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BELIEVE

PATH TO THE CROWN AIN'T PRETTY

KING BENJAMIN

**Believe 2**

**A King Benjamin Novel**

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

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# Chapter 1

Things were not going well for Des. She'd faced trying times in her young life before but nothing this extreme. After a long, drawn-out battlefield of decisions about her future, she'd decided that aborting this baby was something she just couldn't live with. She could only hope that her decision to keep her baby didn't drastically reshape her future for the worse. But on top of not having Kwon there to help her through such a life-changing experience, she was also having the most grueling pregnancy that she could've imagined.

It seemed like almost immediately after giving Kwon the news, she began to get constant nausea and headaches. It was hard to keep anything down for the first couple of months. As the baby grew, it seemed everything started to swell. Then came the back pains plus on and off depression. Nothing about this was a joyful experience, and as she sat at home supposedly studying for exams, she wasn't getting anything done. She stared blankly at the bare white wall in front of her, ready to cry. But she'd cried enough over the past few weeks to last a lifetime, and it hadn't changed anything.

As much as everyone in her family had their opinions about her keeping the baby, a lot of the women didn't really believe in abortions based on reckless moments, so they supported her decision. They pushed her and praised her for being able to handle it all. Staying in school and maintaining decent grades, all the while pushing through the most physically and mentally trying times she'd ever faced. Her mom never expressed any of her disappointment, choosing to focus on giving her daughter the love and support she would need. But almost six months pregnant now, the days seemed longer and more torturous than she could bear. The closer she got to the finish line with school and bringing a new life into the world, the more she started to question her decision.

Just as a lone tear was about to escape the corner of her eye, a soft tap at the door brought Des back to the present moment.

"Come in," she said, knowing it was probably her mom.

Cynthia came inside with a look of concern in her eyes as she noticed her daughter seemingly wiping a tear.

"You feeling any better?"

"Honestly? No."

"Awwww, my poor baby."

Cynthia came and sat a cup of tea on her desk and began to rub her daughter's back and shoulders.

“Is it your back?”

“It’s everything. Just... everything.”

“Better days are coming. I promise.”

“I don’t know if I can wait any longer. I need better days now, Mama,” Des said, shaking her head in frustration.

“You’re halfway to the finish line, baby. Don’t give up now.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“And I need you to be completely honest with me.”

Cynthia stopped rubbing her back and went and sat on the bed.

“Okay,” she replied, giving her eye contact now.

“Do you think I made the right decision?”

Her mom took a moment before answering.

“I think you made the decision that you believed was right for you. And I think you made that decision without rushing through it and when

you were clear headed and... had all the facts. Now, of course, there was no way to know how trying this was all going to be, but I'm sure you went into it knowing it wasn't going to be easy."

"I just wish I could feel better. It's like every day if it's not my mind, it's my body. And I miss Kwon, and I miss being able to do normal stuff like hanging out with Endy."

"You know Endy is always just a phone call away," her mother reminded her.

"Yeah, but I feel like every time we get together I'm just dragging her down into my depression."

"I'm sure she doesn't feel that way."

"But it feels that way to me. I'm no fun to be around, so I'd rather just stay to myself."

"Well, I don't think that's the healthiest thing for you right now. Honestly, if you can't lean on your friends a little in your dark times, then what are they your friends for? You should call her and tell her to come over or come and pick you up."

Her mom was right. Maybe she did need to get out of the house for a minute. It was Saturday afternoon, and she obviously wasn't going to get

any schoolwork done at the moment. It was the end of winter and the weather was true to its season, but anything beat sitting around feeling sorry for herself.

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Boo spotted an empty phone and beelined towards it before somebody else realized it was open. He'd been in the county since October fighting some very serious charges, including a pistol that police planted in his vehicle to seal his fate. Besides the pistol, he was also facing double assault charges on the officers with intent to do great bodily harm. One of the officers had also lied and said that Boo reached for his weapon, which actually never happened. But Boo was taking it all like a G. He knew what came with the life he lived and was just thankful the bullets didn't kill him or damage him severely for life. At this point, he was just hoping for a bond reduction so he could post bail.

As the automated voice finished clearing the call, his mom's voice came through the speaker.

"Hello," she said in a not-so-motherly tone.

"Sup, Ma?"

"Nothing, I just walked in the door."



“Oh, okay. You get a call from Jazz?”

“Yeah, I talked to her. She said you trying to get a bond reduction. I thought you already tried that and it didn’t work?”

“Yeah, but they was using stuff against me that they wasn’t supposed to, trying to say I’m a flight risk, so they had to give me another bond hearing.”

“Ain’t your trial about to start anyway?”

“Nope, I had the lawyer file another motion.”

Boo hadn’t even hired a real lawyer. He was saving all the money he had to try and make bail. But he knew enough about the law to request his court-appointed lawyer to file some motions to buy him some time. At the moment, his bond was a quarter-million cash. If could get it down to ten percent or at least 50K, he would be on the streets that same day. Still, even if he was lucky enough to get the reduction, he needed someone to post the bail that wasn’t going to draw a red flag and make matters worse.

“I don’t know, Boo. I don’t have that kind of money, and you know it.”

“Yeah, but you can just say you refinanced your house or something if it comes up. They not gonna be looking into you like that.”

His mom grew silent. She hated to leave her son in jail, but she hated to be dragged into his bullshit in any way. She always felt that if he wanted to live this life that he should take on all the responsibility of it.

“Why Jazz can’t do it? She work,” his mom said.

“Mama, that girl younger than me. Where she gon’ get fifty thousand from? But I don’t really wanna talk about it over the phone ‘cause I know they listening. When I go to court, I’m just gonna have her call you. I know this my stuff I got myself in, Mama, but this time I promise I didn’t do nothing. But even still, the fact that I’m innocent don’t really matter. I got myself in it, I can get myself out of it too. I always do. I just need you to bring that bail money if I get this reduction.”

“If I can’t find nobody else to do it,” she agreed reluctantly. “You know I’m not gonna leave my son in jail, but this shit is getting ridiculous with you, Boo. It really is.”

“I know, Ma, but I’m innocent, I swear.”

“Mmm hmmm. Yo’ brother calling me, let me see what he want,” she said, rushing to end the call.

“Alright, Ma, I love you.”

“I love you too, bye.”

Boo ended the calling feeling hopeful. He had to get a bond reduction before his trial started. Once he was on the streets, he would definitely be taking flight like a Learjet. No way he was about to let the system skin him alive like this with assault on two police officers. Flight risk? You better fucking believe it!

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Light snow drizzle floated down onto the windshield of Devonte's Crown Victoria as he slowed down to enter the parking lot of the liquor store. Lil' Wayne's *The Carter* album played on low volume, but he wasn't paying any attention to it. For some reason, today Kwon was heavy on his mind. Having his brother and his best friend gone at the same time and not knowing if or when they would be back on the streets had been hard to cope with over the past few months. It seemed like just as he was trying to get his head on straight with school and work, his brother got shot and went to jail. Luckily for Boo, the bullets that struck him didn't damage any vital organs. He was moving around a few days after the shooting, but his travel was limited, going straight from the hospital to a holding cell. To know that his brother had been beaten and shot just because he looked like a thug had Tae ready to snap.

Since Boo's arrest, Tae had lost his job at Fed Ex but found another part-time job through a temp service making \$18 an hour sitting on his ass, running packages through a shrink-wrap machine. Endy was still keeping him on track with school, but it was hard to stay focused. Tae had all this anger building up inside of him because of how life seemed to be changing for everyone so quickly in the worst way. Endy was the only thing keeping him out of trouble at this point. She provided some balance. She was the most kindhearted and understanding girl he'd ever met. Not just understanding of what he was going through, but she understood him.

Tae found a parking spot right near the entrance. He needed to grab some blunts before he headed home. He'd been smoking more. It was the other thing that kept him calm in the midst of the storms all around him. He hopped out and headed inside. As he reached the entrance, a dude shoved the door open fast and harder than necessary, almost smacking Devonte in the face with it.

“Nigga, watch what the fuck you doing!” Tae barked angrily.

The dude looked around as if he was confused.

“Nigga, who the fuck you talking to?”

“You, muthafucka, you almost hit me with that fucking door!”

Tae's fist was bawled up. He was ready to swing if this dude said something else. He really needed to relieve some stress any way possible. They were evenly matched as far as size went, even though the dude was much older. Tae was sure he could whoop his ass, but the dude saw he was ready and willing to go there and decided not to fuck up his day with a brawl.

“Whatever, young dog, go ahead on wicha game, man,” the dude replied as he turned and headed to his car.

Tae went inside the store and grabbed what he needed. By the time he was done and back outside, all he could think about was how bad he needed some pussy. He needed to get his mom out of the house and get Endy over so she could help relieve some of his stress with that heavenly juicebox she toted around between her legs. He wanted his mom to go to the casino, but he knew she was paying bills this week and probably couldn't afford it. If he had some money, he'd give her a couple hundred just to get rid of her for the night.

Most of his money had been going to retail therapy, trying to upgrade his wardrobe and take Endy out on dates. He'd help with a bill here and there, but his mom never asked for his help. She was just glad he could take care of himself without her now.

As he sat behind the wheel of the car still sitting in the parking lot, he realized that he still had Boo's money stashed. Since Boo had been in jail, Tae hadn't spent one dime of his brother's money because he knew Boo would need it. But today was the day he was just going to have to dip in the stash and put it back later. He called his mom to see if she had any other plans already.

# Chapter 2

Endy wasn't supposed to get her first car until her graduation, but she begged and begged until she finally broke her parents down. She was so in love with her 2007 purple Chrysler Sebring, and you couldn't tell her shit now when she got dressed up and had her hair whipped. She had a job working at the neighborhood Family Dollar part-time so she could pay for her own hair and nails now. A text message came through on her Nokia as she waited out front of Destiny's house. She smiled as she read Devonte's text message.

**Tae:** I want you to come over tonight.

**Endy:** Your mama must be going to the casino.

**Tae:** Hell yeah.

**Endy:** What time?

**Tae:** She should be gone by 8.

**Endy:** Okay, about to hang out with Des for a little while. I'll call you when I'm done.

Des came out of the house dressed in black sweatpants, Ugg boots, and a black leather bomber with a fox fur hood she'd gotten from her mom for Christmas. Her bomber was unzipped and Endy could see her protruding belly as she descended the steps. Her face lit up when she and Endy made eye contact. They were both glad to see each other outside of school and get to spend some time together. It was something they hadn't done in a long time. Des opened the passenger side door and fell inside with a low grunt.

"Heeeey." Endy smiled.

"Girl, I'm so glad you got me out of that house. I don't care if it's just for an hour," Des said.

Des' physical pain had decreased, but she was still mentally down in the gutter.

"It's gonna be more than an hour. I don't got nothing to do until later, so we rolling," Endy said as she began to pull off slow.

"Where we going?"

"You about to see. It's a surprise."

"Awwww, you so sweet, best friend."

"I am, ain't I? Anyway, how you doing, girl?"



“Better than I was earlier. My back and stuff not bothering me no more.”

“That’s good. You talk to baby daddy today?”

“No, he called me last night, though.”

“Oh, foreal? How is he?”

“He seemed to be doing okay. I know he not gonna tell me if he wasn’t, though,” Des admitted.

She and Kwon talked at least twice a week. As far as she knew, there were no appeals or any pending news to look forward to about his thirty-seven-year sentence. She had come to grips with the reality that she may be raising a child on her own. It definitely wasn’t how she saw her life as a mother when she daydreamed about it as a kid, but this was truly the only option she felt she could live with. The love she had for Kwon was still very strong in her heart, but no matter what happened with them, she knew a piece of that love would carry on.

As Endy pulled into the galleria, Des smiled and shot her a look.

“The nail shop?” Des said as Endy pulled right up to it.

“Yup, on me. A bitch got a job, now I can do some thangs,” she giggled.

Inside the nail salon, Endy confided in Des about her father's health declining. He'd been having problems with his blood sugar going up and down, and passed out at his job last week. It was a scary thing to think about, but what made it worse was the fact that her father wasn't taking things seriously. After getting their nails done, Endy took Des to see *Fast and Furious Five*.

"That was good, but they can stop with the sequels now," Des said as they headed back to her house.

"I don't care, they can make a *Fast and Furious Fifteen* and I'ma go see it," Endy disagreed.

"You gon' have to go with your man, 'cause I'm not going."

"Whatever, you gon' go if I ask you to, don't lie."

"Anyway, what's up with you and Tae? You haven't said much about him lately."

Endy was silent for a moment.

"Honestly, I tried not to talk about us that much because I feel like it's throwing salt on your wound with everything you going through. But we are good. Really, really good."

Des punched her in the arm.

“That’s good, girl, you don’t have to spare my feelings because you in a happy relationship. It makes me happy that you’re happy. And I can live vicariously through you for a while.”

“I guess.” Endy shrugged. “I’m actually going to visit him after I drop you off.”

“Oh, okay. Tell him I said hey.”

Endy was glad to hear that her friend wouldn’t feel slighted by her blossoming relationship. She was really feeling Devonte. He had a lot to figure out in life, but he was so good to her and he made her a top priority, which for Endy was a standard she pretty much demanded. She was glad Des had brought it up, because she had so much that she’d been wanting to share but held back, feeling that she couldn’t. They talked the rest of the ride about her love for Tae and how serious they were now. It was still early, so they sat outside in the car for a while with the heat blasted, waiting for their appointment.

“I said to myself, this nigga got me acting right. I don’t talk to nobody and don’t nobody try to talk to me,” Endy said with a giggle.

“Tae got your ass on lock.”

“Long as he acting right,” she replied, gazing out of the window at passersby.

“Tae is such a sweetheart. He’s a better boyfriend than Kwon as far as I can see. He just adores you so much.”

“He aiight.” She blushed. “I’m still a flirt, though. I don’t care long as I ain’t cheating.”

Flirting was just a part of Endy’s nature. She hadn’t had a serious boyfriend since her freshman year, and she was still learning how to be in a real relationship. Flirting with guys just made life more exciting and she missed it already.

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The sound of the electronic doors opening and slamming for the yard was like a rap music classic to Kwon, and he rushed out of the room to give Game his alone time. Today, he needed the alone time just as much as Game did. Although they were still getting along great, spending his days in a room with another man became suffocating after so many months. Kwon had quickly developed a Black and Mild cigar habit to help relieve some of his stress that rose like a crocodile in shallow waters every day to prey on him.

He readied his cigar, softening the insides as he made his way to the exit. There was a quiet tension in the air as the other inmates spread out on the yard finding their tribes. The word on the compound was that the GDs and Moorish Americans had beef. Kwon was just glad he wasn't involved in anything that could lead to those types of situations. He was here to do his time while praying for a miracle on his appeal. He'd taken Game's advice and tried to get his mind off of the streets and the 30-plus years he was doing, but every time he talked to Des, he couldn't help but feel the loss of his freedom, sometimes to the point his heart ached.

There were many nights since his incarceration where he'd played back the voices of reason from Tae, Des, and even his father. Everyone that tried to keep him from throwing his life away. As he rounded the track puffing on his cigar, he thought about what it would be like to have a child that he would never get to help raise. It was a terrifying thought that he tried not to entertain most days, but the reality was relentless. Sometimes his thoughts of her bringing his seed into the world felt like a lightning bolt of joy, and other times it was... deflating. His drift was interrupted as a fight broke out in the yard. But this wasn't just a one-on-one scrap.

Multiple groups of GDs and Moors were swinging fists and knives at one another. Kwon watched on in shock as one man dropped to the ground and lay motionless, and the rumble grew closer to him. He backed

away, trying his best to separate himself from the melee, but it was all around him. A two-on-three fist extravaganza spilled over until he was right in the middle of it, almost penned against the security fence. *Bam!* The next thing Kwon knew, he was being attacked as a fist rammed into his jaw. It was either defend himself or get ran into the barbed wire. He reacted without thinking, swinging back with everything he had. Kwon knew he could be fighting for his life right now if someone pulled a shank. He managed to get off a few punches and shuffled his feet out of danger, giving himself room to breathe. By then, the dude that punched him was being jumped.

*Blah! Blah!* Shots rang out from the gun tower and orders came roaring from the loudspeaker as everyone dove to the ground. Kwon could feel his heart pounding through his chest and onto the ground as he lay with his hands and legs spread out. His body tensed up as he laid there a nervous wreck, but glad to hear the warning shots that had broken up the brawl.

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There was a wave of excitement that always came over Tae when Endy texted him and told him she was outside. He felt like the luckiest man alive every time he was with her. His mom was gone and he had the crib all to himself. Endy rushed inside wearing no coat, a crème-colored sweatsuit,

and black Bearpaw boots. Her hair was in a long ponytail and she was clutching an oversized purse.

“Shit, it’s cold,” she complained, shivering through the door.

“Where your coat?”

“It’s in the car. That heat had me hot so I took it off.”

She gave him a peck on the lips before she took off her boots, getting comfortable immediately.

“How was the movie?” Devonte asked.

“It was good. You know I love me some *Fast and Furious*.”

“Shit’s getting kinda lame now, though,” Tae said, leading her straight into his bedroom.

“Mmm. I see what’s on your mind. You took me right in here to the bedroom, huh?” she teased him.

“I figured you might be ready to relax. Get a nice massage or something.” He grinned.

Endy fell across the foot of the bed with an exaggerated collapse.

“I am tired. I been driving around all day it feels like.”

He laid down next to her and pulled her into his arms. He inhaled.

“You smell good.”

“You always say that.”

“You always do,” he replied, kissing her softly.

She wrapped one leg around him.

“You smell good too.”

His hand slid down her back and gripped her soft bottom as Tae allowed himself to enjoy the moment while his boo lay in his arms. They laid in that position for a while, talking briefly about the day. He told her about the incident at the store, and she told him about how her best friend was still struggling with her pregnancy. They enjoyed comfortable moments of silence in between the conversation. That was until Tae started to kiss on her neck and roam his hands inside of her sweats.

“I knew it was coming,” she giggled.

“Shut up,” he whispered in her ear as he began to slide her top up and kiss on her stomach.

He continued his foreplay as he worked off her garments. It wasn't long before he had removed every article of clothing from Endy's body as well as his own. Laying her down on her back, Tae crawled on top of her and kissed her soft brown shoulder. He ran kisses from her shoulder and all



across her neckline until he found her chin... her lips. He kissed her passionately as his shaft grew rock hard in between her thighs. Endy closed her eyes, momentarily caught up in the bliss, her lower lips enjoying the thrill of his manhood rising and teasing her while her tongue was jammed in his mouth. He broke their kiss and found her nipple, sucking slowly and intentionally. He ran his tongue around her wide areola, feeling her nipple rise on his tongue.

She caressed his back and ran her inner thigh up his leg. It was warm and creamy. He couldn't handle waiting another moment, so he grabbed his dick, planted it right at her opening, then dove slowly inside of her, savoring the entry into her playground. He kissed and sucked all over her body as he slow fucked, enjoying the taste of her skin ... her shoulder ... her chin again. Endy moaned in pleasure as she lifted her leg and hooked her ankle around his. He grew harder and dove deeper with his thrust as he pinned her left wrist to the bed, feeling in control. He pinned her right wrist and steadied himself on top of her.

“Mmmmm,” Endy moaned louder as he began to pound her with more force behind his stroke.

Her legs lifted again and landed then locked right below his butt. With her arms still pinned to the bed, she felt helpless against his wrath. Her

moans grew louder as he drilled all the way up inside of her. His dick was bringing the freak out of her hips like never before. Before she knew it, Endy was lifting her neck and biting on his chest. He pounded her even harder. That shit felt good, but it hurt like hell too. It made the sex feel animalistic. He found her lips and kissed her like it was the last one they would ever have. He broke the kiss and looked in her eyes. He could see the pain and pleasure. It was the best feeling in the world to have the only girl in the world he wanted in his bed, fucking her brains out.

He pulled out just before he came and flipped her over on her stomach. He gave himself a second to reboot as he pulled Endy up on all fours and slowly dove back inside. He gripped one hand around her shoulder and another around her waist. He gripped her waist tighter as she bounced off his dick, calling out his name. Her head sunk into the pillow, and he drove her closer to the headboard with each thrust. Endy came hard as she pressed one hand against the headboard. She screamed loud enough to get the neighbors worried as Tae felt his nut building again. This one was a doozy. He knew she was on birth control. He could let it rip. His body stiffened, and sensation seized him. He let out a moan almost as loud as hers as he came inside of her freely. He grabbed her ponytail as he finished, and Endy's toes curled in the air as she collapsed onto the bed. Tae fell on top of her, sweaty and wet, cradling her in his arms.

# Chapter 3

Luckily for Kwon, the battle royal that took place on the yard didn't have any lasting effects on him. He wasn't put in the hold or brought up on any assault charges. The institution had enough inmates on camera as well as in medical to keep them busy with investigations for weeks to come. The yard was off limits to anyone for the next twenty-four hours. When Kwon told Game about the incident, Game told him to lay low for a few days. That meant he couldn't give Game the alone time he'd asked for in the cell for a moment, but Game didn't complain. He was trying to keep the youngster from getting caught up in stuff he had nothing to do with.

Kwon did even leave out to hit the phone lines until three days after the incident. He wanted to make sure he was still getting a visit the upcoming weekend. He knew if he would've gotten caught in the mix with the GDs and the Moors, his visits would've immediately been snatched away. He called his mom and talked for 15 minutes, then called Des.

"Heeey," her voice came through the speaker sounding excited to hear from him.

It was crazy how much her tone meant to him now. Just the thought of her still being so happy to hear from him meant the world. The only time she didn't sound filled with glee was when he caught her in the moment of physical pain or sickness due to the pregnancy.

"How you feeling today?" Kwon asked.

"Better than yesterday. I'm glad you didn't call me yesterday because I literally was in pain all day and didn't want to talk to anyone."

"Did you make it to class?"

"No, I didn't, and I'm starting to miss way too many days because I'm just not physically up to it."

"Is it a way you can finish school online?"

"I don't know and I don't care. I'm finishing school at Denby and I'm walking across that stage. I don't care how fat I am."

"You can do it, baby. You almost there," he encouraged.

"Thank you, baby. But anyway, how are you doing?"

"I'm okay. Just trying keep a level head while I'm going through this appeal process."

“Please keep a level head. I know this is so not normal for somebody your age to have to take on, but I just want you to know that I love you, I believe in you, and I’m gonna do whatever I can to help you get through this.”

Like bread baking in the oven, his spirit rose as her words of encouragement soothed his soul.

“I love you too. You still coming up with my mom this week, right?”

“I’m gonna try my best. The only way I would not make it is if my back and my stomach don’t allow me to take the drive. Other than that, I will be there. I can’t wait to see you.”

“You know I’m looking forward to it. All I been thinking about lately is seeing y’all.”

“Your father said anything about coming to visit?”

“Not really. He said he can’t afford to take off right now. I understand though, because he had to pick up extra hours to help my mom pay for this appeal lawyer.”

Now that he’d fired his second lawyer, Kwon’s family had Mr. Marsh, his original lawyer, back on his case for the appeal. The family

knew his track record and if anyone could help Kwon, he was the best person for the job.

“Oh, okay. Have you been working out and stuff?” she wondered.

“Naw, I’m about to start, though. Game says he will be my workout partner.

“Yeah, I think you should,” Des replied.

She worried about him being so frail behind bars with all those big, muscular hardened criminals. He worried about his safety in such an environment as well. Kwon had promised himself he was going to start a workout routine with Game but had yet to commit to it. “It feels good to hear your voice.”

“It feels good to hear yours too. Can I give you a kiss when I come up there?”

“I think so. I think you can kiss me when you come in and when you leaving. Other than that, they said you can’t touch.”

“Dang, that’s fucked up. I can’t even hold your hand?”

“Naw, but I don’t care as long as you’re here. I just wanna see you.”

“Few more days,” Des said, sounding excited.

“Few more days,” he agreed.

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Des managed to make it to school for the last two days of the week. She got Endy to bring her homework to her on the days she missed and was able to finish the majority of her assignments by Friday. She was still behind in every class, but she was hoping her spectacular grades on the assignments she turned in would balance everything out. She waddled up the hallway at the end of her sixth hour, glad to be done and thinking about food. She spotted Tino as she made her way to her locker.

He spotted her as well and headed her way. He slid up to her and leaned on the locker next to hers as she fumbled with the combination.

“You been alright?” he asked.

“Hey, Tino. Yeah, I been okay.”

“I ain’t been seeing you that much lately, so I had to come and check up on you.”

“Yeah, this baby been kicking my ass.”

“Dang, foreal? How far are you now?” he asked in a deep voice, sounding much older than he was.

“Six months,” she said, closing the locker.

“You know what you having?”

“Not yet, I’m supposed to find out Monday.”

“Oh, okay.”

Tino began to walk with her down the hall, and Des couldn’t help but wonder, what the hell did he want? She didn’t have to wait long to find out. “So, I was wondering, do you think you gonna have the baby before prom?”

She looked at him like he was crazy.

“Barely,” she giggled.

“Still though. If you wanna go, I would love to take you,” he offered.

“Really?” she said, honestly taken aback. “Why would anybody wanna go to prom with my fat ass?”

“You not fat, you just prego. I don’t wanna go with nobody else, so I figured I should ask the person I really wanna go with.”

Prom was the farthest thing from Des’ mind. She knew her due date, and she knew it was a possibility she could make it, but she hadn’t given it an ounce of thought before today. She was busy trying to make sure she graduated. She looked up and spotted Endy coming her way.



“I don’t know about that one, Tino. Prom is not on my radar.”

“Well, just think about it. We got time, you know?” he insisted.

She gave him a smile.

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” she replied as Endy approached.

“Think hard,” Tino said as he turned to head towards some friends from his basketball squad.

“What he want?” Endy asked, walking up.

“This nigga just asked me to go to prom with him,” she laughed.

“Whaaaaaaat?”

“Yes, girl. What’s wrong with Tino?”

“I don’t know. I guess he on the prowl again, but I didn’t think he went for pregnant girls. I guess he don’t discriminate.”

“Clearly he does!”

“What you tell him?”

“I told him I’ll think about it just to get him out of my face.”

“Right,” Endy agreed. “I don’t know, though. Kwon not here, maybe you should think about it.”

Des stopped and shot Endy a look.

“Tino?” she said loudly, causing Endy to burst into laughter.

“It’s just prom, what’s the difference? You could go with anybody, but he asked you to go, so ... I just think you should think about it, just in case you have your baby and decide you really wanna go.”

They walked out of the school together with Des shaking her head.

“I can’t believe you’re team Tino all of a sudden.”

Endy punched her arm softly.

“I’m not no fucking team Tino, don’t play with me.”

They laughed loudly on the way to the parking lot, but Des was now actually considering the offer.

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When Kwon realized that he was being called out for a visit, he hopped off his bunk, all dressed and ready to go. Although he was only wearing state blues and black state shoes, he made sure he wore his best pair of blues and cleaned his shoes spotless. His brush waves were ocean view amazing, and his bunky, Game, even loaned him some cologne to add the finishing touches.

When he arrived in the visiting room and spotted his mom, pure joy came over him, but it wouldn't be long before it was slightly diminished. He realized his mom was alone. His slighted diminished joy soon turned to disappointment. As happy as he was to see his mother, he couldn't help but feel a little heartbroken realizing that Des hadn't come. He'd waited so long for this day and didn't know when he would get the chance to see her again. Missing this opportunity felt like a chance at any reminder of normalcy he was expecting had been stripped away.

Still, seconds later, he put on a smile and tried to focus on the positive of what he did have. His mom was here.

“Hey, Mama,” he greeted as she reached out for a warm embrace.

She hugged him with all the love she had for her one and only child. When she released him and looked in his eyes, her smile was big and bright. He could tell that it was doing her just as much justice as it was him for them to finally lay eyes on each other again.

“How you doing, Son?” She smiled.

“I'm good. Did you have any problems getting through to see me?” he asked as they took a seat.

He knew how family members could get harassed sometimes during the process of security checks. He also knew he'd had an incident less than a week ago.

“No. No problems. Everyone was polite, not like the county jail where everyone had an attitude. And I'm sorry Des couldn't make it. She was really in a bad way this morning.”

“Yeah, I know she's been having a hard time,” he replied with his head down, feeling guilty he couldn't be out there to help her.

“I told her I'm going to be there for her as much as I can. She knows I'm just a phone call away, so when she has this baby, things will get better for her I think.”

He looked at his mom.

“You must've read my mind. I feel so hopeless in here knowing everything she's going through.”

She tapped his knee.

“Well, Son, you both have your own mountains to climb. She has hers and you have yours. Just try not to become a burden to her. That's the best way you can help.”

“I wouldn’t do that. I don’t wanna be a burden to anybody. It’s bad enough I feel like I failed y’all by being here.”

“You didn’t fail us, Son. If you really didn’t do this, then the system failed us all. This is not on you.” She looked him in his eyes with all the seriousness she could muster. “You didn’t do this, right?”

She’d asked him this several times already. His answer was always the same. Even if he wasn’t fighting for his freedom, Kwon could never tell his mom he’d done such a horrible thing. He had to take this to the grave.

“I’m innocent, Mama.”

“Then fight. Fight with everything you have in you, you hear me?” she said as she began to tear up.

Seeing the tears well in her eyes, Kwon felt himself becoming emotional as well.

“I just gotta have faith like Des keep telling me. I know it’s not the end for me. I just don’t know what’s in store down the road.”

His mom studied him after pulling herself together.

“I feel like we spoiled you too much, me and your father. We didn’t really prepare you for the real world, but I know there was no way we could’ve prepared you for this.”

“I’ma be okay, Mama.”

She looked him in his eyes.

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

# Chapter 4

Boo stepped outside of the county jail and inhaled the fresh air with his girlfriend, Jazz, in tow. He'd managed to get his bond reduction just three weeks before his trial was set to start. The 50K was all he had to his name, but as long as he was on the streets, he could make it happen. His mom had her brother post the bond, and Boo was expecting to see him when he stepped into the lobby, but he was nowhere to be found.

“It was weird, he didn't say nothing to me really. He just told me the bond was paid and left,” Jazz explained.

“Fuck Pete, he ain't doing me no favors foreal,” Boo said as they headed to the parking lot.

He knew his uncle never liked him much because of his lifestyle. Thought he was a bad influence on his little brother and a danger to the family in general. But in Boo's eyes, he'd never let anything happen to his loved ones, and he felt like the streets knew better than to play with his family. As they climbed inside Jazz's Charger, Boo grabbed her cell phone to call his partner, Reo.

“What's up, boooaaaa?” Reo answered happily.

“What’s up, nigga? Where you at?” Boo asked as they drove out of the lot.

“Making my rounds over here off Gratiot.”

“Oh, okay. I’m on my way to Jazz’s crib, and then I’ma swing by my mom’s house, and then I’ll be to see you.”

“You just got out, nigga. I’m not tripping on that shit. I know you a man of your word,” Reo told him.

Since he hadn’t been able to catch up with his baby brother, Boo had Reo put the other fifteen thousand he needed to post bond up for him until he was about to get out. He knew he had the fifteen stashed at his mom’s house, so he planned to get it back to Reo that same day.

“Listen, my nigga, the last thing I wanna do right now is owe a nigga something. Bad enough I’m starting from scratch, so I know shit about to get a little crazy for a minute. Matter of fact, I hope you got something on the floor already, ‘cause I need it.”

“I got a trick or two up my sleeve,” Reo assured him.

“Say no more. I’ll see you in a minute,” Boo told him, ending the call.

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Tae was scrambling around trying to come up with the money that he'd spent from his brother's stash over the past month. There was still a lot there, but there was no way he would be able to explain the 6500 dollars that was missing to Boo. He really had no explanation as to what came over him after he'd dipped in the stash for the first couple of hundred. He was madly in love with Endy, and it was a feeling he'd never experienced in life. His nose was wide open. The more he spoiled her, it seemed the harder she fell for him. He spent a lot of money on taking her shopping, fine dining, and giving his mother money to go to the casino so he could have the house all to himself. Part of him wasn't fully believing that Boo would come home since his bail was a quarter-million dollars at the time. The other half of him just got so caught up riding this wave of bliss that he figured he'd cross that bridge whenever he came to it.

Today was bridge day. He couldn't duck his brother any longer, as he spotted the red Charger pulling up outside. He rushed back to his bedroom and took the five hundred he'd scrambled up on from his job and put with the eighty-five hundred he had left, as he heard the card door slam shut. Tae wasn't afraid of his brother, but he did care about Boo's opinion of him more than anyone else's, except Endy. This wasn't going to look good on his record. The doorbell rang annoyingly, over and over. He opened the

door, genuinely happy to see his brother, but implanted a fake smile to hide his worry.

“Sup, nigga?” Boo came in and slapped fives with his baby brother, pulling him into his arms for a hug.

“Welcome home, bro. My bad I kept missing your calls and shit,” Tae said.

Boo waved him off.

“Awe, man, it ain’t shit. I’m out here, that’s all that matters. Back to business as usual, you feel me?”

Tae hoped like hell he really meant that.

“Right, right,” he agreed cautiously.

The two of them began to catch up with one another, being that they hadn’t talked in a month. Boo asked him about Endy and how the relationship was going. Ironically, it was going fantastic, but it was his relationship with his brother that was possibly about to get rocky. After about ten minutes of standing in the living room chatting, Boo finally got to the main reason he was there.

“Go grab that money for me.”

“I got it right here,” Tae said, patting his pockets nervously.

He pulled out the wad. "It's not all there, though."

"How much is this?" Boo said, taking the money with a raised brow.

"That's nine thousand."

"Nine thousand!?" Boo shouted out. "Where the fuck is the rest?"

The look in Boo's eyes was the worst part. He was so shocked. He trusted Tae with his valuables all the time, and for the second time, he'd let him down. First giving his gun away, and now this.

"I gave Mama some money a few times. I went to the mall and stuff. I ain't gon' lie, I really fucked up the money, bro," he admitted.

Boo wore a look of disgust on his face.

"You fucked up the money? Nigga, don't you got a job? Fuck you spending my money for?"

Boo was heated, and Tae couldn't look in his eyes now. He couldn't tell Boo the worst part, that he spent most of it on Endy, buying designer shit she'd never even asked for.

"I fucked up, bro. I fucked up big time."

"Nigga, I needed this money to pay Reo back. What the fuck I'm supposed to do now?" Boo barked.

“I’ma pay you back, man, you just gotta give me some time.”

“Nigga, that punk ass job ain’t gonna help you pay back shit! You foul, dog. You foul as fuck!” Boo pointed a stiff finger as he turned and headed for the door. “My own fucking family stealing and shit.”

Tae got pissed when he was called a thief. He followed Boo out onto the porch.

“Nigga, I ain’t steal shit, I spent it. I didn’t know you was getting out, bro, I swear.”

Boo was on the sidewalk now. He spun around.

“What that mean? You thought I wasn’t getting out so I didn’t need my money? You just said fuck me, right? That’s even worse.”

“I’ma pay you back.”

“Man, shut the fuck up. You a hoe ass nigga for this, Tae.”

Tae’s fist balled up tightly as he gritted his teeth. He didn’t like being disrespected by anyone, not even Boo. He knew his brother was a hothead, so he tried to calm himself down to prevent things from escalating. He knew there was nothing he could say to make things right. It was a colossal moment of regret as he stood on the porch watching Boo get in the passenger seat of the Charger and Jazz pull off slow. He watched Boo

explaining to Jazz why he was so angry. Boo shook his head as he rode by, not willing to even look at his brother.

Tae's phone began to ring, and he stormed angrily inside the house. He saw it was Endy and answered with an attitude.

"Yeah," he greeted her.

She immediately noticed his tone.

"What's wrong with you?"

"My punk ass brother just left from over here tripping."

"Oh, he out?" she said excitedly.

"Yeah, but fuck that nigga."

"What? Why would you say that? What happened?"

Tae hadn't told Endy anything about the money he'd spent. It was something she'd had her suspicions about since she was right there when Boo gave his brother the money, but she never questioned him about his spending habits.

"I spent some of his money," he revealed.

"How much?"

"Like six thousand."

“Six thousand?” Endy exclaimed the same way Boo did.

“I honestly didn’t think he was getting out. His bail was way too high.”

“Damn, baby, six thousand though? You ain’t think he might need that for a lawyer or something?”

“I spent most of the shit on you while you talking shit!” he snapped.

“I didn’t ask you for none of that shit! You can take the shit back. I haven’t worn it if you got the receipts, ‘cause I don’t give a fuck about it!” Endy fired back.

“Oh, you don’t give a fuck about it? Really? You wasn’t saying that shit when I took you to the mall, was you?”

Endy grew livid.

“Hold up, I know you not trying to sit up and blame me for some dumb shit you did all on your own.”

It didn’t take long for Tae to realize that’s exactly what he was doing. He fell silent for a moment, trying to gather his thoughts.

“You right.”

“I was about to say,” Endy replied, calming down. “Baby, I know you upset, but I don’t wanna fight with you. You can take the stuff back I haven’t worn and get a refund like I said. It still got the tags on it.”

“I don’t wanna fight either. I already got my brother pissed the fuck off at me. I don’t need you pissed at me too.”

“I just wish you would’ve told me the truth before now, because I wouldn’t have let you spend all that money.”

“I just wanted to try and keep you happy the way you been doing me. I ain’t gon’ lie, we both been going through some shit lately, but since you been around ... it just makes things better. I wanted to be that for you.”

Endy’s father was still not in the best of health at all, and he was starting to worry her family. Just last night, he’d gone to the hospital again, this time because he’d gained an extreme amount of weight seemingly overnight, and his ankles were severely swollen.

“You do that already. You don’t have to buy things to keep me happy, just being yourself is enough. Now, do I like nice shit? Of course, I do, but I don’t need it like that. I got a job, I can buy my own shoes and stuff.”

“You can’t buy them Gucci sneakers with your paycheck, stop playing,” he teased her, and they both laughed, breaking the tension even more.

“So what, I can buy some things though,” she replied.

“I gotta get ready to go in to work.”

“Okay. Call me later.”

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

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Kwon was lying on the weight bench with 135 pounds on his chest, as Game stood over him spotting and giving him motivational speeches in between sets.

“Push that shit,” Game barked as Markwon’s reps grew slower after seven pushes. “I got you, come on.”

Game stuck two fingers from each hand under the weight as Kwon began to struggle. It was his first day in the weight pit, and already the burn in his chest was making his face distorted something terrible as he tried to push out ten reps. “Come on, eight. Two more,” Game continued.



“Arrrrggggh,” he pushed.

“Nine. One more, come on.”

Kwon took a deep breath and pushed the weight off his chest one last time. The steel bar moved at a snail’s pace as his arms began to give out halfway. Game wasn’t giving him an inch more help than he needed.

“Push!” he ordered, giving the bar a light tap.

The weight started moving in the opposite direction, back down on his chest, as Kwon found himself running out of gas.

“Get that shit up off you, young nigga. Act like you pushing that time up off you. Push that shit!”

Game gave him just enough help to get the weight back to the halfway mark. His elbows were still bent. He had a long way to go. Game wasn’t helping any longer. “You gotta earn the rest, partner. You gotta earn that.”

“Aaaaahhh!” Kwon growled as he strained out a fart before he managed to get the bar all the way up with his elbows locked.

Laughter erupted inside the weight pit from those in ear and nose reach of the strain fart, including Game. Kwon racked the weight and sat up on the bench.

“You tryna make me shit on myself, Game,” he told him.

Game was still laughing, holding his gut. He gathered himself quickly.

“I’m tryna get you right, youngin’. You gon’ sleep good tonight, watch what I tell you.

“Good shit, young dog,” another OG called out, encouraging him.

Kwon gave him a nod as he glanced around at the men inside the pit that looked like they were all professional bodybuilders. Dressed in dingy, shredded sweats and dirty sneakers, everyone moved with purpose inside, trying to keep warm as the cold hawk blew in constantly from the open front door. The sound of dumbbells clacking and men grunting could be heard from outside passing by. As intimidating as it was, Kwon knew this was the place he needed to be. He needed to get stronger, he needed to get faster, and he needed to be prepared for whatever.

“You talk to that girl lately?” Game inquired while they took a quick break.

“Yeah, I’m trying to get her to bring her ass up here. Especially since she getting closer to her due date.”

“You find out what she having yet?”

Kwon looked at Game curiously.

“I thought I told you.”

“Naw, you ain’t tell me.” Game smiled, waiting to hear the news.

“I’m having a son, man.” Kwon smiled.

The pride in his eyes said it all. Kwon was praying that he would survive prison life long enough to get to know his son. If he didn’t make it home, he at least wanted his little man to know who he was.

# Chapter 5

Des sat in her sixth-hour class with her face jammed in her palm, feeling drained by the day. She felt like her body was just weakening because a kid was eating up everything she put inside of it. When the bell sounded, she felt victorious for having completed another full day of school. She had to tough this thing out. Her last semester's grades were by far worse than she'd ever experienced since she started school. A lot of D pluses and C minuses that barely managed to qualify as passing.

Most of her grades came from being absent and incomplete assignments, but she'd always managed to score well on her exams. Just lifting herself from her seat was a task now in itself. Her back problems had lessened, but now she had pedal edema, a condition that had swollen her feet like a heroin addict. She couldn't fit any of her old shoes, and her self-esteem was plummeting fast. As Des made her way out into the hallway, she couldn't remember a time when she felt more abandoned and unsure of herself. Abandoned because Kwon had left her out here to do it all alone, and unsure of herself because all of the constant attention she usually got from guys at her school was no longer there.

She believed that now when they looked at her, all they saw was a big feet, fat, ugly, pregnant chick that was dumb enough to be having a kid by a guy that wasn't coming home until he was an old man. She knew that Kwon's mom was going to visit him again that weekend, and she'd promised herself no matter how bad she felt, this time she would be there.

"There go my baby," a husky voice came from behind her.

Des turned to look over her shoulder slightly, even though she knew who it was. Tino came up and draped an arm around her. "How you doing, girl?"

"Why is your arm around me like you my man?" she questioned.

"Maybe not yet, but you never know what the future holds, right?"

Tino was the only man that was still paying her any attention. He would see her some days and just speak and keep it moving. Other days, he would go all out, seemingly trying to make some sort of connection. It was weird because although she knew it was the absolute worst time in the world to be entertaining any dude, the attention still was very flattering and sometimes downright needed. Tino always smelled good and his peanut-brown skin was as smooth as his around-the-back lay-up. She still moved his arm, though, to keep people from talking.

“I’m not feeling that good today. I need to go home and get in my bed,” she told him as they walked the hall.

“I’m sorry to hear that. That good news is it’s almost over though, right?”

“I guess.” She shrugged.

On days like this, Des couldn’t help but wonder what made Tino so into her. There were plenty more attractive girls in school that weren’t walking around with a big ass belly and swollen feet. She assumed he had to have some motive and was just good at hiding it. They walked out of the school together and all the way to the parking lot.

“You talked to ole boy lately?” he asked for the first time ever.

“Who, Kwon?” she assumed.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I’m supposed to go visit him this weekend.”

“Oh, okay. Tell ‘em I said to keep his head up,” Tino said, sounding sincere.

Tino wasn’t the type to show compassion for a dude that wasn’t in his circle, so it came as a big shock.

“Okay, I will. And why you being so nice?” She smiled as she opened her car door.

“I’m just trying to put myself in dog shoes. If it was me, I would wanna know that the world hadn’t forgot about me, you know?” he replied, leaning on her open door while she got behind the wheel.

“Well, that’s sweet. I never seen this side of you. I think it’s fake,” she laughed.

“Ain’t shit fake about Tino. But I could see why you think I’m too good to be true.” He smiled, full of confidence.

She looked up in his eyes.

“Whatchu want from me?”

“I told you. I just wanna take you to prom.”

He backed away from the car, still locking eyes with her.

“Mmmm hmmm. We’ll see,” she replied, reaching for the door handle.

He approached the car again and grabbed the door right before she could close it.

“If you ever not feeling up to driving to school, let me know and I’ll come get you.”

“I don’t have your number, Tino.”

He pulled out his phone. She sat there waiting while he scrolled through it, wondering what he was doing.

“I just sent it to you on Facebook,” he told her.

*Damn, that was smooth,* she thought. He didn’t even allow her a chance to refuse his phone number. Now she would have to delete it or save it in her phone when she went online. She hadn’t made up her mind which one yet.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said, grabbing her door handle for a second time.

“Get you some rest.” He blew her a kiss before heading to his car.

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Boo had long ago realized that shit wasn’t going to be sweet when he touched down from county jail, but he didn’t care as long as he had his freedom. It was understood that he would probably have to get his hands dirty and hit a lick or two to get some money before he fled the city and went on the run. He was fine with that too. At this point, Boo felt like his



back was against the wall with cops trying to frame him and no money to give them a fair fight in court. And even if he could come up with the money, he wasn't willing to roll the dice, putting his fate in someone else's hands. So, the first lick he came up on, he paid Reo the fifteen grand he owed and took off to Louisville, Kentucky to set up shop with some old friends he'd reconnected with in the county.

Things were slow at first because it wasn't his operation to begin with. He had to find his own way around town and make his own connections. That took time, but while he did that, his stash was quickly getting lower. He planned to go back to the D at least once a month to visit Jazz and make sure that Reo kept him in the loop about any possible licks on the horizon. The last thing Boo wanted to do was struggle while he was out on the streets. He needed to get money and live as comfortably as possible. He didn't know how much time he had, but he planned to make the most of it. After being in Kentucky a few weeks, he came back to the D and found out Reo had something on the floor and had been waiting for him.

A westside dude named Sugar Bear was the target. Sugar Bear was a heroin dealer that sold weight and had been in control of his neighborhood for quite some time. Reo just happened to be sleeping with Sugar Bear's side chick and over the past few weeks, he'd learned about her dealing with

him. Reo got in her head, and the girl convinced him Sugar Bear had enough money and jewelry in his home to make it worth the risk. Sugar Bear, or SB as most called him, still lived in Detroit right in the heart of the city near Seven Mile and Livernois. Word on the street was he didn't think niggas had the balls to try and run up in his spot.

He was a well-known gangsta with a reputation for blood, but neither Reo nor Boo were impressed. For the money, they would definitely test his gangsta. It took them a few days of surveillance to peep that SB always took out the trash between ten o'clock and midnight. Once they were pretty sure about his routine, they laid on him the fourth night. It was another cold and quiet night on the streets. Boo and Reo had slithered between the gate and the side of the garage. The trash can sat on the opposite side of the garage door, and they had a clear view of the back porch.

As Boo's feet began to go numb from being crouched down in the freezing cold for an hour, he realized how much of a humbling position he'd been put in thanks to his pending charges. He never really wanted to get this grimy. He didn't want robbery to be his main source of income but at this point, it was what it was. Ten minutes later, they heard jingles coming from the back door.

“That’s him,” Reo whispered before the door even came open.

“I can’t see yet.”

The door came up and the 6’2, 300-pound SB stepped out into the night air in a T-shirt and jeans, moving fast to avoid as much of the cold as possible. Boo and Reo raised up in attack mode. Boo’s coat scraped the side of the garage noisily as they moved forward slowly. SB stopped in his tracks and pulled out his firearm instinctively after hearing the noise. He scanned the area, not sure where it had come from.

The rain had washed away the snow the night before. The clear ground allowed Boo to creep closer to the front... silently. He wouldn’t stick his head out to see what SB was doing. He waited for the sound of the garbage can lifting.

But the sound never came. The sound of the trash bag full of trash and empty cans thumped against the ground. SB was on to them. He knew they were there. They had to move now or be sitting ducks waiting for him to find them already backed into a corner. Boo signaled to Reo that he was about to make a move. Reo nodded his readiness. Boo stepped out into the yard, catching his target by surprise. He fired his cannon right at SB but missed. SB with his gun out already raised up and quickly returned fire with bullets still humming his way. It was a death-defying, close-range shootout.

This caused Boo to back up, running into Reo, who was trying to take aim. Reo almost shot Boo.

They both took cover down the side of the garage again as SB emptied his clip, backing up toward the house. Bullets pinged off the garage, chopping up wood and blowing holes in the garage door. Whatever he was shooting spit rounds at a rapid fire to the point there was nothing Boo or Reo could do but take cover. As soon as the shots stopped, they rushed out like attack dogs into the backyard as SB raced up the back porch two steps at a time.

“Get the choppa! Get the choppa!” he shouted out as he yanked the back door open and bullets lodged in his side.

SB fell inside the house and out of sight. Reo continued to shoot up the back door so he couldn't lock it. They rushed to the back door, now knowing there were more guns and people inside. This had turned into a Kamikaze mission. It was do or die now. Boo was the first one inside, expecting to see SB on the ground laid out, but he was nowhere in sight. The intensity of the moment magnified, realizing SB could've gotten to the AK-47 he was screaming for. Cautious not to walk into a bullet, Reo went inside the kitchen using the refrigerator as a shield. Boo took the opposite side of the house, creeping around corners.

*Blah! Blah! Blah!* The thunderous sounds of the chopper rang out inside the kitchen, causing Boo to get low. *Blah!* Another shot, and Boo was expecting the pain to kick in any second. Realizing he wasn't hit, Boo rushed to save his friend. He surprised SB, who was standing over Reo's body but was able to spin behind the refrigerator right before Boo raised his gun and shots rang out. Once Boo started shooting, he didn't stop until his clip was empty. He couldn't let that choppa rain down on him. He ran back to the opposite side of the house near the living room. He grabbed the extra clip and dove behind the recliner as the shots cranked up again from somewhere inside the house.

He slapped in the clip and started shooting through the arm rest of the recliner. He raised the gun and sprayed in every direction, not knowing where the shots were coming from. Almost out of ammo again, Boo conceded he was now in a position where the money wasn't important anymore. He had to shoot his way out of this house before police arrived or he was killed in self-defense. He stopped shooting just long enough to gather some awareness of where he was in the house in connection to the back door. The back door was still open. Once he was clear on his path, he rose and dumped five more shots in the direction of the dining room where he believed the shooter to be. He made a run for the back door, praying he wasn't shot in the back.

When he made it outside, he fired his last single round at the back door but kept squeezing the trigger as the gun clicked. He ran across the yard and straight to the back fence. He could hear the police sirens now as he hopped the fence and dashed down the alley toward the getaway car empty-handed. Reo was heavy on his conscience.

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The ride to Saginaw, Michigan wasn't as bad as Des thought it would be, but it did make her tired and sleepy. She and Kwon's mom talked the entire time about him and his upcoming appeal. They also talked about the baby, but that was something they did almost on a daily the closer she got to her due date. His dad also called to check on her frequently and to see if she needed anything. It was good to know that his parents would be so involved. It gave her comfort and courage in the time it was most needed. She knew this baby would have a lot of love.

When they arrived at the prison, the line to pass through the security check was longer than expected.

"I would've got on the road earlier if I knew we were going to have to wait this long," Chanel said.

"I just hope we don't get in there and they try and rush us out. It's almost three o'clock already."

Des hadn't seen Kwon face to face since county jail. She really wanted to spend as much time with him as possible. It was almost four o'clock by the time they made it to the visiting room. Des began to have nervous butterflies in her stomach anticipating seeing him again. It woke up the love she still had for him that didn't always feel present in his absence. They sat at the table watching the door that inmates came out of into the visiting room, trying not to notice all the lustful eyes that were on them. There was something about the way a sexually deprived man in prison looked at beautiful women that could make her skin crawl if she dwelled on it too long. Luckily, they wouldn't have to.

Kwon appeared in the doorway with his eyes scanning the room, before he smiled big and took off in their direction. He had a fresh cut, he was growing a beard now, and had put on a little weight in his upper body. Des had to lean back a little and rock herself forward before she was able to push out of the seat. They wore smiles big enough to chap their lips as he came up and Kwon embraced his mom first.

“Hey,” he greeted, kissing her on the cheek and hugging her tightly.

“You getting bigger, I see,” Chanel said.

“Yeah, a little bit,” he acknowledged. “So are you.”

Her eyes bucked as she held back her laughter. She mouthed “Fuck you,” without saying it aloud.

After he released his mom, Des came up and opened her arms wide. He took her into his arms slowly, making sure to leave room between them until his lips swarmed down and met hers. It was a kiss worth a thousand words. Not wet, not passion filled. Just her lips smashed against his, but for the both of them, it was like finding the helicopter in the sky after being stranded at sea.

He couldn't just have one, even though that was the rule. He quickly stole a second kiss, and this time he sucked on his lips a little to draw it out. When he released her from his embrace, they held hands momentarily, neither wanting to be the first to let go. He finally released her and looked down at her belly, placing a hand on it gently.

“That’s my son,” he mumbled to himself more than anything.

“Yup, that’s your son.”

She could tell his mind was spinning at the thought of being so close to becoming a father. Kwon sat down next to Des at the table. For a moment, it was like they were the only two there the way they couldn't break eye contact with one another. Chanel understood what they were



going through. She was happy to see the joy they brought to one another and tried not to interfere with the moment.

“What took y’all so long?” he finally asked his mom.

“You see how many people in here? That line in the lobby was packed.”

Markwon looked around, realizing the visiting room was close to being full capacity. He felt lucky to be one of the many that got to see their loved ones today versus the many more back in their cells that could only wish. He wanted to rub her belly more, but he didn’t want any trouble with the COs. He wanted to do a bunch of touchy-feely things that he couldn’t, and it was hard not to be slightly irritated, even in the most joyous time he’d had in months.

“You really been lifting weights, huh?” Des said.

“You can tell?” he said, flexing his still bony arm.

The weight he’d gained was more noticeable in his chest, shoulders, and face at the time. His arms were a little bigger, but he was nowhere near buffed.

“I can tell. It looks good on him, don’t it?” Des asked his mom for a cosign.

“It does. You’re starting to look more like your daddy too.”

“Right, with that beard,” Des said as she gently rubbed his face.

“No touching,” a CO called out from the front of the room.

Kwon shook his head.

“They watching every damn thing, ain’t they?” Chanel complained.

“Forget him, you good. You looking better than ever, beautiful,”

Kwon told her.

“I don’t. I’m fat and ugly, don’t even try it.”

Kwon looked at her like she was crazy.

“That’s what you think? ‘Cause all I see is a glowing pregnant girl with enough shine to light up the sky. Baby, you more beautiful than ever. I mean that.”

Kwon always had a smooth tongue, but way he wouldn’t take his eyes off of her after making that statement, she knew he meant every word. It wasn’t how she felt at the time, but it did confirm what was already being said by her family and friends. Des was glowing throughout her pregnancy, but she was the only one that couldn’t see it. Kwon could. He relished it. Somehow, she had managed to become even more beautiful than she ever was, and he hadn’t thought that was possible. Added to the fact that she was

carrying his seed, and added to the fact that she was still in love with him, it was enough to overload his system just thinking about all the what ifs.

“Stop looking at me like that, you making me nervous,” Des said, smiling.

Chanel laughed. “You want something from the vending machine?”

“Yeah, some Combos and some Cheetos,” Markwon replied as his mom stood to her feet.

“Des, you want something?”

“Surprisingly, no, I’m not hungry for once.”

As his mom left to get snacks, they had a moment alone. Kwon didn’t waste a second of it. He made eye contact with her.

“Look at me. I love you, girl.”

“I love you too.”

It was something he told her all the time, but it hit different when he could look her in the eye. He could tell she felt it too.

“You like my air in this muthafucka, I ain’t gon’ lie.”

“Believe it or not, you are mine as well. Life is hard no matter where you are, you know?”

“I know you going through a lot. I’m trying my best not to add to it.”

Des was shaking her head before he finished the sentence.

“You don’t. You make it better,” Des said as she looked up to see where his mom was. She hated to kill the vibe, but she had something she wanted to say that she wanted to keep between the two of them. “Tino said to tell you hello,” she started.

“Tino?” Kwon asked in surprise.

“Yeah, he genuinely wanted me to tell you to keep your head up.”

Kwon took in the information, nodding his head. Tino wasn’t someone he considered a friend or an enemy. Just a nigga he went to school with.

“You got my dick hard as hell just being this close to yo’ ass.” He changed the subject, undressing her with his eyes.

“Shut up,” she laughed. “I thought that was nice of him though, since y’all wasn’t friends or nothing.”

She had to get this out.

“Yeah, tell ‘em I said thanks,” Kwon replied.

“I will. Also, he asked me to go to prom.”

Kwon didn't immediately respond, but the news cut deeply. He realized now the mention of his name wasn't just by coincidence. It was the first time he had to acknowledge the fact that she was out in the world with life still moving forward while he was stuck in a living hell.

“How long you been holding on to that one?” he finally said.

“Not that long.”

“You really thinking about a prom and you damn near eight months pregnant?”

“Honestly, I wasn't thinking about it until he asked. Then I realized I'll probably be able to go if I have my baby on time, and I... I don't wanna look back on this time with a bunch of regrets. So yeah, I thought about it... I'm thinking about it.”

The mood had changed and so had the expression on Kwon's face for the first time.

“So why you telling me? I don't have no say so in this anyway.”

“Because I care enough to wanna know how you would feel about it. It's just a prom, nothing more nothing less, but I still want you to know about it, whatever I decide.”

Chanel came back to the table with extra snacks for Des anyway. Kwon was staring at the floor now. Brain racing with all types of scenarios. It was something he would have to get used to. Overthinking the future of their relationship or whatever it turned out to be from here.

“I think you should go,” he decided before thinking any deeper.

Chanel looked at them both and could sense it was something personal, so she didn't pry.

“Really?” Des said, eyes lit up with shock.

“Yeah. Go and try to have a good time.”

It nearly killed him trying to be mature about things, but at this time in his life, the last thing Kwon wanted to do was try to be controlling and chase away the only thing that was keeping him sane. He could only pray he wasn't making a huge mistake.

# Chapter 6

The night of the robbery gone wrong, Boo drove back to Jazz's house and stayed there. He didn't have the money he needed to leave town, and he didn't want to leave anyway knowing that Reo was dead and his family would be going crazy looking for answers. He wouldn't be able to provide any, but as his closest partner, he couldn't be missing in action either. He laid around the house licking his wounds, growing more stressed, and trying to figure out what went wrong. What would be his next move? When Jazz came home that evening, she had a look in her eyes that put Boo on high alert instantly. He just knew the police were outside and had the house surrounded.

“Did you know about the kid?” she questioned in a panic from the foyer.

Boo's forehead wrinkled in confusion.

“Kid? What kid?”

Jazz came in and sat down, looking up at the ceiling, trying to blink back the tears welling in her eyes. “What kid, Jazz?” Boo said louder.

Her resistance failed and the tears began to stream, but she quickly wiped them away.

“Baby, there was a kid hiding in the closet of the house Reo was killed in. He’s dead, baby,” she explained, staring at him, mortified.

Boo’s eyes grew wide with shock as his heart sank. Reeling from the news, his head started to spin as he tried to grasp what he could only hope was misinformation.

“Who said that?”

“It’s all over the news,” she said, raising up to find the remote and change the channel.

Boo rose to his feet as well, not to do anything but to fend off the chaotic shame that was seizing his body at the moment.

“Naw, naw, hell naw!” He panicked, pacing the floor.

“It all over the news, Boo,” she continued, flicking channels trying to find the story. “It’s too late now, but I saw it over Tasha's house and everybody is talking about it. It was three people in the house. A guy, a girl, and their kid. The kid is the only one that died.”

He still didn’t want to believe it. He couldn’t. When Reo was shot and killed, it tore Boo apart. That was his partner in crime, and to find out



that he didn't even kill the man responsible for his death was like a kick in the nuts. Now he was finding out that a kid was in the house and he was more than likely responsible for his death? It felt like his heart was being ripped from his chest. His conscience couldn't handle that type of sin. There was wrong and there was the shit you didn't come back from. This couldn't be right. He grabbed his cellphone and called Nae, the girl that had set the whole thing up.

“Hello?”

“Bitch, you didn't say it was a fucking kid in the house!” he growled.

“I swear to God he didn't live there, Boo. That's not even the girl's kid that was in the house, that's another girl's kid. I wouldn't have let y'all —”

*Click!* He hung up before she could finish the sentence, realizing he couldn't talk about this on the phone. Ever.

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Tae hadn't seen or heard from his brother since their fall out over a month ago. It was eating him up still that they weren't speaking. He'd tried to reach out to Boo by getting in touch with Jazz, but she never answered or

returned his calls. He was sure Boo was behind Jazz ignoring him because they were always cool until now. He didn't have a number for his brother, and even though he wouldn't let Endy return any of the stuff he'd bought her, he did put some money to the side to give Boo whenever they talked.

It was Endy's birthday weekend and knowing all she knew now, she made him promise not to buy her anything. Her best friend was almost nine months pregnant and could barely leave the house now, so all she wanted was to hang out with him on a nice dinner and a movie date. He wore a blue and grey Jumpman sweatsuit with blue and grey Carmelo's. The weather was decent in early April, but he rolled down Endy's block with a window cracked. When he pulled up to her house, he didn't bother getting out to say hello to her family. Lately, Endy's family had become more private and less inviting. She hadn't asked him to come in in a while, and he sensed it was better he not try. Endy emerged from the house looking breathtakingly beautiful. She wore her hair in box braids and had her makeup done by a professional for the first time ever. Dressed in a black V-neck sweater, matching skinny jeans, and high-heel Gucci boots gifted to her by Devonte, she glided up the walkway like an angel from heaven in his eyes.

He loved to watch her walk whether coming or going. When she got in the car, she leaned over and kissed him, stroking his face with her palm.

“You look nice,” she complemented his outfit she’d never seen before.

She reached out and flipped the four brand-new air fresheners hanging from his rearview mirror with her fingers. “You got it smelling all good in here. What’s the occasion?” she giggled as he drove off.

“My boo birthday this weekend,” he told her, as if referring to someone else.

“Oh, okay. You must like her, your car all clean and shit. You got a fresh haircut, waves all popping.”

“She cool. I’m tryna get to know you, though.”

“Well, I’m possessive. So if I like you, that means I’m gonna want you all to myself.”

Tae shook his head emphatically.

“I’m not leaving my girl for yo’ ass, I’m just trying to fuck.”

“Fuck you,” she laughed, punching him in the shoulder.

Inside Starters, the two stood by the front entrance waiting to be seated. The place was packed on a Saturday evening with everyone from hustlers and ballers to everyday people. Endy stood by Tae gripping her Gucci handbag in one arm and Devonte’s arm linked around the other. The

ballers in the building gawked at her from afar, and Tae could feel all the sets of eyes on her. A part of him felt proud he had such eye candy. She looked just like a dopeboy's girl, but she was his. Another part of him felt uncomfortable and began to mean mug some of the eyes watching them closely as they were led to a table.

“Fine than a muthafucka,” he heard one dude say.

He didn't catch the whole sentence, but he thought he heard the word bitch come before fine. He spun around and made eye contact with the dude that he thought said it. He was about to address him, but Endy caught his attention.

“Sit over there, baby,” she told him.

She had caught the slick remarks as well and didn't want Devonte to sit on the side facing the boys. This way, his back would be turned to them so he couldn't see them and get riled up the way he tended to do.

“You heard what that nigga said?” he asked her as he sat.

“Yeah. It's just a compliment baby, don't trip.”

“Sound like he said bitch, though.”

“No, he didn't,” she corrected him. “He said she fine.”

At least that's what she thought she heard.

Tae decided to leave it alone. He didn't want to ruin the birthday dinner.

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Des was in her bedroom being harassed by her baby sister, Kadijah. It seemed the closer she got to having her baby, the more her little sister wanted to be involved. She made Des promise she could feed the baby when he came, she wanted to rock him to sleep at night, and now she was trying to change the name of the baby.

“I like Sherrod. You don't like it? What if he comes out looking like a Sherrod?”

Des laughed.

“How do you look like a Sherrod?”

“I don't know but—”

“Hold that thought,” Des said as she struggled up from the bed and rushed to the bathroom.

“What's wrong?” her sister asked.

“Nothing, Dede, I gotta pee,” she replied, rushing out.

In the bathroom, her release was long and drawn out more than usual. She quickly grew suspicious. “Oh shit. Mama!” she called out.

Cynthia rushed up the steps, hearing the alarm in her daughter's voice.

“What’s wrong?”

“I think my water just broke.”

“Uh ole. Are you sure?”

“No, but I just peed for a really long time.”

“Is it still coming out?”

“Not now.”

“Girl, you just had a full bladder, that’s all. You alright,” her mother replied, laughing as she left the bathroom.

Although it was a bit early, Des was hoping she was right. She was so tired of being pregnant. It was a letdown to find out today wasn’t the day. She cleaned herself up and was heading out of the bathroom, when she felt another power push in her bladder. She rushed back to the bathroom and this time, the release was never ending.

“Maaaaaaa!”

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Tae and Endy were wrapping up the first part of their evening as she read the birthday card he'd just given her after dinner.

"Awww, this is so sweet, baby," she cooed.

"You like it foreal?"

"Yes, I love it. It soooo describes us."

"That's what I said," Tae agreed as the waitress came to pick up the tab.

"Let me clear this out for you guys," she said, grabbing plates from the table. "I'll be right back with your change."

"Naw, that's yours," Tae replied.

"Thank you."

"Big spender," Endy teased.

"Only on you and your smiles," he told her.

"Yeah, you keep me doing that," she said, gathering her things.

"You talked to Kwon lately?"

"Not this month. Why you ask?"

“I was wondering did he mention anything about the prom and Des to you.”

“No, why would he?”

“Well, don’t mention it unless he does first, but—” Endy stopped and rolled her eyes without thinking.

Some dude at the table over from them couldn’t keep his eyes off of her, and he was being downright rude about it. She was glad they were leaving.

“What’s wrong?” Tae said, glancing behind them.

He realized the guys that were eyeballing her when she came in were still there with a table full of drinks. He made eye contact with the one he thought called Endy a bitch.

“Nothing. Come on, you ready?”

The dude was giving him the ice grill now. The stare down only lasted a few seconds, but it was enough for Tae to wanna check his temperature.

“What’s up? You got a problem, nigga?” he said loud enough for anybody in earshot to hear.



“What, nigga? Who you talking to?” the dude shot back, leaning in closer to get a clear understanding.

Endy’s phone buzzed as Tae stood ready to head to the table. He was outnumbered, but he’d fought three on one before and he wasn’t afraid to do it again.

“Come holla at me,” Tae dared him.

Patrons of the restaurant watched on, hoping things didn’t escalate. Endy grabbed his arm.

“Baby, we gotta go. Des is having her baby, we gotta get to the hospital.”

Tae was still itching to get a piece of ole boy. Endy pulled harder, guiding him around the other side of the table so he wouldn’t walk past them and add fuel to the fire. “Come on! We gotta get to the hospital!” she repeated.

“You lucky, nigga,” Tae growled with fire in his eyes on his way toward the exit.

For some reason, nobody responded to him. They just exchanged mean mugs, and the two left the restaurant without incident. Endy was low

key nervous but turned on by the way he didn't play about her. She knew she would always be safe with him.

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Once at the hospital, Des had only dilated two centimeters and was stuck there for hours after she was checked in. After she was dilated to five, it was another hour before the painful contractions really kicked in. After that, the process seemed to happen dizzyingly fast. Her mom was in the room with her holding her hand the entire time. Around one o'clock in the morning, just six hours after her water broke, Des gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Because of his mother and father, he was fair skinned, to say the least, but he came out red all over.

He cried for the first few minutes and then he was over it all. When Des held him in her arms for the first time, all the trials she went through to get to that moment seemed to just fade to the back of her memory. Euphoria ignited in her soul as her heart fluttered with a love like she'd never known before. She smiled, still amazed by his head full of hair and features that mirrored his father so much. The way his nose slightly curved at the tip and his tiny nostrils. The way his eyes were set, and even the way his head was shaped. The only thing she and her mother could clearly identify as their

own genes was his lips and mouth. They all had the same mouth, even her little sister.

In the waiting room, everyone was there dying to get a peek at this kid that was born under unusual circumstances but surrounded by love. Her aunt and little sister joined them first, then Markwon's mom. His father had already left a message that he would be coming straight from work to the hospital. Once the room had cleared out a little, Endy and Tae were finally able to get in and see their godson. Des looked tired and sleepy, but she still wore a smile that was genuine when they walked in.

"Say hello to Jevonne," she said as she lifted her son up and into Endy's arms.

"Oh my god, he is so gorgeous!" Endy squealed.

Jevonne was the name they'd both agreed on giving their son. Tae's middle name, as a gift for agreeing to be the godfather. Markwon knew the chances of him having to lean on his best friend for the years to come were heavy, and they both decided it was the least Kwon could do.

"He look just like that nigga." Tae smiled, feeling like he'd just been given a gift that would help with the emptiness of not having his friend around.

“Don’t he though,” Endy said.

“Girl, that’s him all over again,” Des agreed. “He’s gonna be so happy.”

It was a day that every one of them needed. The miracle of childbirth had seemed to magically put on pause all the troubles of their own individual lives. It was a timely distraction, but more importantly, the glue that would strengthen their bond, connecting them for a lifetime, especially with their missing link.

# Chapter 7

Kwon got the news that he'd lost his first appeal, but it couldn't have come on a better day. It was also the same day that he'd learned his son was born into the world healthy and surrounded by love. Then when he found out that Jevonne looked just like him, his mood skyrocketed out of space. By the time he was able to talk to Des, he'd almost forgotten about losing the appeal.

“What Tae say when he found out his name?” Kwon was eager to know.

Des could tell he was smiling.

“He was like, are you serious? You not fucking with me, right?” she giggled, and Markwon started to laugh as well.

“Aye, y'all better keep my son fly out there too. Don't have my son out there rocking no bullshit,” he teased.

“Boy, yo' son ain't thinking about what he wear, all he cares about is eating.”

“I'on care. Keep that nigga fly, 'cause when I get out you know he gon' be extra fly.”

Des was glad to hear him with so much confidence about his future. It spilled over to her as she thought about the possibility that he could actually get out one day and they could be a real family.

“You such a showoff,” she remembered.

“You love it doe. Don’t you?”

“No, I love you, nigga. I care nothing about all that other stuff.”

“Yeah, whatever, if I was a bum ass nigga, you would’ve never fucked with me.”

“There’s a lot of room in between making school a fashion show and being a bum ass nigga.”

“Whatever. Anyway, what he doing now?”

“He sleep in his crib,” she told him.

“Damn, I can’t wait to see that little nigga.”

“Why he gotta be a nigga already? Can he at least live a year or two in the world before he becomes a nigga?” she teased him.

“Shut the fuck up,” Markwon said, laughing. “Seriously though, did y’all send the pictures out yet?”

“I haven’t left the house, so I haven’t sent anything out. My mom said she put them in the mail though.”

“Cool, cool. Speaking of mail. I been meaning to tell you I got the news I lost my first appeal.”

Des’ heart sank.

“Nooo.”

“Yeah. It’s all good, though. Almost everybody loses the first appeal. It’s all part of the process. Now we just take it to the next step, which is appealing to a higher court.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re taking it so well.”

“I gotta a newborn baby out here on these streets, can’t nothing get me down.”

To hear him so upbeat about life was like music to Des’ ears. Between the two of them, she believed they had enough faith to change the course of Kwon’s future. She could only pray that she was right.

“Just keep believing, baby.”

“I’on got no choice. I got a son to raise.”

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When Reo was killed, not only did it leave Boo devastated, it also put him in a tough position. Boo was the only person with a spare key to Reo's crib. Before police found out who he was and where he lived, Boo went to the house and took all the cash that was inside. It turned out to be over two hundred grand. This didn't feel anything like a come up. Boo was miserable about not only his friend's death but the kid that lost his life that night as well.

Reo didn't have any kids, but he did have family. Boo gave half the money to his family and left town. With the money, he was able to purchase a new identity, but even that didn't take any of the pressure of the pain he was living with away. No matter how much he smoked, how much he drank, he just couldn't shake the reality that his greed had robbed a kid of a chance at a life that only God knows what that kid could've made of. He didn't expect it to hurt this bad. He'd murdered many men without losing sleep, but this was different. Way different.

After tricking off thirty thousand in Miami, Boo returned to Detroit a couple of weeks later. He missed Jazz, and she was the only one that was keeping him from going crazy at the time. He figured if police hadn't raided her house by now, then they had no idea about that address. He'd lay low there and stay still for a while.



As he laid in bed, Jazz was right next to him sound asleep. Boo's thoughts were running a marathon in his head and he couldn't shut them off. Lying on his back with his arms tucked behind his head, he stared blankly at the ceiling in pitch-black dark. The future looked and felt so grim, it was starting to feel like the walls were closing in. Didn't matter where he was or what room he was in, they were slowly closing in. To turn off the faucet of misery, he did the only thing he knew that would help. He rolled on his side and ran his hand up Jazz's smooth chocolate thigh. He rubbed her pussy to see if she was wearing panties. She wasn't. Without warning, he climbed on top of her, lazily pulling his boxers off and sliding inside of her.

"HMMMM," Jazz hummed as he penetrated her again.

Her eyes were still closed, as he pulled the straps of her gown off her shoulders and began to suck on her healthy melons. He plunged deeper inside of her as she moaned and gripped his back tightly. Her legs rose and folded around his hips as he began to pound away at her pussy, taking all of his frustration out on it. He sucked her nipple harder as he felt the warmth of her vagina bringing about temporary relief. He drove the tip of his dick as deep as he could inside of her and let it sit there as he whispered in her ear.

“Do that shit.”

Jazz wrapped her arms around his neck as her pussy muscles clamped tightly around his shaft. He let out an exhale of built-up pressure that had been forming all day. Slowly, he pulled back out of her just enough to feel the experience heighten, then slowly dove back in. He grunted as he began to pick up the pace again. Seconds later, he was fucking her like a wild beast fresh out of his cage. He pinned her legs to her shoulders and got lost inside of her.

It was feeling so good to Jazz she wanted to cry as he picked up his pace and the bed started to rattle and knock against the wall. As he came inside of her, she clawed his back and Boo finally let her legs go. They shook wildly in the air, coming down and wrapping around him again. He collapsed on top of her and stayed there listening to her heartbeat until he was able to doze off.

*The next thing Boo knew, he was back inside the house Sugar Bear lived in, and he was chasing someone through the house with a gun. As the person ran up the steps, Boo realized they were too small to be an adult. It was a kid he was chasing up the steps. He didn't want to chase the kid, but he couldn't stop his legs from moving. He couldn't stop stalking this kid, chasing him down the hallway and into his bedroom. Cornered, the kid*

*showed no fear. The only fear was inside of Boo as he tried to stop himself from raising the gun. He couldn't control his arms. The gun raised and his finger squeezed, but the gun just clicked over and over.*

*As the gun clicked, the kid was reaching inside of his toy box. He pulled out a gun that was almost bigger than him. It was so big he shouldn't have been able to lift it. But he did. He lifted and aimed it right at Boo's face and pulled the trigger. Blah!*

Boo jumped in his sleep, waking Jazz and himself up at the same time.

“Baby, what's wrong?” She sounded scared, laying underneath him afraid to move.

He pushed himself up off her and rolled out of bed angrily. He fumbled in the dark until he found his half blunt in the ashtray.

“Nothing, go back to sleep. I'm alright.”

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Tae and Endy had been on the phone for two hours talking about nothing in particular. He didn't mind at all. It was the best way he could think of to spend his free time when he wasn't actually in her presence. He loved the way she'd catch an attitude if he didn't call her as soon as he got

off work. He eagerly anticipated hearing her voice when he was clocking out each time.

“I need to get my nails done, but I’m trying to wait until prom. Don’t make no sense to get ‘em done now, but I’m tired of looking at ‘em like this.”

“I’m tryna wait to get my haircut too,” Tae said, sitting on the couch in the living room.

“Naw, you don’t need to wait. You can get yours cut now and then get another cut when it’s time to go to prom, cause you be looking crazy when you don’t get your hair cut,” she laughed.

“Shut the fuck up, no I don’t.”

“Okay, don’t get mad at me, I’m just telling you. Walking around school looking like you in the county jail ain’t a good look.”

“Just for that, I’m not cutting my shit now.”

“Whatever. I’ma come cut it myself. My daddy got some clippers over here.”

“Whatever. Anyway, is Des still talking about going to prom?”

“Hell yeah. She ain’t about to miss our prom. We gon’ be looking so good,” Endy bragged.

“I don’t like that shit.”

Since hearing the news that Des was still considering going to prom with Tino, Tae had been salty and a little irritated with Des. He didn’t want his homeboy’s girl all dancing up on and kicking it with another man, especially while he was present. Des hadn’t been back to school since having the baby, but she was set to return Monday after being at home with the baby the last two weeks.

“Don’t like what?”

“You know what.”

“Don’t start that shit. Destiny is not thinking about Tino, okay?”

“Whatever. I’m ‘bout to take a shower,” he told her with an attitude now.

“Oh, now you wanna get off the phone ‘cause you got an attitude, huh?”

“Naw, seriously, I need to go take a shower,” he replied.

“Yeah, okay, well, gone get your stanking ass in the shower then. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I don’t stank, nigga. Bye,” he said, ending the call.

As soon as he stood to get ready for his shower, the house phone rang and he picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Mama gone to work ain’t she?”

When Tae heard his brother’s voice, he was happy and confused at the same time. He never called the house phone unless he was looking for their mom, and she was always at work this time of night.

“Yeah, she gone. What’s up, bro?”

“How that block looking? I wanna pull up on you real quick. I need to holla,” Boo revealed.

Tae slid over to the window and peeked out the blinds. He then moseyed to the front door and opened it, surveying the block from left to right for suspicious looking cars. They knew police were probably watching the house by now with Boo being on the run for a charge involving officers.

“It look quiet.”

“Okay, give me about five minutes. When your phone ring again, just come outside.”

“Bet.”

Tae ended the call and waited by the phone just as instructed. The minute he heard it ring, he jumped up and shot to the door. A dark-colored Durango was sitting out front of his next-door neighbor's house. He cracked the door and peered closer inside the truck to make sure it was Boo before he stepped out onto the porch. He was instantly reminded of the last time they'd talked. As he approached the truck, the passenger window came down, releasing a thick cloud of smoke. He could tell Boo was blowed and he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his brother this intoxicated.

"Hop in," Boo told him.

Tae opened the car door and fell inside. Boo was dressed in designer drip from head to toe. His jewelry was the same jewelry he'd had before he was arrested, but Tae hadn't seen him wear it in a while. Today he was wearing his chain and his Rolex watch.

"This your truck?" he asked, looking around inside and noticing the new car smell.

"Yeah, this me."

Boo wanted to ride something much flashier but knew he had to be low key. When Tae looked in his brother's eyes, he could tell something was wrong.

“You alright, bro?”

“Naw, not really, lil’ bro. But I didn’t come to talk about me foreal.”

“Okay, what’s up?”

“You know Reo dead, right?”

“Naw, I didn’t even know,” Tae replied in shock.

He wasn’t the type to watch the news, and Reo’s death wasn’t floating around the hood with his age group. Reo wasn’t from his hood. The news was all around the hood, it just hadn’t reached Tae until now.

“Yeah, some fucked up shit happened, my nigga. I need you to watch over the crib and Mom like a hawk, you feel me? I don’t know what’s gonna come behind the fucked up shit that happened, but I need you to be on point.”

Tae nodded.

“Damn. You can’t tell me what happened?”

“Naw man, the less you know the better,” Boo said, reaching in his waistline.

He pulled out a black Glock 23 pistol and handed it to Tae.

“Take this, though. It’s clean, so you ain’t gotta worry about that.”



He took the gun, feeling apprehensive. All of a sudden, it seemed that his life was in danger, even though he hadn't done anything wrong.

“You saying I need to carry a burner now?”

“I would prefer you carry it so it's right there with you whenever you need it. But I just wanna make sure you can protect yourself and Mama. Like I said, I don't know what's about to happen. Just be careful and watch your back.”

Boo had already gone back to the house SB lived in to see if he could finish the job, but, of course, the house had been vacated since the murders. Now there was no way to find him until he could fish him out through someone in his hood. That would take time. Time Boo didn't have. Tae sat in the passenger seat staring straight ahead, a little zoned out. He didn't know what to say or think about it all. Watching for cops, preparing for war with the enemy. It wasn't his lifestyle.

“My bad about the money, bro. I really—”

“Man, fuck that shit, I don't care about that lil' money. Just take care of Mama for me, my nigga. And don't tell nobody shit about me. I don't care who asking. You ain't seen me, okay?” Boo said, holding out his hand to slap fives with his baby brother.

“I gotchu,” Tae agreed.

“You all I got out here, man. You, Mama, and Jazz. I can’t afford to lose nobody else.”

Tae looked in his eyes as Boo continued to grip his hand firmly.

“I’m on point, bro. I gotchu.”

# Chapter 8

Des returned to school only two weeks after having her son, to try and finish the final stretch, just barely maintaining the C average she expected now. Her mom had prepared for the new addition to their household and was able to save all of her vacation days for the new arrival. While she was out of school, Endy continued bringing her all the schoolwork she could do at home and turning it in for her. She even cheated by completing a few assignments for her best friend, knowing she wouldn't get a lot accomplished with a newborn baby.

She could see the finish line now. It had been a long 12th-grade semester to say the least, but it was looking like she was about to pull it off. Still feeling fat and ugly, Des walked with her head down and her books covering the slight pudge in her stomach, speeding through the hallways. She stopped by her locker after her fifth-hour class. When she shut the locker, she spotted a tall, caramel-brown dude coming her way, and she knew it was Tino. She and Tino had started to text only a week after coming home with the baby. She still hadn't given him a definitive answer about the prom, and she knew he was about to bring it up.

“What's up, thickness,” he flirted, sliding right up on her.

“Don’t call me that.”

“I mean that as a compliment though. You thick and fine, don’t you know that’s what all these chicks out here wanna be?”

“Well, I don’t. I wanna get back to my regular size.”

“I think you perfect just like this,” he replied, using his best sexy voice as he leaned closely on the locker next to hers.

“Gone with your game, Tino,” she laughed.

“I’m serious. So, what’s up? You know what I’m tryna see, and I been real patient too.”

She closed her locker, and they began walking the hallway together.

“You have been, and I appreciate you for that. I just don’t want you to think that because we go to prom together it’s gonna be something else. I told you I’m not ready for any of that.”

“And I said that’s cool. How many times I gotta tell you that?”

“Okay,” she said with finality in her warning tone.

“So, is that a yes?” He smiled.

“Yes, Tino,” she finally caved.

“Yes!” He pumped his fist then threw both hands in the air. “Me and Destiny going to prom!” he announced loudly.

“Shut up, fool, stop yelling,” she giggled.

“Me and Destiny going to prom, bitches!”

“Oh my god.” She shook her head, embarrassed.

Later on, at the end of the school day, Des and Endy met up at the lockers to leave out together as they always did. It was weird for Endy not having her around when Des couldn’t make it to school, so she was extra giddy on the days she came. As they headed toward the front exit, Endy was walking and snapping her fingers, rolling her neck and shoulder from side to side.

“Northside hoe, Southside hoe,” she rapped and danced.

“What the hell song is that?” Des asked.

“Oh, I got that from *Hustle and Flow*,” she giggled.

“Oh yeah, the parking lot scene,” Des remembered, knowing they had watched the movie a half-dozen times.

“Yeah, yeah. Northside hoe, Southside hoe,” she continued, then Des joined in.

Outside, they were approached by a girl name Anastasia that they knew but didn't really rock with. Her face was contorted, putting both girls on guard immediately.

“So you just literally had a kid and you already tryna fuck with Tino?” she blurted out.

Both Des and Endy were taken aback, and the jerk reaction in their necks showed as much.

“What?” Des laughed aloud, not believing it at first.

“You heard me. You know that was my nigga. Just because yo' nigga locked up for some stupid shit don't mean go try and put your paws on mine.”

“Oh my god,” Des said, in shock, looking around in disbelief, then at Endy for confirmation that this was happening.

Before Des could even fix her mouth to respond, Endy had got in Anastasia's face with all four fingers and a thumb.

“First of all, bitch, that is not your man. Second of all, don't get yo' little skinny ass whooped trying to run up on my girl after she just had a baby, 'cause I will beat yo' ass myself.”

“Girl, come on!” Anastasia’s friend walked up and grabbed her just in time, pulling her away quickly. Anastasia didn’t resist the chance to get away from Endy, who had a fire in her eyes she didn’t want to test.

“Whaaaaat the fuck?” Des laughed again, still in shock, as they headed to the parking lot.

“Girl, you know that little bitch is crazy. I’ll whoop her ass out here though, she better gone,” Endy said, face filled with irritation.

“See, that’s why I didn’t wanna mess with Tino’s ass, ‘cause look, already he bringing drama.”

“That ain’t his fault that bitches don’t know how to get the fuck on when a nigga don’t want they ass. They wasn’t never even together, he probably just fucked her one time too many.”

Now Des was rethinking her decision, solely based on the fact that not a whole day had passed and Tino had a girl coming out of nowhere trying to confront her.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s not even worth it, though.”

“You going to prom. I don’t care about nothing you talking about. If it’s not with Tino, you better hurry up and find somebody, ‘cause you going,” Endy insisted, shutting her down before she could protest.

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That evening, after finishing up her homework, Endy sat in the family room with her father watching television for a change. They were getting along better since he'd stopped drinking over the past month. She had a feeling he was easing back into his old habits though. Just last weekend, he seemed a little more talkative and looser than he had been since he gave up the sauce.

“Daddy, when is the last time you took Mama out on a date?”

“What?” Carlos said, shooting her a skeptical glance.

“You heard me. When is the last time you took your wife on a date?”

“Who sent you?” Carlos said.

“Just answer the question,” she pressured.

“You answer my question. Who sent you? Yo’ mama said something to you about a date?”

“No,” Endy laughed. “I’m asking for myself because I don’t ever see y’all go anywhere. All y’all do is sit in this house.”

Carlos’ eyes roamed around in his head, trying to conjure up a response. Endy could tell he was caught completely off guard and she was



enjoying it.

“Well, shit, she don’t never ask to go nowhere. Where the hell I’m supposed to take her?”

“Anywhere. Didn’t y’all used to go on dates when y’all was younger?”

“Yeah, when she used to ask me to take her somewhere and I would take her.”

Endy shot him a disapproving gaze.

“Why she gotta ask though, Daddy?”

He waved her off.

“Girl, watch the movie and shut the hell up.”

“Whatever. You better start treating my mama better before she go and get a side dude on you.”

“Shiiiiid. You know that—that Beyonce song, ‘Irreplaceable’?”

“Shut up, Daddy,” she giggled.

“You know a dude wrote that song, right?”

“Whatever. She irreplaceable too, so you better start treating her like it,” Endy demanded with a smile.

“Mind yo’ business. My wife know how to speak up if she wanna go out. I’ma see what she say when she get here just so I can shut you up.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Endy taunted. “Happy wife happy life.”

She loved messing with her dad now that he wasn’t drinking and acting a fool. She missed the relationship they had and was working to bring them closer again, but she also wanted to see her parents acting like they still loved each other.

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t we all go out to dinner this weekend? How about that?”

“Nope. Take my mama out to dinner so y’all two can be alone.”

“You serious, ain’t you?” Carlos smiled, finally realizing this was important to his daughter.

“Yup.”

“Let me call my wife and find out what the hell y’all been talking about behind my back.”

Endy burst into laughter as Carlos reached for his cell phone to call Tammy and get some answers.

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Kwon and his cellmate, Game, had turned in for the night and the lights had just gone off on the compound for the night. They laid in bed just kicking the shit the way they usually did for an hour or so until sleepy time kicked on one or the other.

“You talked to your girl, Game?” Kwon asked.

“Yeah, her ass supposed to be coming to see me next week too. I told her muthafucking ass this time if she don’t show up, don’t expect to hear from me.”

“You put your foot down, Game?” he laughed.

“You know I ain’t play no games with her,” Game replied.

Unbelievably, Game had a girlfriend that had been riding with him the entire bid. It wasn’t a girl he’d met in prison either, although he had some of those as well. This was a girl he’d been with in the streets. Markwon couldn’t fathom what would make a girl stick around that long knowing he was never coming home, but it gave him some desperately needed hope about where he really stood with Des. A lot of time had passed since he’d given her his blessing to go to prom with Tino. Now that the day was finally here, he halfway wished he would’ve tried to discourage the whole idea.

“Des supposed to be going to prom tomorrow,” he revealed to Game.

“Oh yeah?” Game said, lifting from his bed excitedly, planting his feet on the floor.

“Yeah.”

“She going with a nigga?” he questioned with intrigue.

This was his type of conversation. He loved to analyze women and their intentions and or motives.

“I think so. I pretty much know so,” he decided.

“Shiiiiid.” Game laid back down. “You a bigger man than me.”

“Why you say that?”

“Couldn’t be me, youngin’. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I’m in here with you, Game. What I’m supposed to do?”

“If it was me? Tuh. You ever heard of the phrase misery loves company?”

“Of course.”

“If it was me, I’mma tell my girl, you stay yo’ funky ass at home and be miserable just like I am. I can’t go to prom, the fuck you doing there?”

Markwon had to laugh out loud at his bunk. He could tell by the tone in his voice Game was dead serious. But for Markwon, even if he did have that kind of control over Des from behind the walls, he couldn't see himself trying to exercise it. He wanted her to enjoy life and everything it came with short of starting a new relationship with someone else. He wasn't willing to accept that. Not now and maybe not ever.

“It is what it is, man,” he said, staring at the ceiling from the top bunk. “It is what it is.”

# Chapter 9

Finding a dress that she liked and could get into wasn't as hard as Des had made it out to be in her head. Her stomach had shrunk back to almost its regular size, and now she was only left with thick thighs and more booty. The first day she and her mom went dress shopping, they found what she was looking for not even fifteen minutes into browsing through the store. And the way Tino looked at her when he arrived at her house to pick her up all but confirmed she was killing it in an asymmetric, metallic-gold mermaid dress with sheer sleeves adorned in fancy rhinestones.

It wasn't a small purchase, and she was still thanking her mom for forking over the money for it without hesitation. It was a beautiful, vitamin D-filled day with a slight warm breeze out, and Tino was laying on the charm with Cynthia as Tae and Endy pulled up to the house in a rented silver Range Rover, courtesy of his brother. It was Tino's first introduction to her mother, but you wouldn't know it the way he wooed her with his conversation. Dressed in a black and gold tuxedo with black Prada's, he stood towering over Cynthia, trying to impress her with his sense of humor as she laughed at his mocking of her daughter.

When Tae got out of the car, the uncomfortable look in his eyes said it all. He wasn't happy with Tino being there, knowing Des was his date.

"Sup doe?" Tino greeted them from afar.

"Sup," Tae returned, walking up to the group as they all gathered on the sidewalk.

"Hey," Des greeted him with a hug and then waited for a slow moving Endy to greet her the same.

"Ooooh, girl, you rocking that dress, best friend!" Endy cooed, her heels clacking the concrete as she approached.

"Naw, you is, best friend," Des returned as they embraced.

Tae was tapered up, dressed in black slacks and shirt, a black and red floral-print suit jacket, and black slip-on red bottoms. Endy wore a red, hip-hugging, low-cut, sequin dress and black heels.

"Where's my godson?" Tae asked.

"He in there sleep with my lil' sister."

"I wanna see him, I'm not gonna wake him up."

"Go ahead. Don't wake my baby up, Tae," Des called out.

As he headed to the front porch, Des turned to Endy again.

“Seriously, who did your makeup, your mama?”

“No, I did.”

“Girl, stop lying, you ain’t do that,” Des laughed.

“I swear! I told you I could’ve did yours too, you thought I was lying.”

“You lying right now!” she still insisted.

“So what,” Endy said, smiling. “You don’t know me.”

Endy had been running with the lie that she’d be doing her own makeup for prom all the way up until the day of, but she never got Des to buy into it the way she wanted to. When Tae returned, the four of them gathered for some group pictures. He and Tino made sure to stay on opposite sides of each other so there was no confusion as to whether they were friends or not. After everyone had taken plenty of pictures, they got in their cars and headed to prom. As they drove to their destination, it was almost comical the way Devonte and Tino would keep passing each other on the road, as if neither wanted to follow behind the other to get there. You would’ve thought they were about to start drag racing any second.

They arrived at the venue and took more pictures outside before heading in, greeted by the booming sounds of Lil’ Wayne’s “How to Love”



blasting through the speakers. Once she was inside and saw all of her classmates all crispy and fly, smiling from ear to ear, Des really got excited for the first time, ready to enjoy the evening. Tino sang along with Lil' Wayne in her ear as they made their way through the crowd of graduates just mostly standing around talking in groups at the moment.

Des could feel the hate as eyes rolled and steam hovered above a few weaves of the girls who had hoped to be Tino's prom date. She refused to let her day be ruined by anyone. A few friendly faces greeted her with hugs as she and Endy quickly separated once inside. She knew Tae didn't want to be around Tino, so she wasn't going to force them to be cordial any longer. When Chris Brown's "Look at Me Now," came on, the whole vibe in the building quickly changed. The dance floor filled up with seniors ready to turn up and make it a party. Tino quickly wandered over, away from his friends, and grabbed Des by the hand, pulling her out onto the dance floor.

When they first began to dance, there was a brief moment when she wished Tino was Kwon. She knew he would've been enjoying this night and probably would've been all up on her. She envisioned his smile and everything before she snapped out of it and decided to focus on the here and now. As people all around them got freakier by the minute, Tino kept his cool and didn't try to get all up on her the way she was expecting. They

danced through Chris Brown and J-Cole's "Can't Get Enough," before dipping off the floor to get something to drink.

When Tino came back with the punch and gave Des her cup, she downed a big gulp without realizing it was spiked. She blinked her eyes repeatedly and shot him a look as the slight burn streamed down her esophagus.

"What's in this?" she giggled.

"They said it's Grey Goose," he replied, grinning.

"Oh my god. Why did you give me this? I got a little baby at home."

"Girl, your mama got your baby tonight, you good," he reminded her.

She hadn't planned to drink anything, but now that she'd already downed half a cup that went straight to her head, she decided she only had one prom night and her young life was definitely about to change forever after this.

"Fuck it," she said, taking another big sip.

They mingled and worked the room for a while as if they were an actual couple, with Tino never straying too far away from her. She liked the way he prioritized her. He wouldn't allow any other dudes to grab her

attention for more than a couple of minutes before he slid right in and took her away. Eventually, he talked her into having a second cup of the spiked punch, which she only drank half of this time. By then, Beyonce's "Dance for Me" was coming on, and Tino grabbed her by both hands and pulled her back onto the dance floor.

She wanted to slow dance just as much as he did. The liquor had her in a different vibe, and her date had her relaxed and completely comfortable with him. As his hands slid around her waist and hers around his neck, she could feel him trying to make eye contact. She looked up into his eyes and held the eye contact he was looking for as their bodies swayed from left to right. She couldn't lie, Tino was smooth and it was easy to see why so many girls wanted to have him all to themselves.

He spun her around and pulled her close to him. With her hands wrapped inside of his now, he leaned down, letting his chin rest on of the nape of her neck. She could feel her body temperature rising, not just from the dancing or the alcohol but the feel of his body pressed against hers from his rock-solid chest to the third leg jammed into her backside. She thought any second he would smooch the nape of her neck as he whispered in her ear.

"Damn, you smell good as hell, girl."

She hadn't been this up close and personal with a man in so many months, it was drawing all types of emotions and lust-filled thoughts out of her.

"Stop whispering in my ear, Tino," she said, not really meaning it.

"My bad," he whispered, almost kissing her earlobe.

As they swayed to the beat and he continued to hold her cradled in his arms, Des knew one thing for sure, it was going to be hard to just up and forget about Tino after this night.

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Tae and Endy were on the dance floor slow dancing as well. Endy was having a great time and Tae was as well, up until now. Now he was watching Des and Tino, and his blood was boiling watching the closeness between them. You would think that Des was his girl the way he wanted to rush over there and punch Tino in the mouth. Endy peeped his vibe and realized what was going through his head.

"Hey." She grabbed his face and turned his head until he had no choice but to look directly at her. "Look at me. You here for me and you, not them."

She kissed his lips.

“I wanna beat that nigga ass foreal,” he moaned.

“For what? Des is not complaining, is she? Let her enjoy this night. You know how much she been through this year? You wanna ruin the one night she has out when she’s able to really enjoy herself?”

He took a deep breath. It killed him to not be able to step in and put a stop to this bullshit, but he knew Endy was right and he didn’t want his and Des’ relationship to become awkward. More awkward than it was already becoming. She was like family to him now.

“I’ma chill,” he decided.

“Thank you, my love,” Endy said, planting another appreciative kiss on his lips. “I’ll thank you much more later.” She smiled and so did he.

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The ride home was slightly uncomfortable for Des, although Tino was being a perfect gentleman with his seductive ways. She just knew in her heart that he had plans for her after tonight, and she had no idea how she really felt about that now. As they pulled onto her block, she gathered her things. Her mind raced with thoughts of everything from her son to sneaking Tino inside and breaking him off something real quick. There was

no way she'd have the guts to go through with it, but her mind was on a wild rollercoaster this night, and she didn't trust her own judgement.

"Thanks again, beautiful. I don't know about you, but I won't forget tonight," Tino said, pulling up in front of her house.

"I definitely won't forget it either, and thank you for convincing me to even go. I had a really nice time."

"Come on, let me walk you to the door. Only because it's prom night," he assured her.

"You don't gotta do that," she told him.

"I know," he said, getting out.

As she gathered her dress, climbing the stairs, he grabbed her free hand to make sure she didn't fall up the steps. At the front door, she found her keys and turned to face him as Tino opened his arms for a goodbye embrace. She fell into his arms and he squeezed her tightly before he released her and leaned down, stealing a kiss before she could protest.

"Un un," she said, mad she didn't see it coming.

"Too late," he chuckled, dashing off the porch.

"You play too much," she called at his back.

“Ain’t nobody playing, I earned that shit,” he replied, looking back at her, now at his driver’s side door.

“You tryna start some shit.”

He gestured with his index finger and thumb.

“Maybe just a little.”

She smiled. Instead of saying something crazy or giving him any more incentive than she’d already given him throughout the night, she just shook her head and turned to put her key in the door. “I’ma call you,” Tino said, and to that, she didn’t respond either, still not knowing what to say. She wasn’t ready for this.

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Back at Tae’s house, he had ushered Endy into his bedroom and stripped her down to her panties as soon as they came inside. His raging hormones were boiling over. She’d been teasing him all night with kisses, feels, and body heat, even rubbing on his dick on the drive home. He caressed her bare back and kissed all over her smooth, caramel skin, and he laid on top of her in bed, thirsty to be inside of her. As he sucked her pretty, dark nipples, his dick felt harder than it had ever been. They were both tipsy from Grey Goose and inhibitions had long gone out the window.

She smacked his ass hard right before he began to kiss his way down her stomach, past her belly button, and slipped off her panties. He was ready to fuck, but once he saw her pussy lips staring him in the face, his mouth started to water and he quickly positioned himself with his head between her legs. He hungrily sucked on her juice box, making Endy squirm immediately. He clamped on her hips with his palms holding her in place. He was an animal this night.

“Shit!” she cried out.

“Mmm hmm,” he moaned in satisfaction.

When her hips began to gyrate like she was trying to fuck his face, he knew she was ready.

“Ooooh, shit! Fuck me, Tae,” she pleaded.

He backed up and climbed on top of her, drilling slowly inside of her wetness, letting the sensation of her tunnel sink in. With his arms stiff, elbows locked straight, he stroked her with a passion that made even him wonder what had gotten into him. It was like she had brought out a different man, a different stroke. He could tell she felt it too. Her cries of passion were hungrier, almost desperate for more.

“Baby,” she cried as she grabbed his forearm and squeezed.



His torso moved like an ocean wave as Endy's body tried to catch the current. She reached out and grabbed his neck and pulled him to her lips.

She kissed him with her eyes closed, lost in a flow of something that was next level for reasons unknown. He bit her lip and held it between his teeth as he began to pound her pussy harder. He let her lip go, and she wrapped her limbs around him. With each stroke, he lifted them both off of the mattress a little, feeling like King Kong every time he pile drove her back down into the mattress. Feeling himself about to explode but not wanting things to end, he pulled out and flipped her over on her stomach.

“Oh my god,” Endy managed, trying to quickly catch her breath.

His dick had her dizzy and he knew it.

“You tired?” he laughed, looking down at her while he caught his second wind as well.

“Come on,” she replied dizzily, tooting her ass in the air.

Tae spread her fluffy cheeks apart and dove inside of her again, burying his bone deep in her backyard. He was just getting back into a rhythm when there was a loud tapping at his bedroom window. Startled, he

jumped up and reached under the mattress, grabbing a pistol before he even went to the window.

“What was that?” Endy said in panic as she grabbed the sheet, covering herself.

“I don’t know, somebody at my window,” he replied, moving cautiously toward the window.

The loud tapping came again, but this time there was a voice outside.

“Bro!”

“Who is that?” Tae shouted back.

“It’s Boo, come open the back door!” his brother said, sounding urgent.

“Here I come, hold on!”

He rushed to find his pants. “Get dressed real quick, that’s my brother.” As Endy got up and got dressed, Tae headed to the back door. When he arrived at the door and opened it, Boo almost knocked him down rushing inside.

“Who here with you?” he asked.

“My girl, why?”

Boo shot to the front of the house and peeked out of the blinds. Tae followed behind him nervously, knowing something had to be seriously wrong.

“What’s going on?”

“Listen, bro, them bitches came to Jazz’s house looking for me today. I wasn’t there, but they said they gonna keep coming back. I gotta get out of town, dog, they tryna connect me to Reo’s death.”

“Shit!” Tae vented, shaking his head.

Although SB had cameras around his house, they didn’t point towards the backyard, which was just dumb. Boo thought he was scot-free because their faces had been concealed with hoodies drawn over their heads the entire time, but once police started digging into Reo’s background, they quickly came up with his partner in crime. When learning there were two men in the house that night, Boo became the most likely suspect. The fact that a child was murdered, and that he was already wanted, gave police every reason and probable cause to comb the streets and knock on every door associated with him.

“Listen, I need you take this money and stash it. It’s all I got to my name, bro, so you can’t fuck this up.”

“I gotchu man, on Mama. I’ll give it to her if you want me to.”

“Naw, man, Mama got a serious gambling habit. You gotta keep it. You the only person I can trust, my nigga,” Boo explained, holding two large stacks of cash.

“How much is it?” Tae asked as he took the money.

“It’s forty thousand. I’ma need that to fight this case.”

“I’m not gon’ touch it man, on everything.”

*Boom Boom Boom Boom!* Someone was banging on the front door.

“Detroit Police Department!”

“Fuck!”

“What should I do?” Tae asked, freaking out.

“Go put that shit up,” Boo said as he went and hid in the kitchen.

A flashlight came shining through the window as Tae rushed to the bedroom and handed the money to Endy.

“Hide this,” he told her.

“Where?” she said, looking confused and afraid.

“Anywhere, police outside.”

*Boom Boom Boom!* A second round of banging sounded at the door.

“Detroit Police Department, open up!” a voice roared.

Tae rushed back to the center of the house, looking around for Boo. He found him in the kitchen with his gun drawn. Just then, he realized that he still had the gun in his front pocket.

“What’s up? Whatchu wanna do?”

He was scared to death, but he wasn’t about to let them kill his one and only brother without a fight. Boo knew they had the house covered from front to back. He wasn’t about to get out of this one.

“Tae!” Endy shouted from the bedroom.

Tae knew she was in fear of her own life, not knowing what was going on. That’s when he realized he couldn’t go out like that. He had to try and talk Boo down before he got all of them killed.

“I got my girl here, man, we can’t go out like this,” Tae said as the third pounding came.

“They don’t got a warrant, they would’ve been kicked this muthafucka in,” Boo realized.

“They ain’t gon’ leave, though.”

Boo stood leaning against the stove now, gun gripped with both hands, barrel aimed at the ceiling. He was seconds away from going out in a blaze of gunfire.

“Naw, they ain’t going nowhere,” he told Tae.

“Devonte!” Endy screamed again with panic in her voice.

“Just stay in the room, Endy!” he called back.

“We hear y’all in there, open the fucking door!” the police shouted.

“Fuck you!” Boo shouted back.

“Ma’am, stay back, we got a situation here,” they heard an officer warn.

“This my house!” another voice fired back.

“Damn, that’s Mama,” Tae realized.

“Fuck!” Boo vented and started pacing around the kitchen.

“I gotta do something, man. We can’t let Mama stay out there with them.”

“This is your house? You have the keys?” they heard the officer questioning their mom.

“Yes.”

“Can you open the door?”

“You gotta surrender, bro. Mama outside, we can’t put her in the middle of this shit,” Tae pleaded with his eyes.

“Go put that gun up, Tae,” Boo said, finally coming to his senses, handing over his gun as well.

“Tell me what the hell is going on?” Tae heard his mother demanding as he rushed to hide the weapons.

Boo stuck his hands up high in the air as he started to walk towards the front door.

“I’m coming out! Don’t shoot, I’m coming out! Don’t fuck with my mama. leave her alone. I’m ‘bout to come open the door.”

Tae came back into the room, standing at the threshold.

“You want me to open it?”

“Yeah, come open it.”

“Don’t go out there!” Endy shouted from the bedroom.

Tae ignored her and rushed past his brother to the front door. He quickly unlocked it, and six officers bombarded the door, hurrying inside to get to Boo. They quickly handcuffed Boo as they questioned Tae.

“Do what I told you to do, bro,” Boo said as he was hauled away.

“I gotchu man, I promise!”





# Chapter 10

Kwon got an unexpected visit from his lawyer, which he could only pray meant good news. As he made his way inside the visiting room, he studied Dan's demeanor carefully, searching for any signs of the news to come. Dan was smiling, but he always greeted his clients with a smile. He met Kwon with a firm handshake and they sat.

"How you holding up?"

"I'm doing alright," Kwon answered truthfully.

The past couple of months, he'd been able to adjust to doing time. His workout regime was becoming more beneficial each day, physically and mentally. His newborn son had given him something to live for in a time when he woke up a lot of days feeling like his life was over.

"Glad to hear it. There's a couple of reasons I came to visit you today to discuss your appeal. The first is I'm having some trouble with getting in touch with the arresting officer that found the gun down the street from your house. There's some discovery that's missing, and I think they're intentionally ignoring all my requests."

"You think they're hiding evidence?"

“I do, but even if that’s the case, it’s still gonna be really hard to explain your fingerprints on the gun. Which brings me to the second reason I’m here.”

“Okay,” Kwon replied, preparing now for the worst.

“I’m really good at what I do, and I agreed to take this case because I’d hate to see a young man like yourself wasting away in a jail cell for 30 years if you’re in fact innocent. But I gotta tell you, with you not having an alibi for that night, we really need something to strengthen the grounds for this second appeal.”

“I thought we had that already?”

“Well, although I don’t feel the prosecution proved beyond a reasonable doubt, after a conviction you have the burden of proving your innocence at this point.”

Kwon wanted his lawyer to believe that he just happened to find the gun in the grass, and to keep some kids or anyone else from getting a hold of it, he picked it up and tossed it in the trash. Whether his lawyer believed it or not didn’t matter. That fact that he would have to try and convince a jury of it was a big problem. He’d talked to a new witness that could dispute Kwon’s face was visible enough to ID him at the time of the

shooting. It still wasn't enough. He sat with his head down, trying not to let the conversation send him back to a dark and hopeless place.

“I'm innocent, Dan. That's all I can tell you, is I'm innocent.”

He wouldn't look Dan in the eye. Dan bit his lip as his brow furrowed.

“Well, kid, I hate to say this, but your word just might not be enough.”

“So what you want me to do?”

“Try and find something. Someone that can corroborate your timeline of being at home. Any little thing you can think of that can point us in a different direction. At this point, we just need more,” he explained as Markwon listened on, shaking his head. He was starting to feel like he couldn't win. Like he just had too many variables working against him. Like his prayers would never be answered and this just might be his new home.

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The snooze alarm went off for the third time, making Des pry her head from the pillow just to find her phone and hit snooze again. It was

graduation day and she knew she had to get out of bed ASAP, but Jovonne had kept her up until 3 am for no apparent reason other than he sensed how bad she needed to be trying to get some rest. In all, she'd probably had about two hours and fifteen minutes of sleep. It was 5:15 and she had a hair appointment for 6 am that she couldn't miss. After the fourth alarm sounded, she finally dragged herself from the bed and staggered into the bathroom, nearly running into a wall before she made it to the sink.

She glanced in the mirror and cringed at the foreseeable amount of work that would have to be done to glow her up before she walked across the stage. Her mom would keep Jovonne while she went to get her hair done, and she planned to meet her makeup girl back at the house at 10:30. By ten minutes to 6, she'd managed to get herself together and get dressed. She called Laci, her hairdresser, to let her know she was on her way and might be a few minutes late.

Laci didn't answer and never called her back as she drove to the shop. Des sat outside waiting for her for thirty minutes before she finally called back, only to relay that she had overslept and needed a minute to get herself together, then she'd be on her way.

"Okay, well, I'm here waiting," was all Des could say. She wanted to say much more. She wanted to say, bitch, you know this is my

graduation, what do you mean you overslept? Instead, she kept her cool.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can, Destiny, I promise,” Laci said.

“Okay,” Des replied, ending the call.

As soon as she could turned out to be two hours after the scheduled time of her hair appointment. Des barely said a word to Laci the entire time she did her hair, although it wasn’t because of Laci’s lack of trying. After getting a deep wave 20-inch sew-in, she rushed back home to meet with the girl that was supposed to do her makeup. She had to push the appointment back and was hoping she hadn’t taken too long. She called Reeka while walking through the door.

“I’m here,” Des said, fingers crossed.

“You gonna have to wait now. It’s been over two hours and I had other appointments to keep,” Reeka informed.

“Okay, I understand. How long though?” she asked, disappointed.

“At least an hour.”

Des sighed hard, making her lips flap and flutter. “Unless you wanna just go to someone else,” Reeka suggested.

“No, no, no. I have time, I guess. I’ll be here waiting.”

After hanging up from Reeka, she went and found her mom and her son in the family room. Cynthia was holding him in her arms and feeding him. She reached out for her son to give her mom a break, knowing she'd been with him since 3 in the morning when she'd finally tapped out. She kissed his red cheek as she took him into her arms headed to her bedroom.

“Hey, my lil’ man,” she cooed.

She baby talked him, feeding Jovonne his bottle, until her phone rang with a call from Kwon. She knew he would probably try and call her, but she wasn't expecting him until after graduation.

“Hey,” she greeted when the call went through.

“Hey, what up?”

“Nothing, sitting here waiting for this girl to come do my makeup.”

“Oh, foreal? I was hoping I caught you before you left. I really just wanted tell you again that I'm proud of you and I love you.”

“Awww, you so sweet, thank you baby. Is everything okay on your end?”

“Yeah, I'm cool,” he lied.

She had no way of knowing how much of a pick up it was at the time to just hear her voice on this day. Kwon didn't want to unload his

problems on her, especially on her day of graduation. He just wanted to connect with the most important people in his life, hoping to brighten his own gloomy day.

“Where’s my son?” he asked.

“Right here in my arms.”

“Oh yeah? Put the phone by his ear so I can talk to him.”

Des turned the phone towards Jevonne, sticking the phone right by his ear.

“Go ahead, he can hear you.”

“My dog, what’s up, man? This yo’ daddy, boy, I can’t wait to see you. I love you too, man, you better know that,” he spoke loud and proud.

He went on talking to his son for a couple of minutes, until Jevonne burst into a crying spell.

“He said your voice is annoying,” Des teased.

“Yeah right, he probably want me. That’s why he crying, ‘cause he tired of yo’ ass. He cry a lot though?”

“He did last night. I didn’t get no fucking sleep.”

“He just want his daddy, that’s all.”



“Whatever.” She smiled.

It was good talking to Kwon to take her own mind off of the day. She was way behind schedule and trying her best not to panic about it. Markwon spent almost his entire hour of yard on the phone with Des. She promised to send him pictures of graduation and some more of their son. By the time she ended her last call with Markwon, the girl was there to do her makeup. Once she was finished, it was time to get dressed and head to the school. She put on her Denby gold-colored gown, tilted her head down to zip it up, and got makeup over the front of her gown.

“Oh my fucking god!” she ranted, forgetting her mother was in the next room.

“Who is that cursing in my house like they crazy? I know it ain’t my daughter,” Cynthia said, going to find her in the bathroom.

“I’m sorry, Mama, but look.” She turned to show her the disaster.

“Damn it, Des!” she vented.

“I know, I was trying to zip the stupid gown up. You got something I can clean it with?”

“No, that’s just gonna make it worse.”

Des turned and looked in the mirror. She looked ridiculous with the huge light-brown foundation stain smeared all over her gown. She threw a tantrum right there in the bathroom, jumping up and down and pouting.

“Calm down,” Cynthia told her.

“What I’m a do, Ma? I can’t go on stage looking like this.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s almost 12:30 and it starts at two.”

“Well, we can take it to the cleaners around the corner and they will have it ready in an hour,” her mom suggested.

“Okay, yeah, let’s to that,” she agreed, quickly taking off the gown.

“But we gotta go right now,” Cynthia warned.

“I know, I know, let’s go,” Des said, rushing out of the house in her house slippers.

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As Endy’s parents pulled into the parking lot of her school, she wondered where the hell her best friend was at. Des lived closer to the school and she was expecting to see her car there when she pulled in. Carlos

drove and Endy sat in the back, with her mom in the front passenger seat, filled with joy.

“My baby graduating, ayeeee!” She danced, doing a little freak ‘em dance in her seat with her shoulders and hips.

“Ma, stop, don’t embarrass me in up in this place, please,” Endy pleaded.

She knew she had gotten her outgoing personality and silliness from her parents, but she hated when they reminded her of it. Carlos decided to join in just to piss her off.

“Embarrass you? Fuck you talking ‘bout?” As he turned Earth, Wind and Fire up, he started dancing behind the wheel as well.

“Go Carlos! Go Carlos!” his wife cheered him on as Endy’s classmates and their families walked by staring and laughing.

“Let me out this car! Unlock this door, I’m not going in with y’all,” she shouted from the backseat. “So embarrassing.”

Deep down, she was so glad to have her parents with her to share in this day. This was for them just as much as it was for her. They’d worked hard to provide and give her just about everything she’d asked for

throughout the years, and she really wanted to live her life as a reflection of them giving back by becoming all that she could be.

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To save time, Des and her mom sat in the parking lot for an hour waiting for her gown to get cleaned. She still needed to go grab her shoes but being that the school was in the opposite direction of the cleaners, it made sense to wait and head straight to the school from home. When her dress was ready, they started back to the house to grab her shoes. Cynthia tried pulling out of the parking lot, but her car started shaking and rocking loudly underneath them.

Soon, they could hear the unmistakable sound of the rim rattling against the road. She had a flat tire on the passenger side. Des looked at her mom, infuriated, with her eyes bucked to capacity.

“Mama, can I please curse?”

“Des, shut up, please,” her Mom said angrily as she pulled over and sprang from the car to go look for herself.

“Arrggggg!” Des growled.

She’d waited so long for this day. Worked so hard just to get here through all hurtles, and now this. She found her phone and called Endy to

see if she had left, but she didn't answer. She saw her mom outside of the car on the phone.

“Who you calling, Ma?”

“Your uncle,” she replied.

Des knew they didn't have time to wait for her uncle to come and fix the flat. Neither of them knew how to do it, and she sure as hell wasn't about to try it today even if she did. She called Tae, hoping he would pick up.

“We can't wait on him, Mama, it's about to start.”

“I know, but I can't leave my car here. See if you can find Endy or somebody to pick you up on the way.”

“I'm trying, but they probably already there,” she said as tears started to well in her eyes.

If she missed her graduation, she would die. This just couldn't be happening. She saw her mom had reached her uncle, but that didn't solve anything on her end. She thought about calling a taxi, but then she still had to go and pick up her shoes, which by the time the taxi even arrived would probably put her too far behind. She wiped a lone tear from her eye as she

got out of the car, hoping to see a taxi riding up the streets. “Flag a cab if you see one, Mama.”

“I’m so sorry, baby,” Cynthia said. “Your uncle said he’ll be here in ten minutes.”

“I don’t have ten minutes, it’s 1:46 now.”

She called Endy again and her phone was turned off. She tried Tae and so was his. She spotted a Dodge Intrepid slowing down in front of her and realized it was Tino pulling up. Her face lit up as she dashed to the car as quickly as her feet could move.

“What’s wrong, y’all got a flat?”

“Tino, please take me to go get my shoes really quick, please,” she begged.

“Come on, you gotta hurry up.”

She turned to her mom.

“I got a ride, Mama,” she said, but Cynthia was already waving her on to leave.

“Go, go, I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She rushed to grab her cap and gown from the car. Des was going to hate walking across the stage and not having her mom present, but it was better than missing out completely. As she was hopping in, she felt the nervous anxiety flowing through her still at the thought of her name being called and she wasn't present. Tino drove well over the speed limit.

“How you just now leaving to go to graduation?” she wondered.

“I don't even wanna talk about it. My whole family there waiting on me, but they gonna call me last though, so I'm not worried.”

Tino's last name was Weaver, which going by alphabetical order meant he'd be one of the last names called. Destiny's last name was Browner, so she knew she needed to be there from the beginning. They made it to her house just five minutes before two. She dashed inside the house and grabbed the shoes so she could change in the car. By now, the temperature outside had risen and the temperature mixed with her anxiety had Des perspiring under her arms as they drove to the school. She sniffed herself and Tino saw it.

“What's wrong?”

“I'm sweating. Can you turn the air on?”

“It's broke,” he revealed.

“Of course it is.” Shook her head, as if it couldn’t get any worse.

“Well, you don’t stink,” he told her.

“And I’m trying not to. I wish you had air.”

“I know you not mad at my car and I just saved yo’ ass,” he reminded her.

“You right, I’m not mad at you or your car at all. Thank you, you really did save me... hopefully.”

Still feeling the perspiration popping off, Des lifted her arms in the air to let the outside breeze cool her body and her underarms off, thankful she hadn't put her gown on already. She was embarrassed, but she didn't care as long as she made it across the stage, funky or not. When they pulled into the parking lot, it took a while to find a parking spot. As she put on her cap and gown, she spotted her uncle and her mom pulling up in her uncle's truck.

“Let me out while you find a place to park,” she told Tino.

Once Cynthia saw her get out, she did the same. They rushed toward the building, both fixing their clothes.

“I’m sweating like crazy!” Des said.



“You here, that’s all that matters,” her mom told her as they entered the building.

“Where’s your car?” Des asked.

“It’s still at the cleaners. He just helped me get it out of the street and back in the parking lot until the graduation is over. You know I wasn’t missing this.”

From the hallway, they could hear names being called over the loud speaker. They were already on the B’s.

“I think they called me already,” Des panicked.

“No they didn’t. They said Bradley. That’s before Browner.”

“You sure that’s what they said?”

“Yes, I’m sure.

“Destiny Browner,” a voice came over the speaker again.

“Shit!” Des shouted aloud as they both took off running for the auditorium door with her mom punching her arm for cursing.

“Destiny Browner,” the principal repeated as she and Cynthia came bursting through the door.

“I’m here! I’m here!” she shouted, slightly out of breath.

Des quick-stepped down the aisle with all of her classmates looking at her like she was a unicorn. As she made it to the stage, she felt a lot of things, embarrassment, frustration, relief, but more than anything else, she felt accomplished. She'd beat the odds of a teen pregnancy and she was finally about to walk across the stage. It gave her the fuel she needed to keep going. As she quick-stepped to the podium, she looked out and made eye contact with her mom who was clapping hard, still standing near the entrance. All of her troubles of the day just melted away like they never happened.

# Chapter 11

Graduation wasn't as special for Tae as it was for everyone else. Yeah, he was glad to have made it through and felt good that he'd made his mom proud, but he was once again fighting off the depression of having his brother and his best friend incarcerated. To make matters worse, the time that his brother was home, they weren't even on good terms and didn't spend any time together. He always thought that when he got older they would grow closer and hang out more.

In many ways, Boo was his only male role model. He'd taught him how to fight, how to stand up for himself, how to deal with females, and much more. He was no angel, but he was all Devonte had, and now he was locked up facing serious time for assaulting two officers and possibly a double murder charge.

Homicide had put Boo at the scene of Reo's death by his fingerprints on the back door. Tae's uncle, who was familiar with Michigan law, told him that if Boo was charged with the death of the kid, he would also be charged with Reo's death, as it related to the robbery attempt. Tae walked across the stage and got his diploma, then he and his mom had a

quiet little dinner date, just the two of them. She was still broken up and dismal about her first born's current circumstances. But seeing Tae on a different path gave her much-needed exhilaration and hope.

The next day, Tae got a call from Kwon, whom he hadn't heard from in over a month. He was ecstatic to finally catch his call.

"What's up, my nigga!" he beamed as soon as the call went through.

"Bro, what's good?" Kwon replied, and he could hear the happiness in his friend's voice as well.

"Nothing, man, you know your boy just walked across that stage."

"I know, congratulations, dog. You did that shit, boy!"

"Barely," Tae laughed.

"It don't matter, you did that shit."

"You feel me?" He smiled.

"Whatchu do afterwards?"

"Nothing really. Just went out to eat with moms and shit. I wasn't really feeling like being around a bunch of people I don't fuck with. You wasn't there and bro wasn't there, so it was kinda like ... you know?" Tae said, not able to find the right words.

“Yeah, I feel that. I’m sorry to hear about big bro, man. Des told me what happened.”

“It is what it is, man, you got your own fight to finish.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t wanna talk about that shit either, honestly.”

“Fasho,” Tae agreed, understanding it must’ve been hard to talk about his appeal when it was seemingly going nowhere.

“Anyway, man, how was prom and shit? You and Endy had a good time?”

“It was alright, man. A lot of shit went wrong that day.”

“How so?”

“For one, that’s the day Boo went to jail. I was in the bedroom with Endy having the time of my life, no bullshit. This nigga Boo come banging on the window and shit. Then it almost got too real when the police showed up.”

“Damn, I didn’t even know that part.”

“Yeah, shit was crazy. Then, you know Des was with that nigga, Tino, and I wasn’t really feeling that shit at all.”

“Yeah? What that was like, my nigga? What type of shit they was on?” Kwon decided to ask, wanting to get a real read on where things were with her and Tino for the first time.

“I mean, it was all regular shit you would expect from a prom night at first, everybody just dancing and having a good time. Once the slow dancing started, that’s the shit I didn’t like.”

“Mmm. So Tino was all up on my bitch, huh?”

“Yeah, you know a nigga gon’ be a nigga. I think he got her ass tipsy off that punch too. I wanted to say something, but Endy told me to let her enjoy herself ‘cause she been through some shit lately.”

“Damn, foreal?” Kwon said, and Tae could hear the disappointment in his friend’s voice.

“Yeah, I was pissed the fuck off, though.”

“So you think she kicking it with that nigga now?”

“I don’t know. You know she wasn’t in school that much these last couple of months, shit, most of this year really. Endy don’t tell me shit, so I can’t say.”

There was a long pause, and Tae knew his friend’s mind was probably racing. Probably feeling his girl slipping away from him. “What’s

up, my nigga, you good?”

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Des had been home all day attending to her son. He'd been excessively irritable today and she was glad when her mom came home tired and asked her to make a few runs for her. She needed a quick break from Jevonne's whining. It was warmer than normal today and neither wanted to stand over a hot stove cooking, so she went out to get pizza, stop by Family Dollar for a couple of things, and play her mom's numbers. When she drove around, she thought about the near future now that she was done with school.

Although her mom was super supportive of her and was in no rush for her to get a job, a lot had changed since last summer when her plans were to apply to a four-year college and live on campus somewhere out of state. Now she was looking at something more immediate. She was looking at a career in the medical field and planned to enroll in a program that would allow her to become a medical assistant by the end of the year. She planned to take evening classes so her mom could watch the baby.

Thankful wasn't a big enough word she could use to describe how she felt about the way her mom was stepping up to help her with the entire

transition from a high school student to someone's mom. Her phone rang with a call from Tino as she left the pizzeria.

"Hey, Tino," she answered.

"What's up, Mello Yellow?" he replied.

"Boy, my name is Destiny. What I tell you?"

"I can't have a nickname for you though?"

"If I liked it you could, but I don't, so no."

Des had been fighting the urge to get to know Tino more all the way up until prom night. After that, she had come to realize that she couldn't feel guilty about befriending another man when the dude she loved was doing thirty-plus years in prison. She still had faith that Markwon would come home way before then, but that didn't mean it would happen today or tomorrow. Tino turned out to be cooler than she expected. She was attracted to him and he treated her with respect. So far, nothing about their friendship felt forced, so she was just going with the flow.

"Damn. That's cold," Tino said. "Anyway, what you doing?"

"Making runs for my mama. Just left getting some pizza."

"Yeah? I want some."



“You just wanna see me, stop lying,” she giggled.

“I do want some and I wanna see you.”

“Not today. I look a mess and my baby been tripping all damn day.”

“Well, when you gonna let me take you out on a date then? You haven’t answered that question yet.”

Since prom night, Des had invited Tino over a couple times but they still hadn’t been on a date.

“Friday if you're free,” she said, purposely catching him by surprise.

“Oh foreal? You finally ready to stop playing with me?” he chuckled.

“I wouldn’t mind getting out of the house, it’s been a minute.”

“Say no more. I got the perfect lil’ spot and everything.”

“Sure you do,” she said skeptically.

“We’ll see.”

“Sure will.” Des smiled, feeling a little excited about the idea of an actual date.

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The sound of dumbbells and steel plates banging together was the only thing that overshadowed the loud grunts of determination inside the weight pit. It was the only place in the whole prison Markwon felt at peace, and today he was in bad need of that peace. The anger that built up inside of him after talking to Tae continued to snowball long after he ended the call. He was so angry he couldn't even call Des and talk to her about it.

*What would he say anyway? How dare you try and have a life and not sit around and wait for me forever?* Still, the reality of her possibly trying to date or finding interest in someone else was devastating. It made the love she claimed to have for him feel fabricated. Today he felt stronger than he'd ever felt as he bench pressed 225 pounds over and over, with Game standing over him as the spotter. He was definitely stronger now, and he'd put on a little more weight in the past few weeks.

"One more," Game insisted, always pushing Markwon past his believed limitations.

"Arrrggg!" he growled, pushing with all he had before he locked his elbows and racked the weight. "Got dam!"

"You tired?" Game asked.

"Hell no. I'm just getting warmed up," Markwon replied as he sat up on the bench.

As Kwon reached for his water, he stood to be the spotter so Game could get his set in. A dude walked inside of the gym that he'd only seen recently a few times. He must've been a new ride-in or something. What made Kwon keep an eye on the guy was the fact that he seemed to be fixated on him. From the time he entered the weight room, he'd scanned the area, zeroed in on Kwon, and now seemed to be headed straight towards him. His posture was all business and his eyes were cold. Kwon was already on guard now when he was approached.

"Yo' name Markwon?" dude questioned.

"Who is you?" Kwon replied.

"Don't worry about me, nigga, is your name Markwon or not?"

Kwon knew it was about to go down. He didn't quite know why, but this was prison life and he'd learned to be ready at all times.

"Yeah, nigga, what's up?" he replied, spreading his feet a bit wider, clenching his fists.

"Phil was my cousin, you bitch ass nigga!"

Before the dude was even finished with the sentence, he was taking swings at Kwon. He ducked just in the nick of time. The wild swing had so much force behind it, it left his attacker off balance. Kwon swung hard and

fast as he fell forward, connecting with two hard blows. The dude stumbled and grabbed Markwon, pushing him back until he fell over the weight bench.

“Give ‘em room, give ‘em room,” Game ordered as he cleared out the space around them, moving like a referee.

Kwon was down and the dude was leaning over him, getting off multiple right punches to the side of his face. Kwon’s legs were trapped under his attacker on top of the weight bench. He slid his legs out and was able to stumble to his feet before his attacker could round the bench. Markwon went on the attack, throwing combos and connecting. Dude tried to tackle him again, but this time there was nothing to trip him up. Kwon began to realize how much stronger he was when swung dude around and slammed him to the floor. Guards were only a stone’s toss away the entire time, but they’d decided to watch the show for a second before getting involved. Meanwhile, Kwon had pounced on his attacker, getting off a flurry of punches before he was able to break loose and stagger to his feet. His attacker’s mouth was bleeding now.

“What’s up, nigga?” Kwon challenged as they both danced around each other, hoping for a second wind.

Markwon saw something in the dude's eyes he'd never seen before. He saw fear as the COs stormed in and wrestled them both to the ground and handcuffed them. He didn't care about going to the hole. He had just survived another prison rumble. Not only did he survive, this time he came out on top.

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Des missed the call but received the text message from Kwon's mom while she was on a date with Tino. She was wondering why she hadn't heard from him, and now her mind was somewhere else most of the night and she ended up going home earlier than expected. She wanted to call his mom and find out if she could give her some more details about what happened. She was afraid that something bad had happened to him, and even more worried about the toll another Phil-type situation would do to his psyche.

His mom couldn't tell her much but by the sound of his letter, it seemed like he was fine. After talking to Chanel in the driveway, she came into the house and found her mom and her sister in the family room. Jevonne was in the bassinette wide awake, just chilling.

"Kwon is in the hole," she informed her mom as soon as she came in.

“What? Oh no!”

“I just talked to his mom. He was fighting in the weight room, that’s all I know.”

“Oh my god, is he okay?”

“She said he was,” she replied, flopping down on the sofa.

“So how long he gotta stay in there?”

“I don’t know. I won’t know anything until he writes me or calls me.”

“Did he get beat up?” Kadijah asked.

“Didn’t you just hear me say I don’t know nothing?” she snapped, being upset at her little sister for assuming the worst.

“I just asked a question.”

“And I answered it,” Des sassed.

“Come on y’all, stop,” her mom interrupted. “Say a prayer for him tonight before you go to bed.”

“I always pray for him, Mama.”

Des decided she missed her baby while she was gone, so she got up and went to get him out of the bassinette. Cynthia changed channels on the

television just in time to catch the last three numbers of the Mega Millions dropping. When Des sat back down, she noticed the first three numbers immediately. She was the one to turn in the tickets again. As the next two numbers fell, her brain didn't compute what was going on as fast as it was happening. She kind of froze until she heard her mom swear.

“Oh shit!”

Her heart started to pound as the realization kicked in that they had five of the six winning numbers. Before that registered good, the sixth number was called. Her family had just hit the Mega Millions lottery. Des and Cynthia turned to each other speechless, eyes about to pop out of their skulls.

“Oh my god! OH MY GOD! OH MYYYYY GAAAAWD!” Cynthia shouted.

“NO FUCKING WAAAAAAAY!” Des screamed, running in place as her sister finally caught on and started to jump up and down.

“We won! We won!” Kadijah shouted, and their mom started running and jumping with them.

Des had to rush and put her son back in the bassinet, knowing she was too excited to have him in her arms. They all stood in the middle of the

living room jumping up and down ecstatically, knowing that their lives had just been dramatically changed forever.

“NOOOOO WAAAAAAAAY!” Des continued to scream loud enough for her voice to travel farther than it ever had before.



# Chapter 12

## Seven Years Later

Everyone in the room sat still as a statue as they tuned into the pastor, hanging on his every word. Endy stood at the altar wearing a beautiful sleeveless white dress that boasted a train longer than an Amtrak. She blinked back tears of joy as the pastor looked her in the eyes, smiling.

“Do you, Endy, take Devonte, to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

“I do,” she replied, smiling bigger than she ever had.

Tae stood there dressed in a black Saint Laurent classic wool suit and matching loafers, with his shoulders all squared, proud as ever of himself for finally being able to bag the girl of his dreams for life. The road to the altar had been a rocky one for the two of them. After high school, Endy went out of state to college while Tae started to work odd jobs full time, always looking for the best pay rate. Things worked out pretty good for them at first, but eventually, the distance between them along with Tae’s

insecurities started to push them apart. Endy played her part in the disconnect as well.

Her ego became a factor as she saw her future growing bright as she'd envisioned it when she was younger. The attention she got from the college boys made it hard to focus on her relationship when Tae was hardly ever around. At the end of her sophomore year, the two of them called it quits and went their separate ways. For Endy, although the breakup hurt, it was a time to be free from the restrictions of a relationship, but for Tae, it was a knife through the heart. When he should have been sowing his oats and enjoying the life of a young single man, he was trying desperately to find someone that could compare to the love he'd lost.

Then when Carlos' health took another turn for the worse and he was rushed to the hospital with kidney failure, Endy decided to transfer to U of M so she could be closer to home with her family. When Tae found out about her dad, he had to reach out to her. Two and half years had passed since their breakup, but the feelings he'd had for her never burned out, still smoldering in the pit of his stomach. Slowly, the two of them began to talk more, and Tae quickly realized there was a window of opportunity open that he absolutely had to take advantage of.

Endy soon concluded that she never stopped loving Tae either, and he confided that he believed in his heart he would never meet another woman of her caliber that would love him for who he was. He proposed while they were on a vacation in Myrtle Beach, and Endy said yes, knowing she had a man that would love her with everything he had. As he accepted the vows the pastor laid before him, the two of them locked eyes in a moment that felt like their souls touched.

“You may kiss your lovely bride,” the pastor finished.

“Come here,” Tae summoned, as he pulled her into a long and thirsty lip lock that had the guests clapping and cheering them on.

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At the reception, Des sat with her mom, her mom’s new boyfriend, her baby sister, who was now 18, and her boyfriend, Tino. She leaned back in her chair, smiling at her best friend and her husband on the dancefloor showing off. Tae had just learned to ballroom dance specifically for this occasion, and now he was stepping in the name of love with swagger. Des glanced over and spotted her son, Jevonne, at the kids’ table passing licks on the sly.

“Hey!” she shouted, pointing a stiff finger as a warning.

Joevonne stopped and looked around the room innocently, pretending not to see his mom with her eyes glued to him. Raising their son over the past seven years had been sometimes overwhelmingly challenging. Although they were more than financially stable, and there was a male figure around, without knowing it, Joevonne took on a lot of his father's ways. He was spoiled, entitled even.

He knew from the beginning that Tino was not his father, and Tino never wanted to overstep his boundaries, which only made Joevonne act out more, pushing his limits. It was a complicated situation. Des didn't believe in physically disciplining her son, but Kwon did. Kwon would also never allow Tino to be the one to issue out any ass whoopings if they were ever to take place, though. She tried putting him in therapy and all types of activities, but it seemed the only person that could get through to him was his father.

"Tae hitting that shit," Tino said, laughing.

"Ain't he though?" Des agreed.

The song changed to Koffee Brown's "After Party," and the couples began to spill onto the floor.

"Come on, let's show 'em how we do," Tino said, grabbing Des by the hand.

She was hesitant at first, wanting to keep a close eye on Jevonne's bad ass, but as she glanced at him, her mom noticed her hesitance and read her mind.

"I got him," she assured.

The two of them strolled out onto the floor and got their groove on. Love was in the air and everyone was having a great time. As couples danced seductively all around them, Des couldn't help but reflect a bit on her own relationship. She and Tino weren't perfect, but she was happy for the most part. Throughout the years, she'd met a lot of men that wanted to latch on to her, hoping to reap some of the financial benefits of being in a relationship with her, but Tino wasn't like that. He made good money as a fitness trainer after his dreams of the NBA didn't pan out.

He worked around and with a lot of attractive women, which caused friction sometimes, but Des had finally made it to a place where she'd forced herself out of being insecure about it. They only dated a year after high school, but things had been off and on since then. This was the longest they'd ever been ongoing, three years in now and living together. Des figured they had tried to go their separate ways more than once but always seemed to find their way back to each other, so why not try and make it work?

Outside, Des handed over the keys to her metallic white 7 Series M Sport Beamer. She just wanted to kick off her heels and relax on the ride home.

“You driving,” she insisted as Tino took the keys.

“No, I’m driving,” Jevonne said, snatching the keys and running off. He ran right out into an oncoming car, and Des’ heart stopped as the driver quickly slammed on the brakes.

“Jevonne!” she screamed in panic as Tino rushed to grab him.

Everyone in the parking lot froze as the car braked just inches before hitting Jevonne. Because he was angry and scared, Tino snatched him by the arm a little harder than intended, and Jevonne began to cry.

“Stop playing so much, boy, you almost got hit by that damn car.”

“Leave me alone,” he whined before he punched Tino’s leg for pulling him so hard.

“Boy, what I tell you about that punching?” Tino warned.

“Jevonne, get yo’ ass in this car! Now!” Des shouted as she grabbed him from Tino and drug him forcefully to the backseat. “How many times I gotta tell you about running out in traffic? Huh?!”

Inside the car, he proceeded to kick the backseat angrily with his arms folded tightly as she secured his seatbelt. Defiantly, he unbuckled the seatbelt as soon as she clicked it.

“Jevonne, put this fucking seatbelt on and stop playing with me.”

He finally stopped resisting and let the seatbelt stay on. When Des got in the car, her heart was still pounding and she was shaking from the close call. It had been a great moment to share with her best friend, but she was super irritated by Jevonne’s actions throughout the day. She quickly let down the tinted windows and rolled back the panoramic sunroof, in desperate need of some air. Tino drove silently with the music low as Des took off her heels. She knew he was probably irritated as well.

“I wanna watch *Sponge Bob*,” her son whined.

“Turn it on, you know how to do it,” she told him.

“Turn the music down, I can’t hear.”

“Put your headphones in, that’s what they for.”

“Right, because I don’t wanna hear y’all voices anyway,” he sassed.

“Boy, shut up and watch your show,” Tino told him.

He kicked the back of the passenger seat. Des turned and shot daggers at him.

“Keep being a fucking brat, alright? I’m taking every fucking crumb of entertainment you got in the house and locking that shit up!”

Joevonne scowled. “And don’t say another word the rest of this ride, because I’m tired of you just like you’re tired of me,” Des finished.

The rest of the ride was peaceful as they drove home to Oakland Township. Pulling down the long stretch of driveway that preceded the property, Des couldn’t wait to get Joevonne in bed and then take a long, hot bath, then maybe soak in the Jacuzzi. Her house sat on a cool two acres of land and was worth 1.9 million at closing. It was a home she never could’ve dreamed of living in at twenty-five. Her mom had always promised her that if she ever hit the lottery on the days that Des made the lottery runs for her, then she would split the winnings 50/50. Just so happened Des had turned in her tickets that day.

The lottery was 36 million dollars, but it didn’t all go to them. There was another winner that they had to split the money with. Her mom chose the smart option to have the money spread out in payments over the next thirty years. That left them with an annual income of around half a million dollars to split between them. Kadajah had just received a lump sum from her mom when she turned 18, and would inherit all of her mom’s money when she passed away.



At first, Des took a year off from school and work to just live and enjoy her newfound wealth. She traveled the world and experienced things some people never would in their entire life.

Sometimes she traveled with her family, sometimes with a guy, sometimes just her and Joevonne. After a year, she went back to school and eventually earned a bachelor's in business. She wanted to start a business but had yet to find her passion.

By the time they made it home, Joevonne was knocked out. Tino carried him inside and up to his bedroom quietly, hoping he stayed that way. After getting Joevonne in bed, Des stripped down to her birthday suit and headed into the master bath that was almost as big as her bedroom.

Tino had run her bath water already, and she slowly eased down into the porcelain tub that sat opposite the walk-in shower. The soothing hot water immediately gave her a much-needed pressure release that made a moan escape her lips. Her son was heavy on her mind because he seemed to be only getting worse. He was having a hard time socializing and behaving at his private school. He'd started trying to use curse words more blatantly than he was before. It all brought her back to the thing that had been her main focus for the past couple of years. If there was a way, she had to get

his father out of prison. She knew this was a time when Jevonne truly needed his dad.

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Kwon sat at the card table studying his partner and their opponents' eyes. Engaged in a serious game of Spades, he had counted the cards well and knew exactly what hadn't been played. By the smirk on his partner's face, he also knew that they had this game in the bag as long as he played his hand right. He led with a ten of diamonds. Down came the king. His partner cut it with a two of spades.

"Aaaaaah!" his opponents roared in defeat, knowing Kwon's team held the last book.

"Yeah." Kwon nodded in victory before the game was even over.

"They got that shit, man," Tick said, tossing in his cards.

"Yeah, they got it," his partner Sam followed.

It felt good to be in a level three now with a little more room to breathe. He still didn't get much yard time, but Kwon was able to hang outside of his cell and do more activities. Activities that kept him out of trouble and his mind off of the time that he was still walking down. He was still in the same prison, just on a different side. Game's level had also

dropped, but they were no longer in the same prison. Kwon and Game kept in touch about twice a year. After going to the hole, it took a couple of years to work off the points he'd built up for fighting in the weight pit. He never saw Phil's cousin again, but it was a lesson learned to always be on point and assume there was imminent danger around at all times. He'd been in more altercations since, but he was never caught and taken to the hole again. Since her graduation, Kwon and Des slowly drifted apart.

Once her family came into such a large amount of cash, it was no way he was going to be able to hold her attention from a jail cell. As much as he loved her, Kwon knew he had to let her go. Although she moved on and started dating again, she never stopped sending him money and she made sure that his son had the best relationship they could manage under the circumstance. It was a hard pill to swallow knowing how much life he was missing as each calendar flipped and his son grew older and more defiant.

Kwon had exhausted all of his appeals and had begun to accept his fate. The only thing that gave him some sense of hope was the fact that he had people out there still fighting for his freedom. Des had more faith left than he did. He couldn't see any reason to keep dreaming of a day that would never come. His parents were still trying to find someone that would possibly look into his case.

They continued to research organizations that helped innocent people get justice when wrongly convicted. But what they didn't know, what no one that saw him fighting for his freedom knew, was that he was in fact guilty. That guilt alone made it hard for him to see a brighter future than the one before him. The only thing he had left was a small morsel of faith that he would someday be given another chance, and that hopefully, he would make the best of it.

After finishing up the game of Spades, Markwon headed to the bathroom to take a piss. Inside, he's spotted Tick and Sam, who had left the table first, both upset about the small wager they'd lost in the game.

"Bitch ass nigga, you ain't never gotta be my partner no more. I don't give a fuck," Sam said.

The two joked around a lot, but today they didn't look like they were playing.

"Man, who you talking to like that? Call me another bitch nigga, I'ma beat yo' ass up in here," Tick threatened.

"What's up then, nigga? Watch the door y'all," Sam said as he squared up in a fighting stance.

Kwon quickly stepped in and put his arm around Tick and began to guide him away from Sam and towards the bathroom door.

“Come on, come on, walk with me, bro. Walk with me just for one minute,” Kwon said, opening the door now.

“Sup man?” Tick said, still heated.

Kwon could tell by how tense his shoulders were he was ready to scrap.

“You don’t wanna do that, man. That’s just another black man fighting the same fight as you. Fight with ‘em not against ‘em, you feel me? Don’t blow your shit and end up back in level four, my nigga. You better than that. You got a daughter out there you tryna get home to, remember? Fuck that little money or whatever the situation is.”

“Nigga always talking shit!” Tick vented as they made their way further down the hall.

“Don’t matter, let ‘em talk. If you go in everybody's shit that’s running they mouth, you’ll never get out this bitch. You got a thirty-year tail, nigga, you wanna be here for thirty years with me?” Kwon rationalized.

He had been at the new joint for a year now. He’d made a respectable name for himself in level four prison, and a lot of those same

dudes were around that saw him handle himself when he needed to. He'd earned his respect from those that mattered, and word got around that he was a solid dude. He'd come in a boy, but he was a man now. A man that had learned to survive under the most detrimental conditions. But Kwon chose to use his respect differently than most. He used it to keep confusion down when he could. He used it to shine a light on all the negative programming that black men had instilled in them since birth. He'd read hundreds of books since he'd been in prison, including the Bible and the Koran. He was much more enlightened now and self-aware. He was nothing like the Kwon that came through the doors at eighteen. Not even close.

“And that’s yo’ manz anyway, ain’t it?”

“That ain’t my manz like that, I just gamble with the nigga sometimes.”

“Okay, well, y’all cool enough to get money together, y’all cool enough to talk about some shit like men, right?”

“You right, my G. You see how that nigga be on some hoe shit, though, but I hear you,” Tick said, still watching his back.

Sam came from the bathroom.

“I’ma holla at him too, but you know I fuck with you. I can’t let you jack reck like that, fam.”

Tick had been given some time to cool down now, and he realized everything Kwon had said, he needed to hear at that moment. He reached for Kwon’s hand and they slapped fives.

“You a real nigga, fam,” Tick said.

“Yeah, man, think about that little girl, man. Baby mama gon’ need your help out there in a few years. Don’t let these niggas keep you from your family.”

“You right. I’ma go press my rack,” Tick replied, meaning he was going to go in his room and chill until he settled down.

“Yup.” Kwon nodded in agreement, and the two slapped fives again and went separate ways, and Kwon went to go and try to talk some sense into Sam.

He was good at defusing situations. It was something he took pride in now.

# Chapter 13

## Montego Bay, Jamaica

It was the second day of Tae and Endy's four-day, all-inclusive honeymoon stay at the Hilton Rose. The room temperature was perfect in their oceanfront suite as they slept in, soaking up the bliss. Tae laid on his side, eyeballs enthralled in Endy as she slept in the comfort of memory foam wrapped in Egyptian cotton linen. She looked so beautiful and angelic sleeping, and he was still in awe that out of all the men in the world, she had chosen him. It wasn't so much that he didn't think of himself as worthy, but more so that she just made him feel extremely lucky.

Her eyes popped open, as if she could feel his intense focus on her. He didn't look away, instead locking eyes with her in silence.

"Stalker," she said, turning over, placing her back to him. "What I tell you about watching me sleep?"

He spooned her and kissed her neck softly.

"What I tell you about me not giving a fuck about how you feel about it?"



Their naked bodies clung together as she scooted closer, giving him an immediate erection.

“Get your dick off me. Where was all that energy at last night?” she teased him, playfully scooting away.

“I fucked the shit out you last night, don’t sit up here and lie,” he defended his performance.

“You didn’t put me to sleep, though. I was still up, you said you was gon’ put me to sleep.”

He moved closer and cupped her breast then nibbled her shoulder, slowly guiding her body to an angle closer to her stomach. She didn’t resist, even gapped her legs apart for him.

“You ain’t said shit, watch my next move,” he threatened as he grabbed his pole.

She slid out from under him and out of the bed.

“Unuh, wait. What time is it?”

“I don’t know, why? Bring yo’ ass back here.”

Endy went to the curtains and yanked them open, letting the sunlight illuminate the room.

“Cause we got the couples massage at noon,” she remembered, looking out at the heavenly view.

Devonte rolled over and found his watch.

“Girl, it's only 10 something.”

“Oh. In that case...”

She rushed to the bed, climbed on over him, and laid out like a snow angel. “Take me now,” she purred dramatically.

Before she could get the words out, Tae was climbing on top of her and sliding inside of her wet walls without warning. She arched her back as his thrilling manhood tunneled inside her and took command of her body. He found her left nipple and captured it. She linked both legs around his calves as he began to drill her with a rhythmic pound. Endy bit her lip and gripped his bare back, holding on as if she sensed the ride was about to get rough.

He still had fresh sore scratches on his back from last night and wasn't ready for more just yet, so he lifted and locked his arms in a pushup position as he continued to stroke. She smacked his ass hard.

“Come on,” she dared him.

He found her arms and pinned them both right above her head as he felt his dick extending to maximum capacity. When he heard the gasp for breath followed by her screaming his name, he knew he had her right where he wanted.

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Boo had just ridden in from up north after finally getting his security level dropped to a level three. He was a short timer now, but due to his assaults and fighting tickets he'd caught during the first four years, he knew he probably wasn't going home when he saw the parole board. After having his most serious charges dropped in the death of a seven-year-old due to lack of evidence, he was slammed with a ten-to-twenty-year sentence for assault on police officers. Beating the case didn't stop the nightmares and overwhelming guilt he continued to suffer from the tragic event.

It chipped away at his sanity sometimes, forcing him to take out his frustrations on others around him. To this day, he still hadn't accepted the fact that he was responsible. He told himself that maybe SB unintentionally shot his own kid. But even that didn't soothe his tortured soul, because the fact remained that the kid would still be alive today had he not been there. After being assigned a room, Boo left the control center and split up from the other inmates he rode in with, heading to his new home. Once he

arrived, he realized that he had a white guy for a bunky. He was indifferent about it but would've rather had a brother just for the sake of cultural conversation. After getting his property squared away, he realized it was time for yard. He hurried out into the halls, dying to get into the fresh air and smoke.

Heading to the stairs that led to the yard exit, he spotted a familiar face in the crowd. Dressed in burgundy sweats and white sneakers, the dude looked much buffer than he remembered, but as he peered in closer he knew it was definitely him.

“Kwon!” he called out.

Kwon stopped and spun around. His eyes squinted as Boo came closer, then a huge smile spread across his face.

“What’s up, fam?” Kwon greeted as the two embraced tightly.

“My nigga!” Boo said, happy to see a familiar face that he had genuine love for.

“When you get here, today?”

“Just got here a couple hours ago,” Boo replied, breaking their embrace.

“Damn, it’s good to see you, bro. You headed to the yard?”

“Yeah, nigga, I need to smoke.”

“Come on, let’s roll,” Kwon said.

As they hit the yard, Kwon showed Boo around and filled him in on the ins and outs of this jail and level three in particular. They’d both come from a different way of jailing, and Kwon knew it would be an adjustment for Boo.

“My nigga, you done got buff in this bitch.” Boo punched his chest.

“Little something, man,” he replied, flexing his upper body muscles and pounding his own chest. “Ain’t shit else to do.”

Kwon had put on twenty-five pounds of solid muscle. He’d gone from a scrawny kid to a model of fitness. He caught the female COs gawking at him all the time, and the attention always gave his ego a boost. As they walked past one in particular, he smiled and nodded.

“Hey, Markwon,” she spoke, smiling back.

“Hey, Ms. Enos.”

“What I tell you about calling me that?”

“My bad, Sherrie,” he said as he made it to the yard.

Boo lit his cigarette.

“So, what’s the deal with these female COs? They getting down?”

“You mean fucking?” Kwon asked.

“Shit, fucking, bringing in the bag, whatever. What’s up with ‘em?”

Kwon could tell Boo was like a Pitbull off the leash in level three.

“To be honest with you, bro, I wouldn’t know. I try to stay off the radar and out of them people face.”

Boo looked at him like he was crazy.

“For what, nigga? Don’t you got thirty years?”

“Yeah, but that don’t mean I’m trying to do it all.”

“You heard something on your appeal?”

“Naw, they shot me down.” He lowered his head in disappointment.

“All of ‘em?”

“Hell yeah.”

Boo hit his cigarette.

“So what am I missing?”

“I don’t know, big bro. I guess you missing the part about me not giving up on myself in this bitch. For some reason, I feel like God just keep

telling me to keep my nose clean, so that's what I been doing. I could be wrong, but I'm just going with my gut on this shit right now."

As the two walked the yard and dug deeper into each other's lives over the past seven years, Boo realized that this was not the same Kwon he watched grow up on the block. He was a grown man now, with his own mind and finding his own way. None of that changed Boo's outlook on life, of course. He was still going to do his time his way.

"I wish you all the luck in the world, bro, 'cause I know nobody wanna do that type of time. But I'ma get me a bag in this bitch as soon as I can, if it's possible. Money I had on the streets been gone a long time ago, and I can't wait around for nobody out there to take care of me."

"I can respect that too, though," Kwon replied honestly.

Just then, Boo spotted someone else he knew on the yard. Someone that could probably give him more reliable information about the organized crime elements of this particular prison.

"Yo, Black Boy! What up!?" Boo called out, throwing his hands up high.

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It was the third day of the honeymoon and the newlywed couple was having the time of their lives, working their way down the list of things they'd planned to do in Jamaica. Today they went ziplining and drove ATVs, which turned out not to be Endy's thing at all. She was just happy to see her husband enjoying himself, but for her, she couldn't wait until it was over. After that, they went back to the room to shower and change into their swimwear before heading down to one of several pools. They got a little tipsy at the underwater bar inside the pool, and Tae's eyes began to roam a little, taken aback by all the amazing asses in his vicinity.

“Hey, hey, hey! Eyes over here, nigga, I see you,” Endy warned.

Tae looked at her and smiled, realizing he got caught in the act.

“Shut up, I can look. You know I only got an appetite for you, don't play.”

“Whatever. The way you was looking, you might got an appetite for me and a thirst for something else,” she teased.

“Oh, you calling me thirsty now?” he chuckled.

“I don't know, that's what I'm tryna find out.” She threw up her hands, laughing.

“The fuck outta here.”



“Speaking of appetite, I’m getting hungry,” she informed, letting her legs flutter in the water, dangling from the barstool.

“What you wanna eat?”

“Let’s go back to the thingy. It’s getting late anyway. By the time we go get dressed, it’ll be nighttime anyway.”

“You don’t wanna watch the sunset again?”

Last night they had watched the sunset from the beach and it was an amazing moment for them both as they laid in each other’s arms, feeling an overwhelming sense of gratitude. Yeah, there were things Tae would like to be different. His girl made twice what he made working at the cable company installing cable, but to be honest, it wasn’t something she ever made him aware of, which made it easy to forget at times. He liked the job and the people he worked for, so he wasn’t in a rush to find a better job. They had everything they needed, and until they reached the point where they were ready to start a family, he figured, why change what’s working?”

“I don’t think I can wait that long. I can’t eat the sun,” Endy replied.

“You ever tried that Jamaican sand on the beach, though? I heard that shit kinda tasty.”

“Shut the fuck up, Tae,” she laughed.

“Tell the truth, you know you ate some mud pies when you was a dirty ass little girl on the eastside.”

“I’ma beat yo’ ass!” She splashed water in his face and all into his drink, officially ending their pool time as Tae laughed hysterically.

After changing clothes again, they went to have a romantic candlelight dinner in the beautiful courtyard. The vintage feel and spectacular service had Endy eager to come back again after the first time. As they were led to a table, a man’s voice called out.

“Endy?”

She looked up and spotted someone she knew from work.

“Steffan?”

The tall, copper-brown brother in cargo shorts, a polo, and flipflops stood up and headed their way. Endy met him halfway, not far from their own table. They embraced in a brief hug.

“What a surprise seeing you here!” Endy said.

“Yeah, I thought I was tripping for a second, but then I took a closer look,” he chuckled.

“I’m on my honeymoon. This is my husband, Devonte. Tae, this my coworker, Steffan,” she introduced.

“What’s up, bro, congrats man,” Steffan said, and they shook hands.

“Appreciate it, bro.”

“Hey, Britt, come here for a second.”

A tall, mocha-brown woman with an hourglass shape joined them moments later. She smiled and waved. “This is my good friend, Brittany, we just got here today.”

“How you doing, Brittany?” Endy greeted, and the two shook hands.

After that, she and Tae did the same, then Tae just kind of stood there while Endy and Steffan talked about how they were enjoying the stay, and then naturally drifted the conversation to work. He didn’t know these people and didn’t want to know them either.

“And you know Leslie finally had her baby,” Endy said.

“Yeah, I heard. They say she had a biiiiig baby.”

“Oh my god, yes!”

Brittany cut in after a few minutes.

“Hey, I’m gonna head back to the table before my food gets cold. It was nice meeting you two, and congrats again.”

“Nice meeting you too. I’m actually gonna head to the table too,”  
Tae said.

“Okay, that’s fine. If you wanna order, get me the lobster,” Endy  
told him.

Tae thought that would’ve been her cue to wrap it up, but it wasn’t. As he took his seat at the table, Endy and Steffan continued their conversation long past after he’d made their orders. They were only fifteen feet away. It wasn’t the fact that they were talking to each other instead of the people they were there with, it was the fact that this was their honeymoon and Endy was just enjoying a conversation with this other nigga too damn much! Steffan’s arms were all folded, and he was smiling, gazing at her intensely.

Endy would toss her head back in laughter and slap his arms as if Tae wasn’t fucking standing right there. All these years and she still was doing the shit that pissed him off the most. Flirting with niggas. He’d tried to convince himself that this was who she was, and if he really loved her, he should just accept the whole person and not try and change her.

But after the waiter started to bring plates out and she still hadn’t wrapped it up, he knew that this shit was just unacceptable.

“So why the fuck you stand there and act like you wasn’t gonna see that nigga right back at work that next week anyway? You had to run your mouth for a fucking hour?”

“It wasn’t no hour, Tae, stop exaggerating,” Endy said, defending her actions back at the hotel room.

Tae checked her about it at the restaurant, but he refused to make a scene. He kept his cool until they made it back to the room, then he exploded.

“This the shit I be talking about! You know who the fuck I am by now.”

“And you know who the fuck I am by now!” Endy fired back.

“Wrong is wrong, Endy! I would never do no hoe shit like that to you. You got a nigga thinking you more interested in what the fuck he talking about than your muthafucking husband.”

“You need to calm down, ‘cause all this fucking yelling ain’t doing shit for me.”

“Maaaaan, fuck you!” he yelled louder as he paced the floor, and Endy sat at the edge of the bed.

The fact that she never wanted to admit she was wrong was always more aggravating than the initial offense. He shook his head in disbelief.

“Some things never change,” he mumbled.

“Duh! You right, so get used to it!”

It was at that moment that Tae knew he had to get out of there. He had to leave, because he was on the verge of saying some shit he could never take back. And he was feeling like maybe he should, but it was their honeymoon, so he didn't. He grabbed his room key and fled the scene, feeling like punching holes in walls.

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Kwon could tell that time, or something else, was really bothering Boo. He'd only rode in two weeks ago, and it seemed like he was already on the radar of all the wrong people, including the second shift captain and lieutenant, but Boo didn't care. He was doing his time the way he wanted to do it, but he wasn't acting like the same dude Kwon remembered. Boo was always a gangsta and a criminal, but he was calculated and made moves that either made dollars or made sense. This version of Boo was reckless as hell, and Kwon didn't see how he was going to last long in level three. Already, he'd found all the players on the yard that had pills, weed, or spud juice, and he was indulging in all of it. Yesterday when they walked the

yard together, Kwon could smell the alcohol breathing through his pores, and he knew if he didn't talk to him, it was just a matter of time before the COs in his unit ran up in his cell.

As the two of them took their daily walk counterclockwise around the track, Boo was sober at the moment. Kwon felt like it was a good time to try and talk to him.

“Wanted to holla at you about something, fam,” he started.

“What's up? Holla,” Boo replied.

A dude that was taking his walk in the opposite direction came upon them. Boo cut Kwon off as he was about to speak his peace.

“What's up, Debo? I got them thangs,” Boo said.

“On you?” Debo said.

“Naw, back at the house.”

“Alright, bet. I'ma catch up with you after yard.”

“Bet,” Boo agreed.

Once they were out of earshot from anyone else, Kwon started again.

“That's kinda what I wanted to holla at you about.”

“Talk to me.”

“You don’t think you need to slow down a little bit? I mean, I know you grown as hell and you my big bro, but if I see something dangerous happening that I don’t speak on, then what kinda homie would I be? You feel me?”

Boo didn’t hesitate to reply.

“Kwon, I hear you, and I appreciate your concern, but this big boy business. This how I jail, you know? I’ma slang some shit, I’ma stay faded every chance I get, and if I can get one of these lil’ bitches to pull they pants down, I’ma do that too. I got a bunch of heavy shit on me, man, and ... I don’t know no other way to keep it off me. Shit’s eating me up inside. You know me, Kwon, I wasn’t never no nigga to be out here popping pills on all that shit, but now, seems like that’s the only way I can really sleep at night.”

Somehow, their brisk walk came to a slow drag as both men got lost in their own thoughts. Boo had just about confirmed what was lingering in the back of Kwon’s mind. Something was eating at Boo, and he believed he knew what it was.

“I’m just saying, man, I don’t wanna see you get tossed in the hole or slapped on the ride-out list. That lieutenant here don’t play,” he warned.



“I ain’t seen you in ‘bout seven years, nigga. I don’t wanna see you ride out this muthafucka, you know?”

“I ain’t going nowhere, my nigga, we in this bitch, fuck that lieutenant. Tell that bitch, catch me if you can,” Boo said and burst into laughter, which made Kwon laugh too.

But deep down, Kwon didn’t find anything funny about the way Boo was moving, and he really didn’t want him to blow the spot. Boo was the closest thing to family he would probably ever have in prison. As they passed a couple of Islamic brothers that they both knew, they all greeted each other, the Muslims using the native greeting.

“As salaam alaikum Ock,” Boo returned.

“Big ride-in today,” the righteous brother said as they passed.

“Yeah, I heard,” Kwon said.

No sooner than the words were said, Boo’s demeanor changed.

“Hold the fuck up, man,” he spoke in a low tone.

Three gentlemen were approaching, and the look in Boo’s eyes was barely readable. It wasn’t fear ... it was more like dangerously alert. Seconds later, one of the dudes spotted Boo for the first time, and his gaze grew vicious as they locked eyes, slowly passing. Even after they had

passed one another, both men spun around and began to walk backward, not willing to take their eyes off one another.

“What’s up, man?” Kwon said finally.

“That’s the bitch ass nigga that killed my nigga, Reo. They don’t fucked up and put this nigga in the same jail as me.”

Kwon had learned of Reo only recently, but most of what he knew was that Boo and Reo were the closest of friends. He knew this wouldn’t go well.

“You sure that’s him?” Kwon asked, hoping he wasn’t.

“Yeah, that’s him,” Boo said, finally turning around. “It’s on now, nigga.”

# Chapter 14

Des sat in the living area of the house, gazing out of the floor-to-ceiling windows that gave her a therapeutic view of the forest full of trees right outside of her property. The serene white walls throughout the house along with the ultramodern lighting and curved hallways gave the house a futuristic and peaceful feel walking through it. She'd done a lot to the home since buying it three years ago to make sure it felt like her sanctuary. She was thinking about expanding the deck out back, when her cell phone interrupted her daydreaming. She knew who it was. She had been expecting his call.

“Joevonne!” she called out as loud as she could, waiting for the automated system to run its course.

“Hey,” she greeted Kwon.

“Hey, how you doing?”

“I'm good, just sitting here waiting 'cause I knew you were calling.”

“Yeah? You was waiting by the phone for me, huh?”

“Whatever.” Des smiled.

“I’m just messing with you.”

“I know. So listen, I have a meeting with this new group, Project Innocence, next week and I was hoping to get your lawyer to come with me. You know I don’t know anything about the legal system and the law. I need him there to explain what’s going on.”

“Technically, he’s not my lawyer no more, so I don’t know if he’s gonna take out the time, but I’m sure he will give you any info you need.”

“I mean, but I’m not a lawyer. I can’t explain your case the way he could.”

“Yeah, I know, but I can. If they willing to talk to me, then I’ll answer any questions they have.”

Des fell silent for a minute. This was a touchy subject, and she knew it. She never got much information from his family all these years, and it seemed like every time she ever tried to talk to Kwon about his case, she hit a roadblock. If she was going to keep putting her energy and effort into proving his innocence, then he had to give her something.

“I can’t just go in there with a hope and prayer, Kwon, so if there’s something that you’ve been holding from me that I can tell these people, then tell me now, please.”

“Just call Dan and tell him what’s going on, Des. It’s a few different case numbers he’s gonna give you for reference, and he can explain to you better than I can what the appeal issues are.”

She didn’t understand it. He’d been screaming his innocence this entire time, but it didn’t seem like he was willing to fight for his freedom anymore the way she expected him to. It would seem by now he should have memorized the entire law library if he wanted out of that hellhole.

“Don’t you wanna come home?” she asked, frustrated, as Jevonne came down the from upstairs finally.

“That’s my daddy?”

“Yeah, just a second, son. Answer my question.”

“Of course, I wanna come home more than anything in this world, Des. It’s... it’s just hard to keep getting my hopes up. I not saying I lost faith, because I haven’t, but it ain’t no fun to keep getting your hopes up just to have them crushed again, you know?”

“If you don’t want me to go through with it—”

“No, I do ... I do... just let me talk to Dan first and see what he says about it. I’ll call you back before you meet with ‘em.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want.”

“Yeah, that’s what I want. Let me talk to my son,” he told her.

“Yes, talk to him, because he’s been acting a ass lately,” she informed.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes, here he go,” she said, handing Jevonne the phone.

“Hello?” Jevonne answered excitedly.

“What’s up, boy? You being bad again?”

“No,” he lied quickly.

“Don’t lie,” Des snapped.

“What I tell you? Didn’t I tell you I didn’t wanna call and hear no more bad news about you?”

“Yeah,” he shamefully replied.

“You need to listen to your mama and Tino then. When you don’t wanna listen to nobody, you know what happens?”

“No.”

“You end up in a bad place like me. And I told you that you gotta be better than me, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Now, I love you, but I’m not gonna keep telling you the same thing over and over. You keep it up, we gonna have some real problems when I come home.”

“When you coming home, Daddy?”

“Soon,” he lied.

Des sat right by the phone listening to every word. She went along with Kwon’s lies about him coming home soon for two reasons. She was hoping and praying he would, and she knew it was the only thing she’d found lately that would keep her son a little in line. Even in prison, he could sense that his father meant business, and there was a small intimidation factor that his mom or Tino just didn’t carry. If his dad was there with all the bad guys, then he had to be a bad ass himself. Des continued to eavesdrop as the conversation turned friendly before he wrapped it up.

“You got some homework?” Markwon asked.

“Yeah.”

“Make sure you take care of that, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

Joevonne handed the phone back to his mom. Kwon always wanted to talk to her again before he ended his calls.

“Hello?”

“Yeah. My pops supposed to be coming up next month if you wanna bring him up. I think he’s gonna call you about it.”

“You want me to send Joevonne or you want both of us to come?” she clarified.

“I wanna see both of y’all.”

Des hadn’t been to visit him all year. She’d send their son with his mom or dad when they went. It was her way of keeping life peaceful as it was. Seeing Markwon often only stirred up mixed feelings and made Tino’s jealous side surface. She was honest about the love she had for Kwon. Although she was no longer in love with him, she often questioned whether she was truly in love with Tino either.

“I’ll come,” she decided.

“Good. I’m a look forward to it.”

“Me too.” She smiled as the automated voice alerted them the time was almost up.



She could tell he wanted to say more. Something that he probably shouldn't say, but he ended the call without making things awkward, and she was glad that he did.

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*The ferocious, musclebound, blue-nose Pitbull gave chase through the alleyway as Boo scrambled for dear life. He hopped a six-foot fence and landed in the back yard of another vicious animal. A German Shepard lunged at him from a doghouse, but he was halted by the thick chain around his neck. The Pitbull flew through the fence as if it was invisible. Boo ran down the side of the house, hoping the Pitbull would go after the German Shepard and get off his tail, but he had no such luck. As the chase spilled out into the streets, a car was coming and it had to slam on brakes to keep from slamming into Boo. The dog was quickly gaining on him. If he didn't do something, the Pit was about to bite a chunk out of his ass.*

*He saw a girl standing in the doorway of her house with the door cracked open, waving him onto the front porch. He made a dash for it. He could hear the dog's paws thumping up the steps, and he made it to the top of the porch. The girl released the door and he caught it just before it closed. She ran away as he made it inside and closed the door without a second to spare. The dog rammed the door headfirst with an insane*

*relentlessness. Boo was breathing heavier than he ever remembered in his life. His heart was pounding through his chest as he turned into the house, thanking God he made it inside.*

*As he turned, he spotted the little boy holding the gun bigger than him, pointed right at his head. Before he could say or do anything, the little boy squeezed the trigger.*

“Aaaaahhh!” Boo screamed in pain, being jolted from his nightmare.

He sat straight up in his bunk.

“What the fuck, man?” his bunky sounded angrily.

Boo looked around a minute, realizing where he was. He then grew angry at his bunky for having the balls to complain.

“Shut the fuck up and take yo’ ass back to sleep, white boy,” he lashed.

“I’m trying to, but you’re screaming at the top of your lungs. How am I supposed to sleep?”

Boo slowly laid back down, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling from his top bunk. Those fucking nightmares. He hated them. They’d come back with a vengeance since he spotted SB on the compound. He knew one of

them had to go immediately. Either someone was going to the control center and asking for a transfer, or someone was going to medical. Boo wasn't doing either.

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Endy loved working in the serene yet eye-popping setting that was the Renaissance Center. Some called it a city within a city with its seven interconnecting skyscrapers and a 73-story hotel. Since she was watching her weight, often on her lunch break she just had a smoothie and strolled around the circular, lighted, glass walkway to stretch her legs. As she strolled with earbuds in her ear listening to Jazmin Sullivan and admiring the modern architecture, she felt a presence coming up behind her.

She glanced to her left and saw Steffan with a bright smile about to say something. She removed one earbud.

“Hey, how you doing?” he greeted her.

“Hey, Steffan, what's going on?” she spoke back.

“Trying not to let Tori get on my last nerve today,” he chuckled.

“Oh, I bet. That's a job in itself,” she said.

“Tell me about it.”

Steffan and Endy had different team leaders they reported to, but Tori was once Endy's boss as well, when she first started. She knew how much of an egotistical leader she could be at times.

"They need to give Brian her job."

"Like, seriously, he's doing all the work," Steffan agreed.

The two of them continued to chat and stroll the walkway. Since running into each other in Jamaica, they seemed to talk more nowadays. It wasn't intentional at all. Just running into each other outside of the country gave them a little more to talk about and a seemingly better sense of familiarity.

"How's married life treating you? Y'all probably still on a honeymoon, huh?"

"Some days, but other days, I still wanna punch him in his eye," she giggled.

After the big fight about Endy being so friendly that night, the two of them were able to talk the next morning and salvage the rest of their honeymoon. She didn't understand what his problem was with her. She'd been this way since high school. Back then, she knew that she could be a flirt, but now she just considered herself a social butterfly. He couldn't

expect her to stifle her outgoing personality to appease him. It took him a while to find the words to articulate it, but what Endy was finally able to gather was that Devonte just wanted her to understand that it was her job as his wife to make sure he felt way more important than any other man in the room.

She didn't see herself as the jealous type, so she could only partially understand, but she agreed to a compromise because her mom told her that's what marriage was all about.

"Well, he's a lucky man. You tell him Steffan said he better be on his best behavior."

"I'ma tell him you said that too," she lied.

The last thing she would do was bring up Steffan again for no good reason. She never told him about the fight they had. As they took the elevator back to the floor they worked on, she decided to pry a little in his business since he was all in hers.

"How are you and Brittany doing?"

"Brittany's cool. She's just a friend, but we get along." He shrugged as if there was nothing else to be said.

"Oh, okay. Must be some friend, y'all taking baecations and stuff."

“Hey, when you find a connection you gotta hold on to it, right?” he chuckled.

“You right about that,” she agreed as the elevator opened and they headed in separate directions.

“You take care, beautiful,” he told her.

“You too,” she said, smiling.

She couldn't remember him ever calling her beautiful before, and although she heard it a lot, it was a nice gesture coming from a sexy man like him.

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Kwon was stressing like he hadn't in years. Boo had only been on the compound for thirty days and it was already life or death situations on the floor. The day after they'd spotted SB on the yard, Boo stayed inside the next few days. It wasn't because he was afraid at all. He was preparing for war and he was urging Kwon to do the same. Just like Boo had people in prison that would ride for him, so did SB. Word around the yard was that SB was doing fifteen for a body, which meant he wasn't too concerned

about going home at the time, not to mention Boo had violated in the most unthinkable way.

Four days later, when Boo hit the yard, he was prepared. He'd made a shank that was six inches long and had books taped around his torso under his two sweaters. Markwon was taped up as well, but he didn't have a knife because he never went to find one. He'd been in a situation like this before and carried knives around hoping he wouldn't have to stab somebody, but since he got wind that Des was about to meet with these Project Innocence people, the last thing he needed was to catch a whole new case while in prison.

All he could do was pray on it, watch his back, and watch Boo's back when they were together. They were together a lot, which would automatically make him a target, but he couldn't leave Tae's brother hanging out to dry. He never forgave himself for leaving Tae behind in the scuffle that day.

"You get that bone?" Boo asked, referring to the knife Kwon was supposed to get, as he looked around to see if anyone was in earshot.

"Naw, man, I can't get caught up right now, bro. Des about to talk to these people to see if they'll look into my case."

Boo's eyes were intensely focused on Kwon as they walked the track. He could tell Boo disapproved of his decision.

"I hear all that, nigga, but shit, this is real shit right now. If you on some peace treaty shit, might wanna stay the fuck away from me, foreal!" he explained, eyes bucked.

Kwon looked him in the eyes.

"I know what it is, Boo. I'm with you, big bro," Kwon replied calmly.

They walked in silence for a minute. Boo would glance around the yard ever so often, scanning the faces, probably looking for the enemy, of course. Kwon was busy trying to convince himself that somehow things would work themselves out.

"Let me ask you something, Kwon."

"What up?"

"When you banged them niggas out on that bike, how did you feel?"

"Phil and n'em?"

"Yeah."



“Honestly, I felt vindicated for about thirty minutes. After that, I was scared as fuck every day up until I was arrested.”

“But before you thought about getting caught, you felt like that was just something that you had to do, right?”

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“Even though my brother probably tried to talk you out of it before he gave you the gun and all that shit. Your mind was made up, right?”

“Yeah.”

“How you think that nigga SB feel about me?”

“I see what you saying.” Kwon nodded.

They strolled in silence for another moment. Boo tapped his shoulder, laughing.

“Aye, run it down to me what happened that night. You never told me the real story behind that shit,” he said, ready to get a kick out of some war stories.

“Nah, man, I don’t like talking about that shit.”

“Come on, man,” Boo insisted. “Tae already told me what the fuck happened, but I wanna hear your side of the story. You already got caught

and doing the time for it. What else can they do to you?”

Kwon knew these were the only kind of conversations that sparked Boo’s interest. He never wanted to hear any of the positive shit that Markwon was kicking. He had only talked about it one other time with his bunky, Game, admitting his guilt. But Boo already knew the truth. He decided to give him what he wanted. A war story.

“Damn, nigga! You was a muthafucking monster that night,” Boo praised when he was done. “Shit, I wish I would’ve had a nigga like you on my team when I was out there.”

Kwon waved him off.

“Shit was dumb, man. I threw my whole life away for them niggas. I can’t raise my son, I never had a car, I never even left Michigan, bro. Ain’t no get back worth this,” he explained.

“So you saying you would’ve rather let them niggas get away with that shit?”

“If this was the alternative? Hell yeah. We slaves to the system, bro. These people getting paid off our stupidity. We gotta find a way to stop hating each other and start sticking together. If not, we might as well be still picking cotton.”

“That’s some real shit, nigga,” Boo said, catching Kwon by surprise.

Out of all the conversations they’d had over the past month, this was the first time Kwon felt like he’d gotten through to him a little.

“You going to work out today?” he asked Boo as they headed back toward the unit.

“Yeah, I’mma meet you in there.”

Later that day, when they were granted an hour of rec time and had access to the inside weight room, the two met up again. Instead of going into the main weight room with all the free weights, they went into the second room in the back that only had machines. Neither of them liked the machines, but under the circumstances, the main weight room was way too crowded. You could get your head busted wide open with a dumbbell while you were lying on a bench with two hundred pounds on your chest. The machine room stayed just about empty. As the two worked the chest press machine, Kwon pushed out reps, thinking about the free world.

All he wanted was one more chance at life and he would make the best of it, and hopefully keep some people from going down this path. That’s what he really wanted to do with his life now. He wanted to be an advocate for change in the hood. He wanted to teach young people how to

not get influenced by their egos and peer pressure. As he finished his set, Boo went down to start his.

“Put another dime on there for me,” Boo said.

Kwon bent down to change the weight on the machine and when he raised up, he spotted SB and another man he’d seen around walking into the machine room with a deadly gaze in their eyes. Kwon tapped Boo hard as he went to start his set.

“Boo, Boo, Boo! Get up, man!” he said, calling out his name in rapid repetition.

As Boo raised up, SB pulled the shank from his back pocket and charged straight at Boo. To get to Boo, he had to run past Kwon, but Kwon was fast on his feet. He stepped to the side, swung, and caught SB with a two-punch combination, with the second punch catching the back of his head. The two punches only slowed down his forward motion, but it was enough to give Boo time to roll off the bench. As Boo reached in his socks and pulled out his own shank, SB was still coming. Kwon got socked in the face by the other dude as soon as he swung on SB. Then a third party entered the room as Kwon traded blows with the inmate. With no officers in the back room, Boo and SB danced around in the corner with knives out.

“What up, bitch?” Boo growled as he swung at SB and missed.

SB swung and caught Boo on the arm, drawing blood, but he backed up enough to keep from getting hit a second time. Right behind him, Kwon had his back against the wall, fighting two inmates now. He was catching hell, but he was dishing out all the pain he could muster, fists left to right. SB rushed in again and tried to gut Boo like a fish, but this time his forward motion was his downfall. Boo jumped to the side and poked the knife right in his ribcage. SB screamed bloody murder as he spun around and pushed Boo back with adrenaline still pumping. The backward motion pulled the knife out as Boo saw another inmate running towards him to help SB.

He swung the knife at his second attacker, missing him by inches. This gave SB a chance to strike as he lunged forward, sticking Boo in the side. Boo jump back after getting poked and stabbed SB right in the top of his head. SB hit the ground face down and didn't move. Boo began to chase the other inmate right out of the backroom into the main weight pit. Kwon was still fighting one on one with the first inmate that sucker punched him. They were locked in a tussle position, neither throwing punches now. The inmate realized SB was on the floor bleeding and Boo was on the loose with a shank. He broke free and ran out of the machine room. Kwon started to give chase in the heat of the moment.

He stopped just short of the threshold, realizing COs would be in the main gym. He turned and looked at SB on the floor in a puddle of blood.

The alarm sounded loudly throughout the entire prison. He knew SB was dying or dead. He couldn't get caught all alone with this body.

# Chapter 15

Tae was having a good day at work. A good day usually consisted of a bunch of smooth jobs going off without a hitch and eye candy customers with good manners. Today was one of those days. His last client was a thick, tan-complexioned girl named Shelli that was having her cable in her new home installed for the first time. When she let him in, she greeted him with a bright smile that made him want to ask about her dentist. Her lips were seductively glossy and her hair was in a ponytail.

As she led him to the television in the living room, he followed behind, getting a courtside view of her shapely figure. Her stretch pants hugged her round, jiggly ass, and her belly shirt boasted her flat stomach and smooth, tattooed skin. Her lower back tattoo read FLEXIBLE, and he had to keep himself from grunting aloud his interest. After showing him where she wanted the first box installed, the girl drifted off to the kitchen and started preparing what he later found out was a salad.

As Shelli sat at the dinner table and ate, every once in a while she'd strike up a conversation.

“How long have you been working for them?” she started again.

“A few years,” he replied, continuing to install wires.

“You like it?”

“It’s cool. I don’t dislike it.”

“That’s what’s up. Are you from Detroit?”

“Yeah.”

“East or West?”

“East. You?”

“Westside.” She threw up the W proudly.

“Booooo,” he teased her.

“Shut up. Nah, I like the eastside though, most of my cousins live off Morang or Kelly.”

“Oh, okay. Yeah, I grew up on Morang.”

The two continued to converse for most of the time he was there. Tae found it refreshing since most of his customers never talked to him unless they had to. The time passed pretty quickly as he installed the cable in two rooms before packing up to leave. He stole another peek at her booty as she walked him to the door.

“Well, it was a pleasure meeting you, Devonte.”



“You too,” he replied honestly, wishing he were single for a second.

On his way to the truck, his cell started to ring. He realized it was his mom, so he answered quickly.

“Hey, Ma, what’s up.”

“Your brother is in trouble again,” she managed in a shaky voice.

He immediately knew something was seriously wrong by the way she sounded. She was clearly pained and afraid.

“What happened?” he asked, climbing in the truck.

“Oh my god. I can’t breathe,” she barely pushed out.

That’s when he started to panic.

“Ma, what’s wrong? Tell me!”

“Somebody just called and told me they took Boo to the county jail. They trying to charge him with a murder.”

He could tell she was still having trouble breathing.

“The case that they had dismissed years ago?” he assumed.

“No,” she managed before taking a deep breath. “Listen to what I’m telling you. They saying he just killed somebody in jail!”

“Nooo! No! Naw, come on, Ma,” Tae said, now in complete disarray.

His mom was breathing heavier now.

“My chest hurt, Tae. I think I need to go to the hospital,” she warned.

He started the truck quickly.

“I think so too, Mama, ‘cause you don’t sound right. Call a ambulance, I’m on my way!”

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Des and Tino sat out back watching Joevonne ride his bike around the paved area near the Nurf basketball rim. The sky was a gloomy mix of grey clouds with random peaks of sunshine. It was later Saturday afternoon, and Des was relaxing with a glass of Merlot while Tino had cracked open a fresh bottle of D’ussé and poured a glass, knowing they were home for the day.

“Soooo. I been meaning to tell you that I’m going to take Joevonne to see his daddy next week.”

“Oh yeah? How long you been planning this?” Tino asked.

“Not long.”

He sipped his drink.

“Long enough for you to be done told me before now. Your son already ratted you out.” He smiled.

“I’ma kill him.” She smiled back.

“You know I don’t care. It will probably do him some good to see both of y’all.”

“I’m sure it will,” Des agreed.

One of the things she loved about Tino was the fact that he really was trying to be understanding about Kwon and his situation. He displayed normal jealousy about their relationship at times, but she never gave him a reason to feel insecure. The sun vanished as the sky darkened and a hint of thunder crackled in the sky.

“Jevonne, bring that bike in. It’s time to go in the house,” Des called out as he rode around the large paved area before the driveway.

Jevonne peddled harder for a quick getaway in the opposite direction.

“Don’t go toward that driveway!” she warned.

He cranked it up even more, as if his life depended on it. He was headed straight towards the driveway.

“Boy, what she just tell you!” Tino called out.

Another low-key roar of thunder rang from the sky as Des sat her wine down.

“I’ma kick his ass,” she threatened.

“I got ‘em,” Tino said as he stood and took off from the patio.

Des decided to let him handle it and sat back down. Tino and Jevonne had been getting along lately since Jevonne last talked with his father. She could see them from the patio, but she could hear her son and Tino arguing. That’s when she got up and went to find them.

“Shut up, stupid!” she heard her son say.

She rushed around the house and down the driveway.

“Boy, give me this got damn bike!” Tino raged, holding onto the bike so Jevonne couldn’t get back on it.

Jevonne was furious. He used all the strength he could muster to try and take the bike back. When that didn’t work, he kicked it out of Tino’s hand and onto the ground. He stomped on the spokes angrily, until Des came up behind him and snatched him by the collar.

“Get yo’ muthafucking ass in this house!” she growled, so angry she couldn’t even yell.

Tino just stood there looking helpless as she drug him back toward the patio. “Your little ass is out of control and I’m sick of it! I’m sick of it, you hear me!”

The rain came pouring down just as they made it inside. Tino came in shortly after.

“We gon’ have to do something about his temper,” he warned.

“Yeah, I know. Go to your room, now!” Des told Jevonne.

She was going to really have to pray for some answers on how to deal with him. She was running out of options.

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The news of Boo’s new charges hit Tae like a defensive linebacker on the one-yard line trying to prevent a touchdown. The blow was compounded by his mom suffering a mild heart attack after she received the news. He was just beginning to think Boo would be home soon. They both were. His mother had quickly recovered and was released from the hospital later that day, but he was worried about her. Tae knew that the health scare wasn’t brought on by just the fact that her son was facing a new murder charge.

His mom had been dealing with a lot of stress brought on by the man in her life as well. Tae tried to convince her to cut ties, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. If that wasn't enough, she was taking on a lot of double shifts to keep up with her gambling habit that had now become an addiction. The thought of losing his mom right now was way too much to bear. After she was released, he ended up at the bar that he and his coworkers often frequented. He left the bar well over the legal limit to drive, but he made it home safely. When he pulled up to their simple but appealing craftsman-style home, he could see the lights still on and Endy was up waiting for him downstairs.

When he walked in, she stood and came to him quickly. She wrapped her arms around him and held on to him silently. She kissed his cheek before squeezing him tighter. Endy had tried to make it to the hospital, but by the time she found out about it, his mom was already in recovery. He told Endy to go home and visit her tomorrow instead, knowing he had plans to go straight from the hospital to the bar.

“You okay, baby?” she finally said.

“Better,” he admitted.

“You eat yet?”

“Nah.”

“Take off that jacket. I’ll get your plate ready.”

“I’m not hungry right now. Don’t worry about it,” he said, removing his jacket and hanging it up in the foyer closet.

“Okay,” she said, watching him move past her and into the kitchen anyway. Tae came back with an opened beer and plopped down on the recliner.

“When it rains it pours, huh?” he said as she sat on the sofa and crossed her legs.

“I was just thinking maybe Boo had his reasons, you know? Maybe he felt like he had to do what he did to survive. If he really did it, I mean.”

“Oh, that nigga did it. I know he did.”

He reclined all the way back in the chair, looking up into the ceiling. “I should’ve got some fucking weed. That’s what I really need.”

“You don’t need no weed.”

Next thing Tae felt was Endy climb onto his lap and lay her head on his chest. “All you need is me,” she said, lifting her head long enough to kiss his cheek again.

He stroked her hair as he felt her continuous attempts at trying to comfort him actually begin to work. He could feel the pressure of the day

finally starting to dissolve.

“You know you ain’t high school slim no more, right,” he teased her.

“Fuck you.” She punched his arm. “That’s alright, I’m about to start going to the gym and my body gonna be banging, watch.”

“Your body already banging, shut up.”

“Well ... even more.”

Tae felt his pants unzip and her fingers snake inside his jeans and fondle him.

“Can I?” she asked, lifting her head up to see if he was in the mood.

Tae let a devilish smile ease across his face.

“You always there for me when I need you the most,” he replied as her head started to ease down below his waist.



# Chapter 16

Boo sat in a small room that was used for grievances but often doubled as an interrogation room. Only he and the Michigan State Police were in the room. He had thought long and hard about whether he wanted to go through with this or not, but the fact remained in his position, he didn't have much to lose now. The fact was, Kwon had saved his life, and now he was about to do what he could to return the favor.

“So, you claim to have some information on a murder? Is that correct, Mr. Russell?”

“I didn't say I have information on a murder, I said I wanted to confess to multiple murders. That's what I said.”

“And is there any particular reason you're choosing to come forward now?”

“Yes, because I'm not fucking going home anyway.”

The two male Caucasian officers looked on with fake concern in their eyes.

“Okay. Well, we're listening. Start wherever you want.”

As they patiently listened on, Boo went on to confess to the murder of SB's kid first. He was tired of the nightmares and his conscience eating him alive. Then he confessed to having Phil murdered. Knowing the timeline of him being released from county jail wouldn't add up, he told police that he ordered Reo to do it. Then he confessed to killing Red, giving them motive and all the intimate details of the murder as recalled the night he did it. He knew they would question the validity of his confession for killing Phil, but hopefully, Red's murder would substantiate his motive enough to overturn Markwon's conviction. When he was done spilling his guts, Boo sat there staring blankly as a wave of calm came over him.

The officers had recorded every detail, and now they were about to get him to sign a confession.

“So, this Reo. Where's he at now?”

“Reo's dead. He was in the house with me the night the kid got shot.”

“And you say there's a guy that's been wrongfully convicted of one of the murders?”

“Yeah, I know the guy. He lived down the street from my mom. He was convicted because his fingerprints were all over the gun, but honestly, him and my lil' brother had access to the gun, and they was probably just

playing around with it one day. I used to teach ‘em how to shoot and stuff, but they was good kids, man.”

“And what’s his name?”

“His name is Markwon Sanders.”

“Would you be willing to take a polygraph test?”

“Sure, why not?”

The police looked on, nodding and making assumptions in their heads.

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Naw, I think that’s everything. I’ll do whatever y’all need me to do. I’ll sign whatever y’all want me to sign, and then y’all can take me back to my cell.” Boo shrugged.

He could only hope it worked. Boo knew if Markwon got out, he’d do something with his life. Much more than he would ever dream of. He also knew that if Kwon got out, he would receive monetary compensation for his time served, which meant Boo wouldn’t have to worry about money while he served his time. It was definitely worth a try. He felt some of the weight he’d been carrying all these years suddenly become lighter. Now, all they could do was wait.

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Des and Tino sat quietly at a table for two inside an upscale restaurant that was quickly becoming Des' favorite place to eat. As they ate in silence, Tino's phone vibrated constantly with text messages, lying face down on the table. Des wondered about him lately. He seemed to be acting a little different. Today, she decided to address it for the first time.

"Question," she started.

"What's sup?"

"Why your phone always face down all of a sudden?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"No reason. Why, does it bother you?"

"Kinda. Seems kinda shady and out of the blue," she said honestly.

"Whatever," he replied, flipping his phone over. "Happy now?"

She rolled her eyes without responding. It wasn't just the phone being face down that had her giving him a side eye. He hadn't been answering her calls some days. Seemed like now his clients had all of his attention and she was getting less. But it could've been all in her head, she thought. Her cell phone rang, breaking her thought process. When she glanced at the caller ID and saw that it was Kwon's old lawyer, she was

more than a little surprised. Just a few days ago, he'd told her that he didn't think it was a good idea to try and bring Markwon's case to the Project Innocence Group, so she wondered what could it be as she answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi, how are you?" Dan started.

"Hey. I'm fine, just having dinner with my boyfriend."

"Oh, sorry to bother you so late, but I think you're gonna wanna hear this."

"Okay," she said, bracing herself.

"So, I don't think Markwon knows this yet. I'm almost sure of it, because I literally only found out about an hour ago. Do you know a guy by the name of Brian Russel?"

She didn't have to think long and hard. Tae's brother was named Brian. She'd seen him on the news just recently again for allegedly stabbing an inmate to death, and Tae was broken up about the whole thing.

"Yeah, I know who he is."

"Well, he's confessed to a bunch of murders, including Markwon's case."

“He confessed?” she repeated, just out of lack of words to choose from at the moment.

“Yeah, he confessed, and now the state police are looking into it to see if there’s actually some validity to it. But he gave them a motive and everything, so ... we just gotta see what happens, but this is amazing!” Dan said, sounding happy for Kwon.

“Yes, it is. I’m so shocked and happy at the same time, oh my god,” Des said, holding her hand over her mouth as tears welled in her eyes.

She couldn’t allow herself to not jump the gun. She couldn’t abstain from being overly excited too soon. She had prayed too hard for this. They both had.

“What’s wrong?” Tino asked, about to panic.

“Nothing.” She shook her head quickly to calm him down, wiping away tears. “So what happens now?”

“Now we wait. I’m sure they’re gonna want to talk to Markwon, and I’m sure they’re gonna interview this Brian guy again, but this ... this is great news. I mean, we got a guy that’s giving a complete confession. This is a major leap in the right direction.”

“It is,” she giggled, still trying to compose herself.

Des was just about ready to give up. She was almost ready to face the fact that maybe Kwon wasn't innocent after all. Now she had been injected with newfound strength in her belief that God was still watching and working in his life for whatever reasons.

"Well, I don't want to hold you any longer. If you talk to Markwon before I do, tell him to give me a call and we'll go from there."

"I will. I definitely will."

When Des ended the call, she sat there shaking her head silently for a moment as Tino pressured her about the phone call.

"What's going on, baby? Tell me something, shit."

She looked at him with awe still in her eyes.

"Tae's brother Boo just confessed to the murder that Kwon is locked up for. He might be coming home soon."

The look in Tino's eyes told her that his mind was completely discombobulated by the news. They danced around in his head as he searched for words.

"Really?" was all he could find.

"Really," she replied, nodding slowly, eyes wide, not even able to blink as Tino turned away, looking off into space.

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You couldn't miss the brand-new bop in his walk from up the block and around the corner as Markwon stepped into the visiting room. His shoes must've had springs in them, and his smile spanned the polar opposite side of the room as he made his way over to his loved ones. It was miraculous the way he managed to escape from the melee without being identified as being involved. He was still thanking God that no one had given him up. But right now, he was exploding with gratitude for a lot of reasons. When his counselor called him into the office and told him about what Boo had done, he was speechless.

Never in a million years could he have seen this coming. And although he was far from being out of the woods or a free man, he felt like this opportunity had come his way because he never gave up the fight. He had all intentions to get out of prison and live an impactful life, and he knew that if nothing else, God knew his heart. He'd been waiting seven years with his faith waning and wavering at times, but right now it was stronger than ever. So, as he arrived at the table and greeted them with stars in his eyes, he just decided to leave it all to the Big Man upstairs and enjoy this jovial moment in time with his dad, his son, and Des... the woman he still loved dearly.



“Sup y’all?” he greeted everyone right before he and his dad embraced.

He hugged Des and he couldn’t help but notice how amazing she smelled. It was one of the things he looked forward to the most every time she ever visited him in prison. Their hug was brief and very formal, considering the way they started on this journey. He lifted Jevonne into his arms.

“Give me a hug, boy,” he told him, and Jevonne quickly wrapped his arms around his neck.

With skin as yellow as the sun and hair as dark as coal, he could see his son was favoring him more and more as the years went by. “You glad to see your pops?” he asked his son, setting him down.

“Unhuh. I got good grades,” Jevonne couldn’t wait to share.

“Did you?”

“Unhuh.”

They sat down at the table for four as always, with Des directly across from him and his son right next to him.

“Yeah, you couldn’t wait to tell that, but tell him about your behavior grades.”

The look on Jevonne's face went from joyous to as if he'd just found out Santa Claus didn't exist.

"Ooooh?" Markwon said, giving him bucked eyes. "Is that right?"

"I'm not even trying to dampen your mood, but you really need to talk to him. He called Tino a bitch the other day," Des went on.

"I told him when he saw his daddy he was gonna be in trouble," Ryan said.

Ryan was the typical granddad. He didn't do much but spoil the kid and give him love. He left the discipline to the parents. Kwon was highly upset because he'd thought he was getting through to his son. He turned to Jevonne.

"How many times I gotta tell you about disrespecting adults? Look at me," he ordered.

His son turned to look at him with fear in his eyes.

"You think I'm playing with you?"

"No," he replied as his head tilted in shame.

"Don't look at the floor, look at me. See, I know what you need. Didn't I tell you I know what you need? And guess what? I'ma give it to

you real soon. Sooner than you think if you keep it up. Your mama don't believe in it, but I do. And I'm not your mama, you understand me?"

"Yes," he mumbled.

"One more time. That's all I need to hear it is one more time that you called somebody a curse word, and you gonna be right back in this seat dealing with me."

Tears welled in his son's eyes as the shame increased. He hated to see his father this upset with him. He hated to know that if he wasn't careful he was gonna really receive the gift he'd been promised for a while now. Kwon was dead serious too. Even though he knew he couldn't whoop his son's ass in the visiting room, he was so passionate about him misbehaving he was about ready to go for it anyway. He and Des had big fights about how they should discipline him, but it was something Kwon wasn't willing to compromise on. He had his beliefs and she had hers. Although physical discipline hadn't kept him from getting in this position, it did make sure he treated adults with respect as a kid.

"I'm sorry," Jevonne said.

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to Tino."

"I did."

“Good. Now you just gotta do better.”

“Okay.”

After getting in his son’s grill, they were all able to revise the cheerful mood in the room as they tried to speak about the possibility of his conviction being overturned without giving Joevonne too much information and getting his hopes up.

“I’m really not trying to think about it that much. Just going on about my days like I always have. I know it’s a waiting game with any of this stuff, so I don’t wanna start overthinking it, you know?” he explained.

“That’s gotta be hard, though,” Ryan said.

He shook his head.

“More than you can imagine. That’s why I’m glad y’all came today. Gave me a chance to get out of that cell and put my mind on something else.”

“How much you weigh now?” Des asked.

“I’m 180. Do I look it?”

“Yeah, you do,” she said with a look of delight in her eyes.

He noticed the look and flexed his arm muscle through his state-issued shirt. He knew that she liked him when he was 150 pounds soaking wet with chin hairs and a thin mustache, so he couldn't imagine what she thought of his appearance now. He had a full beard and was fit enough to pose for a fitness magazine, but his weight was distributed evenly and matched his height. He didn't have the big upper body and little legs a lot of dudes came home from prison with.

"A little sumn," he bragged.

"Girls gon' be all over you, boy," she told him.

He looked Des in her eyes.

"I'on care about that. I want the girl I had," he said truthfully.

She blushed and looked away. It was one thing when they did their harmless flirting here and there, but it had been a long time since they'd actually talked about ... them.

"Anyway, Jevonne, show your daddy how good you can spell," Des said, changing the subject.

"Give me a word to spell," he quickly accepted the challenge.

Des rambled off six multiple-syllable words, and Jevonne was dead on with all of them. It made Kwon proud to see his son's mind developing

so fast. Now if he could just get his attitude together. Ryan sat there smiling proudly at his grandson.

“Son,” Ryan said, wiping the smile off his face.

“Huh?”

“If this thing does go your way, what’s the plan?” he asked for the first time.

“Well... I wanna start a nonprofit organization to help dudes in the hood stay out of trouble and keep ‘em from going down this path. I seen so many dudes come in here in the same position as me. I seen people get out and come right back in less than a year. I really wanna get out and make something of myself, and if I do, then maybe I can show these kids that they got some other options, you know?”

“Sounds like a great idea. I’m proud of you, son. Regardless of what happens, I’m proud of the man you’ve become,” Ryan said truthfully.

They spent the entire day with Kwon from the time visits started until the visiting room was closing. It did wonders for his mental state, giving him some much-needed separation from the events that were quickly unfolding. When it was time to leave, he and his dad hugged again, long, tight, and hard, slapping each other on the back like long-lost siblings. He

picked his son up again, hugging him then kissing him on the cheek as he told Jevonne how much he loved him. Lastly, he looked at Des standing there all uncomfortable, knowing that he had intentionally saved her for last. This time when they hugged, he made sure to squeeze her tight, prolonging it, and kiss her cheek as well.

After he kissed her cheek, he relaxed his arms but didn't let go of her. His hands rested around her waist. He wanted to see would she pull back and away from him. When she didn't, it was all the incentive he needed.

"Whachu doing?" she said, wondering why his arms were still around her.

Without warning, he kissed her lips.

"Okay now," she said in a tone meant to disrupt the moment as she broke their embrace.

He watched her closely as she turned away, gathering her things. She wouldn't look at him, but she wasn't upset with him. He could tell she didn't mind the kiss but was more caught off guard by it.

"See y'all," he said as he turned to leave.

It was the best day, the best week he had in years.

# Chapter 17

Endy and Des had a lot to talk about. So much so, it couldn't all be discussed over a lunch break, but Endy wanted to get all the tea on Des and Kwon while she was free. She was starving this day so instead of a smoothie, she went to the food court and bought shrimp salad with a few extra add-ons. She found a table in a corner away from everyone and called Des to finish what they'd started late last night.

“That nigga really kissed you?” Endy laughed, getting a kick out of the whole thing.

She thought it was so cute that Kwon planned to come and get his girl back after all these years.

“Yeah, he did, and I don't appreciate that because it confuses my son.”

“Yeah, that's true,” she agreed. “Did Joevonne say something about it?”

“No, he didn't say anything, but I can tell he was wondering what the hell was going on.”



“But tell the truth, how did it feel to you? On the inside when he kissed you?”

“That is not what I’m trying to talk about. I’m trying to talk about this this nigga possibly getting out and how it’s gonna change everybody’s lives including yours.”

“How the fuck is it gonna change my life?” Endy wondered.

“Because it’s gonna change Tae’s life a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess you right, and he’s really going through it right now. Don’t know whether to be happy or sad. Sometimes he seems like he’s sadder about Boo than anything.”

“Can you blame him? That’s his only sibling and he’s ...” she stopped because she couldn’t be sure what was about to happen.

“All I know is that Tae needs somebody out here. Somebody that he really has a bond with, and I know he hasn’t had that in so long. I try to be everything he needs but shit, sometimes he just needs somebody to talk to about guy stuff, you know?”

“Yeah. I wish he and Tino would’ve hit it off better.”

“Yeah, but you know why that was never gonna happen. Speaking of Tino, what do you think about him training me? I’m really ready to start

working out. This diet isn't working, and since I can't get your raggedy ass to join the gym with me, I figured he could help me."

"Fine with me, 'cause you know I'm not going," Des laughed.

Des had no desire to go anywhere near a gym and sweat. She had a pretty healthy diet and it seemed to be working for her. Endy, on the other hand, didn't like what she was seeing on the scale nowadays. She wasn't ready to relinquish her reputation as the finest woman at her job.

"I know you ain't, heffa, that's why your booty gonna be bigger than mine in a minute. People gonna be asking me did you go to Dr. Miami."

"Fuck you!" Des laughed.

Endy looked out of the corner of her eye and spotted Steffan coming up with his food. He motioned his hand toward the empty seat, asking her for permission to join.

"Girl, let me see what this man want," she said, playfully rolling her eyes.

"Man?"

"My coworker."

"Oh, okay. Call me later."

“You know I’m definitely calling you back, and I want an answer about that kiss.”

“Anyway! Before I hang up on your ass, I meant to tell you we having Thanksgiving over here with my mom and Tino’s family, so y’all welcome to join us.”

“I gotta see, because my mom hasn’t even brought it up yet, so we might be joining y’all.”

“Okay, we will have plenty of food.”

“Answer your phone when I call you, heffa.”

“Bye.”

When Endy ended the call, Steffan was taking his food out of the bag and preparing to dive in. By now, she could see that he was becoming a little attached to her, but she thought it was flattering and she liked his company.

“How you doing today, Sir?” she greeted with a smile.

“Famished. I’ll be better when I get this in my belly. Feel like one of those dudes from the Snickers commercial,” he chuckled.

“Well, you haven’t turned into an old lady yet, so hurry up and eat,” she told him.

“I’m on it.”

The two sat in silence for a while, not wanting to talk with a mouth full of food. Endy people watched as the food court continued to fill up quickly.

“First time I saw you down here in a while,” Steffan said.

“Yeah, I called myself being on a diet, but that’s not working out. I need to get my butt in a gym.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said—”

“No, I heard what you said, but you gotta be kidding me, right?”

She blushed, knowing where this was going.

“Don’t start with me, alright? I’m getting thicker than a Snicker and Payday put together.”

“I bet your man ain’t complaining. Is he?”

“This ain’t about that nigga though,” she laughed.

“Well, if you ever need a workout partner, I’m down,” he told her.

“Oh, wow. I just told my friend I would let her boyfriend train me.”

She knew she wouldn't be able to get away with having Steffan as a workout buddy due to the Jamaica incident, but the offer sounded tempting.

“Sounds like I just missed the chance to get some more Endy in my life.”

“Some more Endy, huh?” She smiled.

“Mmmm hmmm. Well, the offer stands if that trainer doesn't work out.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” she said, gazing in Steffan's eyes knowingly.

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The more Tae had time to think about it, he came to the realization that if his brother truly wasn't coming home, the best possible outcome of all of this would be to get his best friend back. He knew Kwon had been through a lot, and to be able to come home and help raise his son would truly be a blessing. Later that day, he sat in the den with Endy, telling her how he was going to look on the bright side now.

“Let me ask you something, though. Do you really think your brother did all those murders?” Endy asked.

Tae shrugged.

“He confessed, so evidently he did.”

“You don’t think it’s strange that he just confessed all out of the blue after he moved there with Kwon?”

“Makes sense if he felt bad that Kwon was doing his time.”

Endy nodded.

“I guess that makes sense. Anyway, I’ve been meaning to tell you that I’m gonna start letting Tino train me at the gym next week.”

Tae’s lips curled as his eyes scanned Endy from head to toe.

“Tino train you? Oh, no the fuck he not,” he assured her.

“Whachu mean? You don’t wanna go to the gym and Des don’t either. Tino is a fucking professional trainer. Why wouldn’t I work with him?”

“You know how to fucking work out. Fuck you need him for?”

“No, I don’t, and what is you getting so upset for?”

“Really? You don’t know how to work out, Endy?” he said, giving her a look of major skepticism.

“No! Not really, I just know the basics. I haven’t been to a fucking gym in years. Plus, I need someone else there to keep me motivated.”

“So you wanna pay this nigga to motivate you?”

“I wanna pay him to train me.” She rolled her eyes, getting fed up.

“Nah.” He shook his head.

She shot to her feet furiously.

“So ... So what do you think is about to happen with me and Tino?  
My best friend's boyfriend?”

“So Des don't have a problem with this?”

“No, because she's secure in her relationship, unlike your self-  
esteem issues having ass!”

“Girl, fuck you! You not about to make me feel like I'm wrong  
about some shit you wouldn't let me do. You know I don't like that nigga. If  
it was a bitch you didn't like, you would never go along with no shit like  
this.”

“If it was a bitch I didn't like for no good reason, I would. I'm not a  
jealous bitch, and you know this. You don't like Tino because he with Des,  
okay, fine. But he didn't do shit wrong! Kwon went to fucking jail and she  
moved the fuck on.”

“I'm not about to keep arguing with you about this. I said no,” he  
stated calmly.

Endy's eyes almost popped out of her head.

“WHO THE FUCK YOU THINK I AM? I bet I have my ass in the gym Monday soon as I get off work. With Tino!” she added.

“I bet you don't!” he dared her.

“I betchu I do!”

“Yeah, okay,” he said as if it was his final warning.

“Boy, bye, you don't run me,” she said before she stormed out of the room.

Her mind was made up, but so was his.

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Des' eyes were burning holes in Tino's back as she watched him take a call and then walk out of the room as if he needed some privacy. She was really going to have to talk to him about the way he was moving lately, because she wasn't feeling it. As she sat there waiting for him to finish this oh-so-private conversation, she got an incoming call from the prison. Her spirits quickly lifted as she answered, hoping to hear some good news.

“Hey.”

“Sup, what y'all doing?”



“I’m sitting here trying to decide what to cook and Joevonne’s sleep, but I can go wake him up.”

“Naw, you ain’t gotta do that. I didn’t want nothing really, just called to see what y’all was up to.”

“Oh. I was hoping you heard some good news.”

“Naw, nothing yet. I’m tryna be patient, but this shit is killing me not knowing what’s about to happen.”

“I bet it is.”

Tino came back into the room, reminding her that she was upset with him. Kwon calling had her mind off of him momentarily. Instead of addressing his shadiness, she decided two could play that game. She got up and walked out of the room and up the stairs to her bedroom. She was still smiling about the way he’d looked at her as she walked out.

“I wanna know more about this nonprofit,” she said, intrigued.

“I haven’t thought it all the way through, honestly. It was all in the back of my mind until now. I just know I wanna try and be an asset to the community instead of another statistic.”

“Well, maybe I can help,” she suggested, as she found herself lying across the bed getting comfortable.

“I would like that. I really would like that.”

“Yeah, I can start doing some research on how to do it and find out what paperwork is needed or whatever.”

“Look at you. Still holding me down.”

“It sounds like you’re really tryna do something with your life. Turn a negative into a positive, and I think that’s dope.”

“You think I’m dope too, don’t lie.”

“Haha. Don’t start with me. I’m still mad you pulled that stunt in the visiting room.”

“Shiiid, that wasn’t no stunt, that was me confessing my love. You know what it is.”

“Oh, whatever,” she laughed. “Seriously though, I’m with Tino and I wanna respect this relationship, so you can’t be doing stuff like that.”

“Doing stuff like what?” Tino said, shocking the hell out of her.

She hadn’t even heard him come up the stairs. She scowled.

“Don’t be sneaking up on me. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Who is that?” he questioned.

“Kwon. Why?”

“What y’all got to talk about so much all of a sudden?” he continued his interrogation.

Okay, so he’s ready to fight, cool, she thought.

“Kwon, I’ll talk to you later, okay?” she said, ending the call before he could even reply.

“Naw, don’t get off the phone now. What happened that made you feel like you was disrespecting your relationship?” he said, standing over her with his arms folded.

“I didn’t say shit happened. I said I wanna respect my relationship, which you should be happy about instead of trying to check me. And don’t worry about how much I talk to him, that’s my son’s father. Who the fuck is you talking to where you gotta keep leaving the room for a private conversation?”

“I left the room to get something to write with, dumbass!” he lashed.

“Dumbass? First of all, that’s not the first time you did that, you do that shit a lot lately. Second of all, yo’ mama!”

A shouting match ensued.

“Girl, you better watch yo’ muthafucking mouth. I don’t play that mama shit,” he shouted, giving her an ice grill.

“Well, you better watch yours, ‘cause you not about to be up in here talking to me any kind of fucking way.”

“You still ain’t answered my question! What the fuck happened that made you feel like you was disrespecting your relationship?”

“Didn’t shit happen!”

“So why you up here laid all out in the bed and shit like you a teenager in love and shit?”

Joevonne came to the door. He was furious they woke him up and even more upset that Tino was yelling at his mom. His fists were clenched tightly and he was fighting mad.

“That’s why my mama kissed my daddy and when he come home, she gonna put you out!” he shouted angrily.

Des was momentarily stunned and couldn’t find her tongue.

“Go take your ass back in your room, lying on me!” she finally blurted out.

Joevonne stormed off.

“Ooooooh.” Tino started clapping like somebody won an award. “That’s what the fuck is going on, huh? Good looking out, lil’ daddy,” he told Joevonne.

He paced to floor, still clapping and smiling.

“That is not what happened,” Des explained.

“Really? What’s your version?” he said sarcastically.

“He kissed me and I pushed him away. End of story.”

“Okay... okay. So you wanna play? I’ma show you how to play,”

Tino said as he waltzed out of the room.

“Play what, boy? Ain’t nobody playing but you!” Des called out to him angrily.

She didn’t know who she was more upset with right now, Kwon for kissing her, Tino for eavesdropping, or her son for snitching.

# Chapter 18

Monday afternoon, Endy went straight from work to the YMCA downtown. Tino had agreed to meet her there, saying he knew that gym well and he didn't want her energy low from a long drive right after work. Once she was changed into her sweats, she found him upstairs inside the weight room.

“Hey,” she greeted him before they fist bumped.

“What’s happening?” he greeted her back.

Both were oblivious to the turmoil going on in their individual households. Endy had no plans on telling Tino how Tae had basically forbid her to come. Tino was dressed in basketball shorts and a tight-fitted, long-sleeve shirt that showed off his physique.

“Come on over here, I want you to stretch and warm up first.”

She followed him to the long floor mat. The two sat down across from one another. “Spread your legs wide like this,” he instructed.

After both spreading their legs wide and placing the bottom of their feet together, Tino held out his hands.

“What?” she asked, confused.

“Give me your hands.”

Endy held out her arms and Tino gripped her fingers and began to pull her to him. After a few minutes of floor stretching, he warmed her up with some over-head reaches and toe touches. The toe touches were a challenge, and Endy didn't appreciate it being part of the warmup. Once they got into the workout routine, she was able to get into a flow. She liked Tino's style of training. Not too pushy but not allowing her to slack. He texted on his phone a lot in between sets, and she wondered was it just clients or maybe even Des. After about thirty-five minutes, the calls from Tae started.

It wasn't like she wasn't expecting it. As her phone vibrated, she just let it ring. She was determined he wasn't about to run her life in that way. As they walked to the treadmill, Tino turned to her and said...

“You think Kwon getting out foreal?”

Endy shrugged.

“I don't know. I hope so. I know my husband would be happy. Maybe then he can leave me the hell alone,” she giggled.

“Ha. I feel you, your friend be getting on my last nerve lately too.”

“They crazy,” she told him.

Tino told her to finish up with the treadmill and he set it to the speed he wanted her to stay at. He placed a hand on her lower back.

“Okay, you good? I got another client I need to go call.”

“Yeah, I’m good. Thanks, Tino.”

“First day was cool?”

She nodded.

“I ain’t dead, so yeah,” she replied.

“Go ahead and rock that out for twenty minutes and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

He walked away but didn’t get far before he pivoted and came back.

“Aye, let me ask you something, though. I know that’s your girl and all but shit, me and you ain’t exactly strangers—”

“What you about to ask me, Tino?” she said, giving him a side eye.

“You think Des still got feelings for that nigga? Be honest.”

She thought before responding.



“I think as her child’s father that she has a good relationship with him. No matter how brief it was, they were in love once, and I think she will always have some feelings for him, but do I think she still loves him, no. Absolutely not.”

“I appreciate your honesty. We gon’ keep this convo between me and you, right?”

“Hey, I’ll take it to the grave,” she teased as they fist bumped again and he walked away.

Tae called her for the tenth time, irking her nerves to the maximum.

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Kwon hadn’t been able to sleep at night since his visit with Des. He was already down to a few hours a night since he got the news of Boo’s confession, but the visit with Des and his son just put his mind on overload. The possibility of getting his whole life back after being sentenced to 37 years was just too much to bear waiting day after day to hear something. Today he decided to run laps around the yard for the entire hour, hoping he’d tire himself out enough to sleep tonight.

As he ran, all he could think about was how bad he wanted his freedom and how badly he wanted his girl back. He envisioned her freckled

face and her reaction when he kissed her over and over. In his mind, he just knew if he had no chance of getting her back he would've found out right then. After so many laps, the runner's high kicked in and he was just floating around the track with his mind somewhere else. Somewhere far, far away from the confinement of barbed wire fences and gun towers.

*It was early fall and several weeks into the junior year at Denby High. The word had been out that Des and her last boyfriend had called it quits. Kwon had his eye on her for over a year, but his opportunity had never arisen until now. Not wanting to seem like a hound, he didn't rush into trying to get at her right after the breakup. He let the clown niggas show their hands and get gunned down first. After a respectable week or so had passed, he swooped in one day at the end of class.*

*With his True Religion jeans and matching shirt, his throwback Jordans and his hat cocked crazy like Trap Music T.I., he slid down on her.*

*"Destiny, come here for a minute," he called out.*

*"Hey, Kwon, what's up?"*

*"Do me a favor?"*

*"What's that?"*

*He pulled out his minute phone and slid it into her Northface jacket.*

*“Hold that for me.”*

*She pulled the phone out of her pocket, confused.*

*“Why you want me to hold a cell phone for you? I’m so confused right now,” she giggled.*

*“So I can call you on it later and we can talk about everything, you know.”*

*“Talk about everything?”*

*“Yeah, you know, when we going out, where we going. All that good shit,” he said with confidence, walking away.*

*Her smile had snatched on her like a First 48 detainee. He knew he had her.*

The voice on the PA system rang out, announcing the yard would be closing in five minutes, bringing Kwon back to reality. He ran his last lap at the speed of light, wishing he could run straight through the fence unscathed like a Marvel comics superhero. He prayed nightly that God wasn’t playing a cruel joke on him. He had to be going home. He just had to be.

\*\*\*\*\*

Tae was done with work and his initial plan was to go home but once he realized Endy did in fact go to the gym, his mind had been scattered ever since. After she didn't answer, he called Des and she told him without hesitation that Tino and Endy were at the gym. He didn't let on to her just how upset he was, but by the time he ended the call, his blood was boiling. These were the times he really wished he had someone to talk to. Someone that he could trust with the most intimate details of his life, good or bad.

As he continued to call her phone, driving around on the eastside, and she continued not to answer, all kinds of random thoughts took up headspace, including divorce. He hated when she made him feel like he didn't have a say in shit she did. He drove to the weed house, not knowing what else to do with himself. He hadn't smoked in months, but today it was what he needed. By the time he pulled up and parked, Endy finally called him back.

"Why the hell you calling my phone like you crazy?" she started as soon as he answered.

"I know you ain't sitting up here tryna check me? You went to the gym with Tino!?" he questioned.

"Yeah, whatchu mean, I told you I was."

“So fuck what I’m talking about, right? My words don’t mean shit, right?”

“Tae, ain’t no point. You ain’t about to just forbid me to go workout with somebody we been knowing forever just ‘cause it make you uncomfortable. I could see if he was a type of shady character or some nigga you don’t know shit about. Tino is my best friend’s—”

“I don’t give a fuck. I said I didn’t I want you training with that nigga!” he screamed at the top of his lungs.

“And I said I was going to the gym, sooooo.”

Tae was seeing red now. If he saw Endy crossing the street right now, he’d run her ass over. He tried to calm himself before he spazzed out on his wife, the woman he loved with everything he had.

“You know what? Don’t look for me to come there tonight. I’m just stay away, ‘cause if I see you right now, I’m liable to push your head through a fucking window.”

“My nigga,” Endy said calmly. “I’m from the same hood you from. What make you think I’m ‘bout to just let you push my head through a window?”

“Yeah, alright, you tough ass bitch. Fuck you!” he scolded, hanging up in her face.

# Chapter 19

The next day after the fall out, Tino and Des didn't speak to each other at all. When he came home late that evening, he slept in the guest room and Des was relieved that he did. She wasn't ready to have the conversation that needed to be had. Today, as she sat in the kitchen nook on her laptop researching how to go about starting a nonprofit, she was ready to have the talk. When Tino came downstairs to make coffee, getting ready for his first client, she spoke evenly.

“Hello.”

“Good morning,” he spoke back as he grabbed a cup of freshly made coffee.

“Are you ready to talk about our ... situation?” Des said.

“Ha! Is that what we have now? A situation?”

“I meant the situation that transpired, and you know it.” She rolled her eyes.

He came over to the nook but chose to stand.

“Well, yeah, I’m ready to talk about that situation, and…” He gestured in between them. “This situation.”

“Okay, you start.”

“Like, what’s good with us? What we doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, for starters, what’s about to happen if this nigga gets out?”

“Why would something be happening that you didn’t already know about? What has changed with us to make you ask that?”

“Well, kissing niggas for one—”

“I told you he kissed me.”

“You didn’t seem to mind because you wasn’t gon’ tell me shit.”

“Why would I? How would that help? I don’t want it to be animosity between the two of you.”

“And then after he kissed you, you wanna start taking calls in the bedroom like you hiding from me and shit? How that look?”

“I did that because you’ve been acting so fucking private lately. Your phone’s always face down, you keep leaving out of the room to take calls. Do you know how that looks?”



“Have you ever thought that maybe I was planning a damn surprise for you or something?”

Des couldn't find her tongue for a minute. Her birthday was coming up, and the thought had never entered her mind that he was up to something positive.

“No, honestly it didn't,” she admitted. “But why have you been so unavailable lately when I call you?”

“I've just been picking up more clients, baby. I'm trying to do some things and I'm just working. There's nothing going on,” he assured her.

She sat with her eyes dancing around in her head. She wanted to believe him. Tino sipped his coffee, watching her think.

“Okay. And there's nothing going on you need to worry about either,” she assured him. “Markwon is my friend and my son's father. That's just the way it is, and I hope you can accept that.”

“I can accept that. I've been accepting that. What I can't accept is him trying to make it out to be more and you sending mixed signals to make him think there's something there if it's not.”

“It's nothing there. And I've made it clear. You heard me making it clear to him that I want you.”

“Right,” Tino said, standing over Des, analyzing her. “So, we good?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” she replied, giving him firm eye contact.

Tino leaned down and kissed her lips then headed back upstairs to get ready for work. Des almost allowed the conversation to go deeper, but she decided against it. At twenty-five, marriage was lingering in the back of her mind, but she figured she still had time to figure out if Tino was truly the one for her. Only time would tell.

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Endy was completely off her square for most of the day at work. She couldn’t believe that Tae had the audacity to stay gone all night long and still wasn’t home by the time she left for work. She was rattled, but out of stubbornness, she didn’t call his phone or text him. She was expecting to wake up with him next to her in the bed or at least somewhere in the fucking house. The fact that he wasn’t had her snappy and irritable as she went about the day.

By the time she ended her shift, she needed to hit the gym again just to let off some steam. She called his phone on the way to the Y and he didn’t answer, but she figured he was working. Once inside the gym, she put on a happy face for Tino, still not wanting him all in her business.

“Day two, you ready?” Tino greeted her with a bright smile.

“I’m ready, let’s do this!”

“Alright, let's get you warmed up.”

“Warm it up, warm it up, warm it up!” she cheered, trying to pump herself for the task ahead, following him to the floor mats.

A few minutes into the warmup, Endy looked and saw a face coming towards her that made her squint hard. She was taken by surprise to see Steffan walking through the gym in his workout gear. He felt the eyes on him and looked her way. His eyes grew big, then he smiled.

“What the hell?” Endy said.

“Didn’t I just leave you?” Steffan said as he approached.

“I know, I’m starting to think I got a stalker now.” She turned to Tino. “This nigga followed me all the way to Jamaica one time.”

They all laughed aloud.

“She a damn lie. I think she overheard me talking about it at work and then went home and booked a flight.”

“Oh, whatever!” She punched his arm.

Tino watched on.

“When did you start working out here?” Steffan asked.

“Yesterday. I told you I was about to start getting it together. By the way, this is my trainer, Tino. Tino, this is my coworker, Steffan.”

“Sup, man,” Tino greeted with a fist bump.

“You gonna get her right, bro?” Steffan said, engaging Tino.

“Well, she already right. I’ma get her where she wanna be.”

“You right about that. She is already right, but you can’t tell her that,” Steffan agreed.

“That’s women for you.”

“Hey! I’m standing right here, y’all know that right?” Endy blushed.

As the trio wrapped up the small talk, Endy look around the room and realized that Tino and Steffan weren’t the only handsome, physically fit men whose attention she had at the moment. Just about every dude in the compact weight room was eyeballing her from afar. Her yoga pants and fitted T-shirt showed every inch of her voluptuous curves. As Steffan left them to their warmup, the two agreed to catch up before they left the gym.

They’d missed each other at lunch, plus she was in a mood earlier, so she looked forward to their usual conversation. As she and Tino started to work out, she continued to notice all the attention she was getting from

men scattered about. More people were there this day, but fewer women. She even caught Tino's eyes wandering where they shouldn't be.

All the attention didn't make her uncomfortable at all. In fact, she relished in it as the workout took her mind completely away from her husband. By the time the workout was coming to an end, Endy came to realize how much she missed mingling with the opposite sex. She and Des had settled into these lives that were more like early thirties status instead of mid-twenties. They were really going to have to start getting out more. She finished up her work out on the treadmill, then she and Tino parted ways. Steffan was finishing up as well. She decided to wait for him and they walked out together. It was a mild late afternoon in November, dark out now because of daylight savings time.

Endy's body temperature was still so warm she barely noticed the change stepping out into the cool air as Steffan walked her to her car parked close by.

"Shit, if I knew you were going to the Y, you definitely would've been my workout partner," Steffan told her.

"That's crazy. It never crossed my mind you might be working out this close to the job."

“Yeah, well, it only makes sense. Why go all the way to Southfield?”

“Oh, you live in Southfield?” she said as they arrived at her car.

“Yeah, I thought I told you that.”

“No. I don’t need to know where you live anyway. I see you enough as it is,” she teased him, leaning on her passenger door.

“Ain’t that crazy?”

“It ain’t crazy, I told you what it is, you a stalker,” she giggled.

“Seriously though. You don’t think it’s more than a coincidence that we just keep bumping into each other everywhere?”

She smiled dubiously.

“I don’t know ... what you trying to say?”

Just then, Endy looked up at the floor-to-ceiling windows of the weight room. She spotted Tino watching her. Good thing he and Tae didn’t get along, but she knew he was probably thinking wrong things about her and Steffan.

“I think I said it,” Steffan replied, bringing her back to the present moment.

She shrugged.

“I mean, yes, it’s strange, but that’s what it means. It means it’s strange. What else could it mean?” she said as if that was the simple, cut and dry answer.

“I don’t know, it could mean that we’re drawn to each other for whatever reason,” Steffan said, throwing his hands up in surrender as he backed away “I’m just saying.”

“Come back here. I’m not finished with you.”

Steffan smiled as he started back towards her. This was the moment that Endy knew without a doubt she was doing too much. This was the moment that she knew it was time to put Steffan in his place before he got out of hand, but that’s not what happened.

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Tae spent the night at his mom’s house in his old bedroom. He had everything he needed there to wake up and go to work like yesterday didn’t happen. He was so high the night before, for a brief time he’d forgotten it all. Today he missed Endy already, but at least his pride was intact. He felt good that he’d held firm on his grievance. He felt good that he’d shown her he wasn’t helpless in the situation. And to hopefully add insult to injury, he

didn't return her call when he was free to do so, allowing her mind time to wonder.

His last stop was at the girl Shelli's house he'd installed two boxes at recently. She'd put in an order to have someone come out and see why her box in the living room wasn't working. He figured it was something going on with the wiring. Since she was closest to his route home, he made her his last stop again, even though he wasn't sure if he was going home. This time, Shelli was fully dressed in tight jeans and a Pink sweater.

"You again, huh?" She smiled as she let him inside.

"Yeah, it's me. You tired of me yet?"

"Nah, you cool. I just hope you know what you doing, 'cause you the one that installed my cable, and this one been off for three days," she complained as she plopped down on the sofa.

"Let me see what's going on," he said to himself more than her.

As he went to work, Shelli sat quietly and watched. She got a phone call that lasted about five minutes. It sounded like she was giving a friend a much-needed pep talk about her life. He didn't mean to eavesdrop, but she was right there.



“You gotta remember people gonna do what you let them do. Well, some people, because I treat people the way I wanna be treated, but most muthafuckas do what they can get away with.”

*Ain't that the truth*, Tae thought. Just when her call had ended, he stood and turned to Shelli.

“I gotta step outside for a minute and look at something.”

“Okay, go ahead. What's your name again?”

“Devonte.”

“Devonte, would it bother you if I smoke?” she asked, holding up an already rolled blunt.

“Not at all,” he told her as he headed for the door.

He went outside and to the back of the house to check the connection. Within a minute, he'd found the problem. When he came back inside the cable was on.

“Yaaaaah!” Shelli cheered.

“You shouldn't have that problem again.”

“Thank you so much.”

“You welcome.”

“You smoke?” she said, extending the blunt towards him as some sort of tip for his service.

The aroma had smacked him in the face the minute he came through the door. All out of the weed from yesterday and being officially off the clock, he decided to accept the invitation, mostly because he was enjoying the company.

“Shit, I am off the clock,” he said, reaching for the blunt.

“That’s right, ease your mind the right way after a hard day's work.”

As Tae took a long pull, Shelli got another phone call. Tae was contemplating should he drive home or draw this thing out longer between the two of them. He hadn’t even considered the possibility that Endy was still using Tino as a trainer. He figured he’d now created enough of an uproar to nip that in the bud. His cell phone rang and it was her. Hearing Shelli’s voice loud and clear sitting on the couch, he thought about stepping outside or just giving her the blunt back and leaving, but his petty kicked in and he answered, deciding to play it differently.

“Hello?”

“Why the fuck you didn’t come home last night?”

“Don’t call me cursing. I told you I wasn’t coming,” he replied calmly.

“Yeah, okay. Try that shit again, your shit will be on the porch,” she warned.

“Girl, that’s my house, I’m not your fucking roommate,” he laughed.

“Oh, you think something funny, huh?”

“We’ll talk when I get home, Endy.”

“We shall will, and you ‘bout off work now so you should beat me there.”

Tae looked at his watch.

“Where you at?”

“I’m leaving the gym.”

“You leaving the what?”

“And where the fuck is you at with a female?” Endy badgered, realizing a girl was talking in the background for the first time.

Tae tried to keep his cool, knowing Shelli could hear every word he said.

“You went back to the gym with who, Endy?”

“My trainer, what the fuck you mean?”

“Word? Word?”

Shelli laughed out loud, but it was pertaining to her own conversation.

“Devonte, stop fucking playing with me! Who is you with?”

“Oh, okay, well, I’m at a customer's house, but I’m done working. We just chilling, smoking a blunt,” he explained nonchalantly.

“Smoking a blunt?” Endy fumed, drawing out each word with disgust in her tone.

He could picture her face in his head. The disbelief that he had the gall.

“Does that make you uncomfortable, wife?” he questioned, passing the blunt back to Shelli.

Now Shelli was laughing quietly at his seemingly awkward conversation. Endy was silent for a moment.

“So, you off work. Sitting with a bitch smoking a blunt?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “Yeah, that’s what’s going on.”

*Click!* The call ended silently, but he knew after a period she'd hung up.

"Hello?" he checked just to be sure.

He wondered had he went too far. He considered calling back, but then he told himself he hadn't done anything wrong. He hadn't gone any further than she had by going to do the total opposite of what he'd asked her not to do.

"Trouble at home, I see," Shelli who was off the phone now called out from the kitchen.

"She fooling," was all he would say.

"Well, ain't my business, but she already knows where ya at now, so ain't no point in rushing out. You want a shot?" she asked, appearing with a bottle of Patrón from the kitchen.

Tae knew he had a knock-down, drag-out battle whenever he did make it home, so he wasn't in a rush to get there. At this point, he also realized that Shelli was probably coming on to him a little. He knew that he should probably be on his way, if not home at least out of her house, but that's not what happened.

“Fuck it, I’ll take a shot,” he said as he sat down and got comfortable.

“Or two,” Shelli giggled.

“Or two,” Tae agreed.

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Endy was in her bedroom talking to Des, who was trying to keep her from popping a blood vessel from the anger building up inside of her. Tae still hadn’t come home two hours after she’d hung up on him at Shelli’s house. She still hadn’t told her best friend exactly what Tae was upset about, only because she knew Des would immediately step in and ask Tino not to train her anymore just to keep confusion down. She really wanted Tino to keep training her. She needed someone to be her motivator, and she needed Tino to implement the proper exercises for the best result. She heard the house alarm chirp.

“I think I hear his ass now.”

“Don’t do nothing crazy, Endy. Both of y’all need to sit down and talk like adults.”

“We gon’ talk like adults alright, after I blow his shit out.”

“No... no, that’s what you’re not gonna do is try to put your hands on a grown man. You know if he tried that with you, it would be a sign of the second coming, so chill.”

“Alright, I’m chill,” she agreed, rolling her eyes.

“Go talk to your husband. I’ll call you tomorrow or you call me back tonight if you need to.”

“Bye,” Endy said as she ended the call and went off to find Tae.

She found him in the kitchen washing his hands in the sink. With his back turned, he could feel the cold eyes on him. When he turned around, they locked eyes momentarily as he went to the fridge and pulled out leftovers without saying a word. The liquor and weed had him starving.

“Who the fuck you think you playing with, Tae?”

“Excuse me?”

“You hear me. You been at that bitch’s house this entire time? If so, you might as well go ahead and pack some clothes and head right the fuck back over there.”

In truth, Tae left Shelli’s about twenty minutes after he ended the call with his wife. He intentionally dragged his feet getting home, even stopping off at a bar in the area to have another drink.

“What difference do it make? You do what the fuck you wanna do,” he replied, sliding his plate in the microwave.

“So you was?” She charged towards him as he leaned on the counter.

Her anger had taken control of the wheel.

“Don’t run up on me girl, back the fuck up!” he told her.

“So you was? Huh?”

All of a sudden, Tae saw an open-hand smack flying his way all the way from the Netherlands. He caught her wrist just in time.

“If you don’t calm the fuck down!” he growled as he grabbed her free hand and pushed her backward until she was pinned against the wall.

Endy smelled the liquor on his breath, and it only added fuel to the fire.

“And you been drinking with the bitch!”

She struggled to break free of his grip, but he knew if he let her go things would get physical. He’d never seen her this angry.

“How it feel, huh? How it feel to know your husband can do what the fuck he wanna do too?” he taunted.



“Bitch, you getting out my house!” she growled as she continued to try and overpower him to no avail.

“I ain’t going no muthafucking where. I keep telling you that, now stop!”

He pinned her against the wall again. “I don’t want that bitch! I don’t want no bitch, and you know that!”

“I don’t want no nigga either, so what the fuck is your problem with me going to the gym?”

He got in her face, nose to nose.

“Because I don’t like that nigga and you know it!”

They shot daggers at each other’s eyes. Endy’s knee went up between his legs, but she didn’t put any force behind it.

“Let me go,” she said calmly.

He released her and she pushed him away from her as hard as she could.

“Tino is a professional trainer. That’s all we do is workout for an hour and go our separate ways. I don’t understand why you gotta be involved in a decision that in no way concerns you.”

“It’s a man, bae, stop acting stupid. I don’t want you having a relationship with him outside of what you already have. He’s Des’ boyfriend and that’s all it should be. I see how he still looks at you. He been wanting to fuck you since high school,” he reminded her.

“Who didn’t? And it wouldn’t matter if he did, Tae, he’s not gonna act on it. And I damn sure ain’t gonna act on it or give him any reason to think he could.”

“I’m uncomfortable with it. And I just wanted to show you how it feels.”

“So you go chill with a bitch you were supposedly at her house to provide a service. That’s so fucking stupid and immature on so many levels. What made you think that was acceptable? How do you even compare the two? Don’t you know that bitch could get you fired?”

Tae was pulling his plate out of the microwave. It was piled with chicken, mashed potatoes, and veggies. Endy slapped the plate out of his hand onto the kitchen floor. The plate shattered into pieces.

“You not about to eat my fucking food, nigga.”

Tae was in disbelief.

“Awe, bitch, you done went crazy.”

“No, bitch, you done went crazy if you think I’m accepting this type of shit in my marriage. Chillen with bitches getting drunk and high?”

“You cleaning this shit!” He pointed a stiff finger as she walked out of the kitchen.

“Let me go find me some niggas to chill and drink with,” she went on from the next room.

Tae grew enraged.

“Endy, don’t get fucked up! Okay? Playtime is over. I’m not even bullshitting with you no more. Don’t say that shit again!”

Endy went to the bedroom and slammed the door. The way his voice boomed through the house, she knew it was time to be quiet before this escalated even further than they ever had before. She’d made her point and she felt victorious.

“And I’m not cleaning this shit up, either!” Tae continued his rant.

# Chapter 20

Kwon was never interviewed by the state police the way he had anticipated. Boo had a second interview where he once again had to give all the details of the crimes he confessed to, plus take a lie detector test. Somehow, he passed the polygraph even on questions about Phil's murder. Once the word traveled around on social media and then the local news outlets that an innocent man could be sitting in prison doing 37 years for a crime he didn't commit, the process seemed to move expeditiously. Boo's story and timeline couldn't be disputed or disproved. The day before Thanksgiving, Kwon was called into the counselor's office to be alerted that his conviction was being overturned and that he was going to be released at the Department of Corrections' earliest processing availability. Since tomorrow was a holiday, the earliest he could be released was the following day.

Kwon came back from the visit with his counselor in a state of rhapsody and complete awe of what he just knew to be God's will working in his favor and in his life. All he could think about was how he now had to be a vessel for positive change in his community. He knew deep down there had to be some sort of purpose and plan for his life for it to take all these

drastic turns to lead him here. Now that he was here, he planned to use the opportunity given to touch as many lives as he could.

As the day went by, he really didn't talk much to anyone about his impending freedom. He told a few people he was going home, and the word quickly ballooned around the compound. That same day he found out he was going home, he quit smoking cigars cold turkey. He didn't want anything slowing him down on the other side of the fence. By now, the word had been circulating for over a month that Boo had confessed to his crime and he was patiently waiting for the outcome. So, after he called his mom and dad, giving them the best news of his whole life, he was all talked out about it. All he really wanted was to see the other side and start his new chapter. He sat in his cell that night thinking deeply and mapping out the details of his plans. Seven years ago, he didn't have anything in common with the streets. Now, he and the streets were like confidants. He could speak to them and at the very least, they'd hear him out.

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Inviting everyone over for Thanksgiving was a big step for Des and Tino because it signified that they were a real couple now and starting to move more like a family unit. Her house was big enough to host his and her family easily, even though Tino's family was much smaller. Four of her six

aunts showed up along with seven of her cousins. Her sister Kadajah came with her boyfriend that Des was meeting for the first time. Des, her mom, and her aunt Kelly did all of the cooking, and the other aunts were responsible for bringing the dessert.

On the menu was turkey, ham, chicken, dressing, seafood salad, mac & cheese, baked beans, and more. There was even a pan of vegan sausages and plant-based burgers. Tino's family showed up with fifths of white and dark liquor as if it was a BYOB party instead of Thanksgiving dinner. His mom and his uncle Brian had seemingly started drinking already, coming through the door talking loud enough to be heard blocks away.

“This a nice ass muthafucking house, nephew... niece,” Brian added as an afterthought, looking Des' way.

“Thank you,” Des replied shyly as she took their liquor to put it at the bar.

Brian was a talker and a storyteller. It didn't take long for anybody to realize they would be hearing from him for most of the night.

“You look just like your mama, Destiny. Don't she look just like her mama, Sis?” Brian went on as Des tried to introduce everyone.

Once everyone was settled in, they let the kids play inside Joevonne's game room until it was dinner time. It was a quarter to six when Tae and Endy arrived, and Des was happy to see her friends, not sure if they would make it. Endy's family didn't make plans this year, and Tae's mom never did any gathering for the Thanksgiving holiday. The two of them still had tension between them, so instead of being alone with each other they'd much rather spend the day in this more tolerable setting. When Tae came in, he quickly spotted two of Des' cousins that were about the same age as him. He knew them quite well, so he strolled over to Tanisha and Chuck and started to mingle.

At 6:00, Des and Tino began to gather everyone that was scattered throughout the house to come and say a prayer before they ate. They all stood around the extended dining room table bowing their heads as Des led in prayer.

“Dear Heavenly Father, we would like to thank you for blessing us all with these wonderful meals and with all this love that we have to share with one another. Lord, we are grateful for every single blessing that you have bestowed upon us and we ask that you continue to show us all your grace, your mercy, and your love. Amen.”

“Amen,” collectively followed before everyone headed to the kitchen to make their own plates.

The table seated twelve adults, plus two leather chairs sat catty corner to the left of it. The kids were seated in the kitchen, but everyone else just got in where they fit in, finding a foldout chair in the entertainment room so they wouldn't ruin her many cloth, bright-colored chairs and sofas with food. After they ate, Des put the foldout chairs away and went around asking everyone if they had a designated driver before the drinks started flowing. Once the drinking commenced, the music cranked up and the party was underway. They all fell into the entertainment room as Cynthia blasted Frankie Beverly and Maze's "Before I Let Go." Before they knew it, Tino's uncle Brian was leading a hustle line that quickly filled the room.

Endy joined in on the floor, dancing and enjoying herself, but every once in a while she would scan the area for Tae. He'd been in Tanisha's face all night and she was trying to figure out was he trying to be petty or just drifting toward the people he was most familiar with. She knew he wasn't the social butterfly she was, so she shook it off and continued to have a good time. Tino was right next to her and she could tell he was feeling good and buzzing as they danced in unison. Des had disappeared for a while, and when she came back she was holding Jevonne's hand and had her phone in



the other. She turned the music all the way down, trying to get everyone's attention.

“Hold up y’all!” she called out. “This Kwon on the phone.”

“My nigga?” Tae called out with his face lit up as he came from the next room.

“Yeah, he on speakerphone and he wanted to say something,” she said, beaming with joy.

“Awe shit!” Endy said, feeling it was some good news.

“Go ‘head, Kwon, they can hear you,” Des said, holding the phone in the air.

“I come home in the morning,” Kwon’s voice came through on speaker.

“Hell yeah!” Tae shouted out over everyone’s cheers like a touchdown had been scored in a game.

“Yaaaah!” Endy sounded then started to clap.

Kwon hadn’t told anyone else until today, thinking it was the perfect time to surprise them all. Des was absolutely glowing with joy as she handed Tae the phone to talk to Kwon.

“I don’t know ya, but God bless ya!” Brian shouted out to Kwon.

Everyone was happy and celebrating the news, except Tino, who walked away and went to the bar to make another drink. Endy watched from afar as Des walked over to him shortly after, and the two exchanged some heated words. Endy went to check on her to make sure everything was okay.

“Hey, everything good? I saw that exchange,” she said.

“Girl, fuck him. How he mad that I’m happy my son’s father is coming home after being locked up seven and a half years for something he didn’t do?”

“Kwon making his ass nervous,” Endy teased, giggling, not making matters any better. “Tell that nigga he best be on his best behavior!”

“Shut up,” Des laughed as her anger quickly subsided.

As the two were talking, Tae came up and handed Des her phone back after ending the call with Kwon.

“You finally getting your best friend back,” Des crooned.

“We gon’ get fuuuuuucked up too!” Tae said.

“I bet y’all is,” Des replied.

Tae shot Endy a look before he walked off. He still wasn't feeling her.

"Who you rolling your eyes at?" she called out to his back, but he ignored her. "Girl, what's wrong with these niggas?"

"Don't get me lying," Des said as everyone in the entertainment room burst into laughter at Brian telling another story. "Let me go find my charger."

As Des walked off, Endy went to see what everyone was finding so funny. In the room, everyone was crowded around Brian as he told a story about Tino's young basketball days. Endy walked up to Tino, who was in the back of the huddle, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Chill out, man, we talked about this," she told him.

He looked over, realizing it was her for the first time. He smiled.

"Alright, I'ma chill," he promised.

With a drink in one hand, her other hand stayed rested on Tino's shoulder, mostly for support, as she leaned in closer to see what Brian was talking about. She didn't even see Tae scowling at her from across the room, pissed about the hand on Tino's shoulder.

“So, my boy had a nephew that played ball too. I never saw the nigga play, but everybody said he was good. I knew Tino could whoop anybody on the court. I was at every high school game, so I saw him in action, you know? We both like to gamble, so I said fuck it, how much money you wanna put on your nephew? Nigga told me make it light on yourself.

“I had a little money at the time, and I told that nigga I got five hundred on my muthafucking blood. Whatchu wanna do? He said bet. Maaaaan, when the day came for them to play one on one, this nigga tried to make up every excuse known to man. ‘I forgot my niece's birthday party was this weekend. Uhhh, I promised my sister I’d picked up the balloons for the party. Uhhh, my mama just saw a image of Jesus on the cross on her bathroom wall.’”

As everyone burst into laughter, Endy sat her drink down and left the room to relieve her bladder. She realized she was tipsy as she staggered a bit down the long, curved hallways. She told herself she was done drinking for the night, even though Tae was the one driving. When she came from the bathroom, she spotted Tino coming up the hallway. She looked in his eyes and thought he’d also had enough to drink for the night as he approached.

“Endy, my baby.” He smiled as he walked up and grabbed her by the hands, which she found strange.

“Nigga, I just left you, why you acting brand new?” she teased.

Holding her hands in his, he stared at her lovingly with low eyes.

“You know, I been meaning to tell you, I really enjoy our time at the gym. I’m glad you let me train you.”

“Me too. Now let my hands go,” she giggled, knowing it was probably the alcohol talking.

“And you... I just been dying to...”

Before he finished, Tino just leaned in and tried to kiss her. She backed up just before his lips met hers.

“What the fuck? Get the fuck off me. What is wrong with you?” she shouted out angrily.

He seemed shocked she wasn’t accepting of his advance. He stammered.

“I-I just—”

“You got me fucked up, Tino! Who you think I am?” she raged as she pushed past him, headed to find Des.

“Endy, don’t—”

“Don’t my ass!” she cut him off, feeling his footsteps following behind her.

She felt him reach out and try to grab her arm, but she yanked away as hard as she could. She cursed herself for allowing Tino to get so close to her that he mistook it for something else. She found Des in the entertainment room. She didn’t even think about the repercussions as she stormed up to her with rage in her eyes.

“Please go get your man, because that muthafucka just tried to kiss me!” she shouted out loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Des’ eyes looked like they were on the verge of popping out of her skull.

“What!?”

Tino came into the room behind her, looking like he’d just swallowed a canary.

“Yes, girl, just now in the hallway this nigga just tried to kiss me!” she repeated with bucked eyes, making sure she said it in front of him.

Tae came charging across the room from out of nowhere and before anybody could stop him, he was breaking through the crowd and slamming

a fist into Tino's jaw. Tino went stumbling backward, trying to catch his balance as more fists came flying his way. Tino caught his footing just in time and grabbed Tae, swinging him into the wall.

“Noooo! Stop!” Des shouted out as the two began trading vicious blows to the face.

Tae and Tino locked up, wrestling all around the room until they stumbled into the bar. Bottles and glasses went flying everywhere. Tae had Tino by the shirt, wailing away on his face as both families rushed in trying to separate them. Tino tackled Tae into the bar and then grabbed Tae in a headlock as they fell down to the floor.

“Stop y'all!” Des continued to plead as the families tried desperately to separate them.

Tino was squeezing Tae's neck with all his might, and Endy could see the veins in his forehead popping out.

“Tino, let him go!” Endy shouted, but once Tae was able to maneuver his chin between Tino's forearm and ribcage, he was able to free himself.

Now Tae was on the offense again, throwing haymakers as they wrestled around on the ground.

“Bitch ass nigga!” Tae growled as they fought until they were too tired to resist the separation.

It took everyone in the house to finally pull them apart and keep them separated. Tae still tried to get to Tino from across the room. It was obvious he'd gotten the best of Tino, but he wasn't done. Drinks and bottles were spilled all over the floor, and everyone was stunned as they tried to gather themselves. Tae shot daggers at Endy long distance as she tried to help clean up some of the mess they made. This was all her fault. Des was still reeling from shock as Tino's uncle dragged him out of the room.

“Find you somewhere to go, Tino, ‘cause yo’ ass not staying here!” she shouted out to him.

**Stay tuned for the Finale!**

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