fucking house behind you and Endy!” her mom shouted at Carlos.

Endy defended herself.

“Don’t say me, because I clean up the kitchen and the bathroom every day when I get home. That be Daddy come right in and mess it back up.”

“I know he do, and I’m tired of it,” Tammy went on.

“I’m fucking tired when I get off. I’m not about to be scrambling around trying to clean up behind myself like a fucking kid. I pay damn near every bill in this muthafucka! So guess what? When I don’t feel like doing shit, I ain’t doing shit!” Carlos argued.

“Well, why don’t you start paying every bill in this muthafucka since you wanna live like a king so bad? Since you think you got a maid. Let’s do that! I’ll quit my muthafucking job and then I can stay home and cook and clean all day every day. I’m doing the shit anyway, I might as well make it easy on myself!”

“Fuck that shit you talking about, Tammy! You ain’t never satisfied no matter what the fuck I do.”

“Carlos, you work four days a week. The other three days you ain’t doing shit but sitting around the house getting drunk! Why you can’t clean up nothing? Why you can’t clean up behind your fucking self?”

“’Cause I don’t want to, that’s why!”

This feud had been going on for thirty minutes already, and Endy knew when they got like this it wasn't going to end any time soon. She texted Tae then went in her room and grabbed her jacket and stepped outside to wait on the porch. Nobody even bothered to ask where she was going as the shouting match continued. Endy loved her parents dearly, but she couldn't deal with them when they were like this. The energy in the house was just fucked up. She stood outside on the porch for fifteen minutes before Tae came pulling up. She was glad to see that it seemed like he'd finally shook his funky attitude as he watched her walk to the car.

“Hey,” she spoke as she got in and closed the door.

“What's going on at your house?” he questioned as he pulled away from the curb and Endy put on her seatbelt.

“Some stupid shit I don't feel like dealing with. My mama and daddy always arguing about the same shit. She wants him to help out around the house more, he say he ain't gon' do it, she say she gon' quit her job,” Endy explained with dullness and monotony reeking though in every word.

“That's all?” Tae chuckled.

“You ain't hear how loud they in there yelling? That shit sound like the back of the school bus,” she claimed.

“You don’t think they gon’ fight, do you?”

“Naw, my daddy would never hit my mama,” she assured him.

“They just need a break or something, I don’t know.”

Tae drove back to his house and parked right out front. He had the house to himself but being that things were so iffy between them, he wasn’t sure if he should invite her in, so they sat outside with music down low.

“You still mad?” Tae asked.

“That’s you. I wouldn’t have called you and asked you to come get me if I was still mad. You the one been ignoring me all day.”

“I didn’t ignore you, I spoke.”

“Yeah, and that’s all you did,” she reminded him with a roll of her eyes.

“I’m a let that whole thing go. But one thing you gotta know about me, Endy, is I’m a little possessive,” he finally admitted.

“Well, one thing you gotta know about me, is I’m a people person, if you haven’t noticed. I get along with everybody. I like being around people and talking shit. I don’t want none of them niggas in that school, I want you,” she replied truthfully.

Tae rubbed his chin hair slightly, taking her words in.

“You love me?” he questioned.

“I do love you, Devonte. The question is, do you love me?” she shot back.

“You can’t tell?” he replied, glancing in the review as a red Charger bent the corner.

He knew the car like the back of his hands, so he tuned Endy out momentarily as he watched Boo pull up and park in the middle of the street right next to his car. He rolled his driver’s side window down as Boo approached dressed in a waist-length, black mink coat and matching hat.

“What’s up, bro?” Tae asked.

“What’s up nigga, what you up to?” Boo came up smiling and looking inside the car to check out the passenger.

“Just sitting here talking with my girl. You never met Endy?”

“Naw, we never met. I seen her around though, how you doing sweetheart?” Boo said.

Endy and Boo had seen each other in passing plenty of times but never actually spoke.

“How you doing?” Endy replied, finally seeing some resemblance in the two brothers now that she had them both right there.

“I’m good,” Boo replied and turned his attention back to his brother, slapping his chest. “Good job, boy, you can stick your chest out now,” he told him, giving props to his beautiful girlfriend.

“Shut up, nigga.”

Boo pulled out two big stacks of cash and tossed them in Tae’s lap. Endy tried not to react, but her eyes widened before she looked away.

“Put that up for me. I got too much money at my bitch house. I need to spread some shit around, you feel me?”

“How much is this?” Tae asked.

He’d kept small amounts of cash for his brother, but never close to this amount.

“That’s thirty thousand. Fifteen and fifteen.”

“Okay,” Tae replied, trying his best to act like this was normal.

“If you need something, make sure you call me first before you take it, okay?”

“I will.”

“And don’t sit out here with that shit on you for too long. Go put it up,” Boo ordered.

“Alright, I’m ‘bout to.”



With that said, Boo turned and headed back to the Charger. As he hopped in and sped off, Devonte turned to Endy to see her reaction to what had just happened.

“Dang, yo’ brother balling,” she cooed.

“He been getting money.”

Knowing that the police could bend the corner and harass him any time, Tae realized he now had the perfect excuse to invite Endy inside.

“You wanna come in? I gotta go put this up.”

“Wait a minute, you still haven’t answered my question I asked before your brother pulled up.”

“What question?”

“Don’t play, Tae, I asked you do you love me?”

He smiled big but let the silence linger for a moment.

“Girl, I love the shit out of you!” he said emphatically.

“Do you?” She blushed as he leaned in for a kiss to drive home his point.

\*\*\*\*

Later that evening, Boo had just put his gun up before he made his last run to the liquor store to get some blunts and some Hennessy. After he got everything he needed, he would head back to his side chick’s house for

the night, hoping his girl didn't blow his phone up. He pushed the Charger up Harper near Conners on the eastside, banging B.G. of Cash Money Records "Trigga Play" on high volume. It was always like a theme song for trigga happy thugs like himself. He was rocking and hugging the steering wheel, amped up while rapping each word with passion, when the cops pulled up right alongside him at the light.

Paying them no mind, he reached for the red cup in the cup holder and took a sip, knowing they would think it was alcohol and get pissed off. The two white officers grilled him intensely, just knowing they could spot a gangsta when they saw one. Boo knew he didn't have any warrants and anything dirty on him, so he grilled them right back at the light until it turned green. As soon as the light changed, Boo pulled off, not too fast and not too slow. He refused to be intimidated, but he didn't want to give them a probable cause for a stop. The patrol car got right behind him and began running his plate, which he was expecting. He continued to bob to the music, driving in route, knowing he was almost at the liquor store. If they hadn't found a reason to stop him by then, he was good.

When he made it to the liquor store, he went to turn into the parking lot and the cops hit the lights and turned in right behind him.

"Muthafuckas!" he fumed.

Boo knew they didn't have a thing on him. All he had in the cup was Pepsi, the car was registered to his girl, and everything was legit. He hadn't committed any moving violations, so he figured they had to be some racist cops looking to stumble up on some felonies in the midst of the stop. He parked the car and they pulled behind him, blocking him in the parking spot. He glanced in the review mirror coolly, getting a better look at them. Both cops looked to be in their early thirties. One had blonde hair and the other a sandy brown.

They both got out and approached with caution from each side, with their hands on their holsters. The blonde-haired officer came to his side, and he rolled the window down.

"Sup man?" Boo questioned, annoyed.

"What's in the cup?" the officer asked.

"Pepsi, you want some?" Boo replied.

"No, I don't want any," the cop said, flashing the flashlight around in the car.

His demeanor said it all. He'd taken one look at the young black dude in the mink coat and flashy car and labeled him immediately. And although he was right on the money, on this particular day, Boo hadn't done anything wrong.

“Let me see some paperwork and identification,” he asked.

“For what, Officer? I’m not drinking and driving, so if that’s why you stopped me, we don’t have nothing else to talk about.”

“We gonna talk about whatever I wanna talk about.”

“Oh, no the fuck we not. You got the wrong one, buddy,” Boo assured him, and the two engaged in a stare-off.

“Oh really?” the cop finally said, in shock.

“Oh yeah!” Boo laughed.

The officer grew increasingly angry, fast.

“Cut the car off,” he ordered.

“Fuck you!”

The officer then aggressively reached inside the car and tried to unlock the door. Boo blocked his path to the door locks with his arm, and the two began to struggle. He grabbed Boo in a choke hold and pulled him out of the car through the driver’s side window. As Boo struggled, they both went crashing to the ground hard. Boo jammed his thumb in the cop's eye, causing him to scream in pain and release him. The brown-haired cop had rounded the back of the Charger as Boo struggled to his feet. He tackled Boo to the ground, but Boo aggressively flipped him over and landed on top

of him. He began striking the officer in the face with a flurry of punches. The blond-haired officer, who was on his feet now, ran and tackled Boo to the ground and tried to get a knee his back.

Boo was too strong for one cop to contain him, and he managed to wrestle himself out the cop's stronghold and sprang to his feet. The two men stood toe to toe and began trading punches. All of a sudden, a gun blast erupted then two more shots followed. Boo's legs collapsed underneath him as he fell flat on his back in the parking lot. Both officers quickly scrambled to get him on his stomach and handcuff him, although he was no longer a threat, as more patrol cars began to arrive on the scene. Both officers looked panic stricken as they scurried around, continuously glancing at each other wondering how they were going to clean up this mess.

## Chapter 17

Des was out making some runs for her mother, still in deep contemplation about her dilemma. She wanted to talk to her mom about the pregnancy but still hadn't found the words. As the days passed, she decided that before she talked to anyone else she should at least let Kwon know what was going on. She hadn't heard from him since he'd arrived at the prison he'd be doing his time at. Kwon had already given her the heads up it might take a few days to get his phone list and pin number set up again.

After playing her mother's lottery, she stopped by the Family Dollar to grab some clothes detergent and a few more items. In the cleaning products aisle, she heard a familiar voice call out her name.

"What's up, Des?"

She turned and spotted Tino approaching. He had a few items in his hands and that always evident grin on his face.

"Hey, Tino," she replied.

"Whachu doing up in here?" he questioned.

"Nothing, just picking up some stuff for my mama."

“Oh, foreal? Let me get that lil’ stuff for you. I can put it on my card and you can keep your money for a rainy day,” he suggested.

Des thought about it for a moment, but she knew Tino probably had an ulterior motive if he was being this generous.

“Naw, I’m okay, this my mama money anyway.”

“That’s why you should keep it and let me pay for this stuff so you can have the money for yourself,” he went on.

“Why you being so friendly?” she giggled as she headed to check out.

Tino followed behind her.

“You my homey, Des. You know I fuck with you, quit playing.”

“I appreciate it, foreal, but I’m good. I was just grabbing a few things.”

“Let me call you a little bit later then. I know your man Kwon is in a bad situation, but you know ... life goes on,” he reminded her.

She paused in the aisle so they could have some privacy before she made it to checkout.

“Tell you the truth, I’m not ready to think about that kind of stuff right now. All I wanna do is focus on graduation and planning my future. I’m not thinking about dating,” she told him honestly.

“Still, can’t we just talk? I don’t see the harm in that, and I know you need somebody talk to.”

“Not right now, Tino,” she said, walking away.

After she shut Tino down, the two went their separate ways. Des paid for her things and left the store with Kwon heavy on her mind. She wasn’t ready to live her life without him. The love she felt for him was still very strong and present in her heart. She hated everything about the circumstances he put both of them in, but she couldn’t bring herself to hate him. Before she made it home, she got a call on her cell phone. When she answered, it was the call she’d been waiting for. The operator alerted her that it was a collect call from prison, and she quickly accepted the call with butterflies swimming through her stomach.

“What’s up?” she heard Kwon’s voice come through, sounding at peace for the moment.

“Hey,” she beamed.

“What you up to?”

“Driving home. I was out making some runs for my mama.”

“Oh, okay.”

“So, how is it there?” she asked.



She'd been dying to know how he was adapting to the real prison life.

"It's a lot like what I was expecting, but then some stuff is not what I expected at all. I'm in a cell with this older guy and we get along pretty good."

"You made a visiting list and all that stuff yet?"

"I filled out the paperwork. My counselor gotta give me the applications to send out. When y'all send them back and they get approved, then I can have visits," he explained.

As the conversation continued, Des wished she could hold off and do this face to face. but she knew it would probably only make that conversation hurt worse. She had to get it over with because at least then she could move forward with whatever the next step was. Kwon was going on about his first few days at the prison, so she waited for him to finish.

"Okay, I gotta tell you something. I don't know how you gonna take it, but I hope you don't let this get you down. I need you to stay strong in there, okay?"

"What's wrong?" Kwon asked, his voice in a panic.

She took a deep breath.

"Well ... I'm pregnant."

Silence.

“You pregnant?” Kwon replied, because that was all he could articulate at the time.

“Yeah, it must’ve happened the last time we had sex. I haven’t told anybody but you and Endy.”

She heard Markwon inhale deeply then release.

“Pregnant?” he repeated.

“Yes,, boy stop saying that, say something else,” she giggled.

He laughed.

“Wooooow. You just fucked me up with this, Des,” he explained, and she could tell he was smiling.

“You sound happy.”

“Shit, I am, to tell you the truth. That’s good news, right?”

“How? You may not even be out here to raise a child,” she reminded him.

“Don’t say that, Des. It’s not over. I got a chance to appeal.”

“I’m not saying it’s over, but this is here and now. A baby is not gonna wait for you to get out.”

“I-I know, and I’m not saying that, but ... you gotta keep my baby, Des, please,” he begged with all the passion he could muster.

“Kwon, I’m in the 12th grade about to graduate and go to college. How do you expect me to just up and have a baby? Especially in this situation. Like, come on now,” she reasoned.

“Des, I understand, but just listen to me. A judge just gave me 37 years in prison. Before today, I didn’t have anything to keep me going in here. Now you telling me you pregnant with my seed. This all I got, baby. Please don’t kill my baby.”

Des began to shed tears as she pulled into her driveway. She hoped her mom didn’t come to the door to help with the bags or anything, because she would surely see her crying and question her.

“That’s not fair for you to say that to me. I don’t want to get rid of it either, but I may not have a choice. This is my life we talking about. How you think my mama gonna react? How I’m I supposed to finish school pregnant?”

“What do you always tell me? Have faith, right? You gotta have faith, ain’t that what you always telling me? If you want me to believe in something then you gotta believe too, baby. I believe you can do it, and I believe God will help you find a way.”

Her tears continued to trickle down as she tried to blink them away.

“You just saying that now because you want me to keep the baby,” she cried.

“No, I’m not. I’m saying because I have to believe it. Shit, what choice do I have, Des?”

She sniffled and wiped her tears as his words weighed heavy on her heart. Confusion replaced her sadness as she tried to search for clarity.

“I’m not saying no, Kwon, but I’m definitely not saying yes. I have to really, really think this through.”

“We just gotta believe, baby. We just gotta believe.”

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